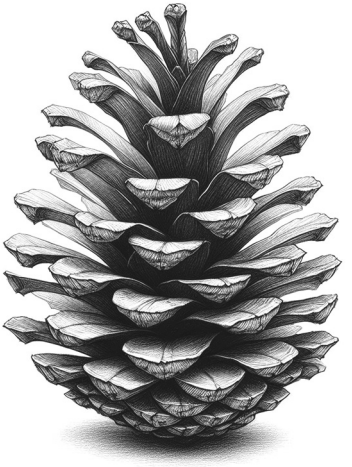
Teachings from the Forest

AJAHN SUMEDHO



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PREFACE

Teachings From the Forest is an amalgam made up of talks (and a conversation) transcribed by the sangha at Wat Pah Nanachat in N.E.Thailand. This is the monastery that Ajahn Sumedho established in 1975, and to which after moving to Britain he returned periodically in order to offer his support. These talks were delivered impromptu. They were all given to a community which in 1982 had few senior bhikkhus, and was affected by the increasing disability of Luang Por Chah, the presiding teacher of the lineage. So Ajahn Sumedho made a point of visiting Wat Pah Nanachat on a yearly basis to provide such support as he could. In this collection the reader can sense the mixture of urgency, encouragement and humour with which Ajahn Sumedho is encouraging the bhikkhus to deal with some of the uncomfortable issues and topics of the early years of community renunciant life. What the talks may lack in terms of scholastic precision they make up for by their experiential wisdom and resolve.

This is followed by *The Three Characteristics, The Ordinary Miracle* and *Taming the Wild Horse* – all composed from talks that Ajahn Sumedho gave during the retreat at Wat Pah Nanachat in 1982, during one of these yearly visits. The chapters *Buddha, Dhamma Sangha, 'Ānāpānasati'* (which was composed from several separate talks on the theme) and *Happiness, Unhappiness and Nibbāna* have appeared before in a small book called *Now Is The Knowing,*

which was published in 1984 from material that in places also draws from the 1982 retreat. This publication presented Ajahn Sumedho's evocative three-line teaching: 'Yesterday is a memory; tomorrow is the unknown; now is the knowing' – a reminder that was appearing on tee-shirts and wall-hangings some twenty-five years later.

The next five chapters of *Teachings From the Forest* (from *Nothing is More Joyless than Selfishness* onwards) are from talks that Ajahn Sumedho gave in a visit to Wat Pah Nanachat in May 1989.

The collection ends in with a conversation held in December 1982 between Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Khantipalo, a senior English bhikkhu of the Dhammayutta fraternity who had both translated and commented on the Pali suttas and (in 1973) established Wat Buddha-Dhamma in New South Wales, Australia.

Teachings From the Forest was originally published at Cittaviveka, Chithurst Forest Monastery in 2005 to mark the completion of Ajahn Sumedho's thirty- ninth vassa (his fortieth counting a year as a samanera), in appreciation for his teachings.

Ajahn Sucitto

Cittaviveka, November 2020

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THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS

In the tradition of Ajahn Mun[1], they use the term '*poo roo*' – 'the One Who Knows.' Our practice is putting ourselves in the position of the One Who Knows. The knower is always now; we don't know about the past or future; knowing now is the Buddha-knowing. And what we can know directly at this moment is that anything that begins must end; that sense-perception through eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind has the characteristic of impermanence (*anicca*).

The characteristic of impermanence is something which ripens as insight knowledge: that every form, whether it is trivial or important, rational or irrational is tinged with the characteristic of impermanence. Knowing just this is 'being the knowing' – it's not a belief in the theory of impermanence, but a continuous recognition.

Change never has any fixed point – except that you can know change. And this is where we place ourselves in the meditation, in the '*poo roo*', in the One Who Knows. 'The Buddha' means the One Who Knows; so this focus offers a direct practice, always here and now, rather than a

1. Ajahn Mun Bhūridatto (1870-1949) was an exemplary forest bhikkhu who trained most of the great meditation masters of the Thai Forest Tradition in the twentieth century. Ajahn Chah stayed with him only briefly, but from their meeting gained complete confidence in *kammaṭṭhāna*, the Dhamma of personal experience.

practice in which we do something now in order to obtain something in the future.

Insight is founded on witnessing characteristics. The second of these is the characteristic of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*). This means you won't find any condition which will satisfy you, it can only gratify you temporarily and then you will start looking for something else, something more. Every condition must change: If you like the condition then you will feel sorrow, despair, loss; when an unpleasant condition goes, then you feel glad. So whether it's pleasant, neutral or unpleasant, it's always unsatisfactory. The practice is simply to recognize that the idea that we can find some kind of permanent security or happiness in something that is unstable is just an attachment.

Not-self (*anattā*), is the third characteristic. It shows us that there is nothing that we can say is a soul or a real self or is really mine. When there is love, that is not a personal thing; even though it seems personal, it's a condition. Love that is present in my mind is the same kind of thing that is present in yours. There may be love there or hatred. When we have pain, we all feel the same kind of aversion to the pain. None of us want pain and that feeling of aversion is what we all share in common.

Our tendency is to become attached to a thing when it reaches its peak. For example, we talk about a 'perfect' rose, a rose at its most beautiful that's reached full maturity; we say, 'This rose is perfect'. But it can't stay that way. It reaches its maturity, and then it fades, starts wilting, petals fall off and then we throw it away; we

don't want to look at it anymore. So the untrained mind seeks perfection in that which is imperfect. Then, when we are attached to the idea of a rose being perfect at one point in its cycle, this is going to lead us to despair. When we become attached to success or beauty or anything that's at its zenith, its highest point, the inevitable result is sorrow.

Love of beauty and aversion to the ugly – these are natural conditions, they're not personal idiosyncrasies. Your body also is a condition in nature; it's following the laws of nature, the same as everything else. It feels hungry, tired, strong and healthy; you get a lot of pleasure out of the human body – and a lot of pain. Often, people try to get as much pleasure as possible out of their bodies; they exploit the human body to squeeze as much pleasure out of it as they possibly can. This always leads to despair, because any pleasure that you get that way is always so momentary; then it's gone and then you have to look for some more pleasure for your body.

We begin to observe that attachment to beauty, sensual pleasures and love will always lead us only to depression. Instead, if you pay attention to the body, and observe it you learn from it. It's part of nature; it's not me and mine, not a self. It's as it is, what it looks like, whether it's male or female, healthy or unhealthy, beautiful or ugly, young or old, black or white, Asian or Caucasian, whatever its appearance, it's as it is right now. Considering like this, our attitude develops into one of detachment. This doesn't mean annihilation or any desire to destroy, but simply letting go, or non-attachment. Recognize that

the perfection of anything lies in its whole cycle, rather than in any point in the cycle. The perfect rose is one that grows out of the seed, reaches maturity, wilts, and decays: that's a perfect rose.

Our bodies go through the same cycle, they reach their peak of physical beauty and then they start deteriorating into disease and death. Old age, sickness, death are part of the perfection. But you have to expand your consciousness to accept that, and be willing to allow things to take their natural course. There's nothing wrong with cycles of nature: simply recognize that what arises in the Uncreated reaches its peak and goes back to the Uncreated. This act of recognition is 'being the knowing' – and in itself, this is perfection.

We may very well think, 'It's too bad Ajahn Chah is ill, having all these troubles with health.' But that itself is nature in perfection. When we see this, we don't get caught up in attachment to our teacher: 'It's not right that Luang Por should have brain damage.' This is merely a Luang Por that we've created in our own minds. Recognize that any perception of Luang Por is something that we've created. Our perception of Luang Por Chah in his present condition doesn't meet our perception of Luang Por when he was healthy. We were expecting something else from Ajahn Chah, we were expecting something better and what has happened doesn't fit in with our expectation. The result is that we feel disappointment or sorrow or despair.

The *dukkha* of all phenomena means that it can never bring us satisfaction. Attachment to phenomena only brings us to despair. When we are heedless, when we

don't understand nature at all, we tend to search for a permanent abiding place in conditions. We try to create a perfect relationship, a perfect society, a perfect security and this will only bring us despair.

At Chithurst in England we know an old couple in their eighties, the Gilberts, who live in a nearby village. They used to invite us over every Saturday morning for tea and crumpets. A very idyllic old English couple; Mrs Gilbert hadn't been to London since she was eighteen years old, although they were living only fifty miles away in the beautiful village of Stedham. They were very good, moral, kind citizens. Mr Gilbert said they had never quarrelled their whole lives – never had a fight. They just had this wonderful marriage and he especially looked very bright, with shining eyes and a clear complexion. His wife was obviously in very bad health with arthritis: she could hardly move and was in a tremendous amount of pain. And so whenever she would get ill, Mr Gilbert would want us to chant; he always had this hope that somehow she would return to good health again. It was obvious that there was no way she was ever going to become healthy, and yet there was this constant hope in his mind that they would be able to live many more years together. But she died a few months afterwards and one could see his tremendous sorrow at having lost someone he was married to for such a long time. What would seem to be a perfect marriage ends in sorrow, separation and despair.

If you don't understand nature, and are unable to transcend it then you're caught in the best conditions of life. Clinging to life – the life of our bodies – takes us

to death, the death of our body. But as we watch in our meditation, we can absorb expectation, hope, worry, fear, dread. Rather than react with likes and dislikes and preferences, as a meditator, you are just watching them arise and pass as they change. That's being the knowing, knowing that whatever arises passes away.

Meanwhile you must take care of your body, feed it, clothe it – all this is part of our way of learning and watching. The human body is something we have to take time to understand, to witness and watch the extremes: there's sensual indulgence (*kāmasukhallikānuyogo*) whereby you seek as much pleasure through the senses as you can; and self-mortification (*attakilamathānuyogo*) – where you try to deny anything to the body and attempt to starve it, persecute it, cause it pain and discomfort. As bhikkhus, there is a middle way between indulgence and asceticism, whereby we take care of the body and watch it, listen to it, understand it. We're not in such pain and misery all the time that we are just reacting to that. We feed it, put robes on it; we contain it within the moral precepts so that it's not being used for harmful, cruel, evil actions or speech.

It's the same for the anagarikas[2]: they resolve to refrain from eating in the afternoon; from dancing, singing, music and entertainment; and they give up using cosmetics, perfumes, jewellery and ornaments. They also undertake to be careful about sleeping, to be mindful of

2. Those who undertake to live by the renunciant precepts mentioned here, (including celibacy) as well as by the five moral precepts.

how much sleep they need, rather than just seeking escape through sleep. So, these renunciate precepts are about renouncing or relinquishing those things that we tend to indulge ourselves in and get lost in. These restraints deal with our inclination to want to get sense pleasures out of the body – pleasures that are not really necessary and which are harmful to spiritual development. We also put limitations on the annihilationist desire to sleep. Of course there is nothing wrong with sleep or robes or clothes, food, medicine, wearing glasses and everything that is necessary – but we don't indulge in trying to make ourselves more attractive or alluring to somebody else, nor do we try to merely seek distraction in external pleasure through the senses. We are content to just listen to nature.

A bhikkhu who keeps the training rules is a source of blessings. Just by staying within the restrictions of the precepts, you become a field of blessings and worthy of respect. You can make yourself that field of blessings. Not by thinking that you are that, but by being it. And if you contain yourself within the precepts, then meditation will develop naturally.

To get perfect in terms of Vinaya training is just about impossible; we do the best we can. It's really awful to see how some monks become Vinaya snobs, and become really nasty people. But then the monks who don't keep Vinaya, the ones who don't really know how to make use of it and contain themselves – they're not very inspiring, they just follow their desires. Those are the two extremes, being a snob and a Vinaya fanatic,

or thinking that you don't need to bother with the rules. It depends on how skilfully you use it, according to time and place – so that the rules are helping you in your meditation.

When you go to another monastery and see monks who are breaking the rules, you can become really nasty about it, 'Disgusting monks who carry money and drink milk in the evening.' I saw that tendency in myself but found that *mettā* was a far more skilful way of relating. In one's own monastery, one can teach and train according to a good standard of Vinaya, but if you stay at someone else's then you don't need to worry about it or judge it. I don't worry about my purity if they offer me a cup of coffee. I'm not going to create a problem out of it by becoming a snob or being ungrateful. Know your intentions and figure out how to use these conventions – because they are only conventions.

How can Vinaya really help you? What's its real purpose? Why did the Buddha establish the rules? You can become very narrow-minded – but then you will have to suffer because of your narrow and rigid interpretations. Then when we want to get free of our *kilesas* (defilements), we may take that as a challenge to annihilate them – because with our conditioned perceptions of defilements we think we have to get rid of them: 'We wouldn't have defilements in the first place if we were good people; we should annihilate and get rid of them. Wipe out the pests! Get rid of all the pests, use a superspray, some hyperactive agent to wipe them out, sterilize, kill.' Like these sanitary cleaning agents you put down the toilet, guaranteed

to kill every germ. Makes us feel safe, doesn't it? Once you've poured all that stuff down the toilet, you can use the toilet – every germ has been killed.

Ignorance makes us want to do this with our minds: to kill everything we don't like: the pests, all that shouldn't be there, all that isn't nice, all that is a defilement. But the desire to kill is in itself a defilement! That desire to want to kill, annihilate, get rid of everything. And how do you get rid of wanting-to-get-rid-of? By recognizing the wanting-to-get-rid-of, just by bare attention, by mindfulness. Things go by themselves, you don't have to get rid of them – because everything that begins, ends. There is nothing to get rid of, you just have to be patient with them and allow things to take their natural course into cessation.

Then you can hear the silence of mind, if you're attentive, and you can hear the whispers: 'I want this, I don't want that, I should, I shouldn't, I like, I don't like, I must.' All the pressures of our life: 'Got to do something, I've got to get rid of, I've got to get hold of that, I shouldn't, I shouldn't be like that. It shouldn't be like that, they should be practising like this, they shouldn't be practising like that!' And you can listen to the whispers, all the buzzing sounds that constantly nag, confuse and contend. You recognize them, and allow those conditions to cease – just by bare attention, alertness to them, and patiently enduring. Be the silent watcher, the silent witness, the silent listener – and allow that witnessing to have its effects. Things can then follow their natural course. Whatever has arisen can reach cessation.

Otherwise, if we don't do that, we just recreate the pattern. Then as we get older, we get stuck in the horrible ruts of our habits. They become solidified; the ruts are so deep, you can't see your way out of them any more; we just reinforce habits all the time, rather than allowing whatever has arisen to cease. To allow cessation means that we have to be very kind, very patient and humble – not taking sides with the good, the bad, the pleasure, the pain. Instead there's the gentle recognition that allows things to change according to their nature, without interfering. So then we learn to turn away from seeking absorption into objects of the senses. We find our peace in the emptiness of the mind, in its clarity, in its silence. We can find our rest in that silence, in that peace of mind. And we turn to that more and more, rather than to distraction through the senses. Then, as you find this place of peace, the inclination to absorb into the objects of sense diminishes considerably, one no longer feels that compulsion to absorb into the things you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or think. One turns and inclines to *nibbāna*, the peace of the mind, the Unconditioned.

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THE ORDINARY MIRACLE

When the body starts slumping during sitting meditation, then you can fill it with energy by turning your mind to the posture. Keep pulling the body up, as if something in front of you is keeping your body straight. Sometimes one is really fed up and just sits there in a dull state; people start nodding off. When you catch yourself doing that, then say, 'Effort, effort,' and pull the body up straight. Use your body, rather than just ignore it, or misuse it. If you energize the body, then after a while it maintains itself, effortlessly. But until then, you have to keep it straight.

Remember, so much of life is just trying to take the easy way, the path of least resistance, so that we just follow our desires, rather than go against them or resist. But the more you yield to desire, the more your mind will become confused and heedless. I remember when I was at the University of California, in the early 50's, the idea then was to follow all your desires. 'Never say no to greed.' I got myself into a terrible state – guilt-ridden and contemptuous of myself because I had become a very sloppy person.

So that was my experiment with 'following desires' – I got myself out of *that* as quickly as I could! And now, the subtlety of the practice is to investigate, so that you know. You are not just following instructions with blind faith

or meditating all night because you feel you have to. You recognize the feeling that you should sit up all night, the worrying about what others think if you don't, and the not wanting to do it – you can watch that kind of thing. But the best way is to resolve (*adhiṭṭhāna*), so that you don't have to think, 'Maybe I will, maybe I won't, maybe I should take a rest.' Doing that makes you suffer a lot. The best way is to make a resolution so that there is no question. Once you have made the resolution, then you can use that to listen, to watch what happens. If you're a person without much effort in your life, then you have to resolve in your mind to definitely do something.

When we were in London, at first we didn't put much effort into our lives because of the cold. We spent the day just trying to keep warm and sank into a kind of depression and state of passivity ... But, if there's one thing I *really* don't like, it's cold showers. When I wake up in the morning I don't like to get out from under the blankets, I just want to keep warm, and I don't like to get up early in the morning in a cold room. So in this cold of the English winter, I'd make a resolution when I went to bed. I'd set the alarm for 3 o'clock and then I'd resolve to get out of bed before it rang at a quarter to three, then leap out of bed as soon as I woke up. Then I'd run into the shower, turn on the cold water and leap into the cold water – which is something that I couldn't do if I thought about it. It was very invigorating. In the morning I would have a great deal of clarity and the body and mind would become sharp.

But if I just followed my *kilesas* and lay there, thinking, 'It's not necessary, I went to bed late last night, maybe I need another half hour', then I'd start the day without much effort. I would then come to chanting because I'd be worried about what people would say if I didn't. If I just followed the path of least resistance, my life would become a dreary and monotonous experience.

So resolution is very valuable for effort, because it takes a lot of effort to sit all night; you have to go against the desire to be comfortable. There is the aversion to the feeling of sleepiness and dullness that arises; and also when we get tired, we can get very bad-tempered and negative towards everything. But even that requires effort, because when you are negative, you have to think – to bring up and dwell on the details of what's wrong with yourself and everyone else.

To stop thinking, you have to make an effort, because we are trained to think, and become habitual thinkers. So it's easier to think than not to think. Some of our thoughts are absolutely ridiculous: I don't know where some of mine come from! But to avoid thinking, we have to be mindful of thought – to put forth effort by watching and listening, being attentive to the flow in our minds. So rather than thinking about our minds, we watch them.

However, you're not trying to get rid of thought, but to know it, rather than be caught in it – to just keep recognizing it. Thought is movement and an energy – it goes. It's not a permanent mental condition – you can recognize thought for what it is, then it begins to slow

down and stop. This isn't annihilation, this is allowing things to cease; this is compassion.

You can use thought skilfully; the problem is being deluded – this is what causes the suffering. As you allow thinking to cease, then you can think skilfully at appropriate moments. It's when the kammic resultants arise in your mind from the past, that you find yourself thinking unskilfully. So you recognize it – and in that recognition, it ceases. But if you're thinking bad thoughts – perhaps you are angry – and you think, 'This is terrible. I've got to get rid of this anger... I'm a terrible person!' you keep reinforcing it all with guilt and repression. That's unskilful. Instead, when obsessive thoughts come up in your mind, recognize them as impermanent, unsatisfactory, not-self. This is the way of observing them rather than evaluating or analyzing. And as you become patient with your mind, the habitual obsessive thinking begins to fade and you will find great spaces in your mind that you had never imagined before.

So you're not trying to change things and people according to your desires and opinions; instead you have compassion. What we usually do is think, 'He shouldn't be like that!' But then we're interfering, rather than realizing that our opinions about somebody are changing formations. So when someone here does something that annoys me – insults me – if I carry that perception back to my kuti – what is that? I can believe that a perception is a real person – but it's just a perception in my mind. And if I allow that perception to cease, if I just remain aware of it, then I stop creating and recreating.

Feeling that 'I should' and 'I shouldn't' – this is what creates so much misery. For example, I say: 'You shouldn't be like this' and 'You shouldn't be that way'; and: 'I think you're like this and that', 'I don't like this and that.' Then you get your perception of me, 'Ajahn Sumedho is so and so,' and then we can believe that these perceptions are truths. We could carry these around for the rest of our lives! We may never meet again until we're eighty years old, and although we've never seen each other, when the perception of me comes into your mind, you think 'He's this way.' We've carried a mental perception around for fifty years.

There's a story in the early scriptures that when the Buddha was practising for enlightenment, Mara the Tempter, who represents the ability to delude, came to test him. The Buddha just said, 'I know you Māra'. The Buddha wasn't angry; he didn't say: 'Get out of here, you so-and-so.' He said: 'I know you.' Buddhas know Māra, they're not deluded by that demon.

Unenlightened, ignorant beings are always deluded by Māra, they're either attacking or being fascinated by him. But Buddha is perfectly alert, perfectly calm, sitting under the bodhi tree with all that is fascinating or frightening, all the demons and dragons, swirling round – and he's just sitting there. He's not shutting his eyes, he's not shaking his fist; he's just sitting there, serene and calm; aware but not reacting. When we are meditating, we do the same thing; we are 'being the knowing.' Taking refuge in Buddha means to be the knowing, to be wakeful. It doesn't mean we believe we *are* Buddha – that's delusion. But

one becomes the Buddha, or the Tathāgata ('One Gone to Thusness') as the transcending knowing by being awake. Then Mara comes in all its different ways; all your fears, doubts, worries, greeds, etc., come swirling around your head and inside your heart – then you say, 'I know you, Māra.' Just be that knowing.

In meditation as you gain equanimity, you can watch things that arise in your mind. Then you can let them go, because they come out of emptiness and go back into emptiness. Some people feel that this is all a miracle. People come to meditation hoping to have miraculous experiences, but they don't realize that experiences are already miraculous. Modern technology is miraculous; it's more intelligent than any of us. But what most people don't experience is what is not miraculous: the Uncreated, that which doesn't arise and pass away. So, although our mind is conditioned to look for something, to find something, the Buddhist is looking for what is not miraculous at all.

All you have to do is watch, attentively. The object of meditation is bare attention, bare awareness. The more technique you give it, then the more remote it becomes. In whatever posture you find yourself, you're simply awake and aware of whatever you can be aware of, now. The four postures – sitting, walking, standing, lying down – all these can be used for awareness. And what you come to know directly is what is caused and what is not caused. Sometimes your mind is perfectly empty: that is the Unconditioned. Most of the time your mind is full of things; then you have to be patient with this great

activity and restlessness. Just be aware of that, watch the pain or whatever it is. Don't ask: 'Why am I restless?' If you do, then you are always trying to figure out your restlessness. The idea is to endure its presence until it goes away. Notice how things change. So you are being the silent watcher, the silent listener. You can actually hear this listening very clearly; it's the 'sound of silence.' When you understand that sound of silence in your mind, then you have a perspective on all mental states – whether trivial or important or whatever their quality might happen to be.

When you are practising like this, there's no attachment. It's not annihilation; it's clarity – stillness, not dullness. If on the other hand, we try to suppress everything, this is out of attachment to the mind as 'my self.' But emptiness is non-attachment in which you don't have to suppress anything, and you don't have to seek anything, either. All that is desire, looking for an object.

Through desire moving in your mind, you are continually being reborn into each moment. Like when you go back to your kuti, what do you usually do? You start looking for something to do. If you are not really mindful, then when you change your location then there is a desire to do something: to eat something, to drink something, to read something. That's desire, seeking rebirth, looking for a place to absorb into, looking for something to become.

If you're living without any awareness of desire, you operate in this way – you have a whole system of going from one thing to another. The result is that whenever

there is the slightest bit of boredom, or unpleasantness, then you have something else to absorb into. Just think of the incredible gadgets that are available now, offering computer games and all kinds of fascinating things to do – the mystery of not being able to do something isn't there. However, you can only have so much excitement, so much romance, so much happiness and then it becomes boring. You can only be excited for a while, then you become weary; you can hope for so much and then there is despair. One conditions the other.

You can't have inhalation and no exhalation, you can't have only love, hope, excitement, pleasure and interest. They are changing conditions: they begin, they reach their peak, then they fade and pass away. This principle applies to every condition. So you get bored with constantly being reborn; and then what comes up is the desire to get rid of yourself. So people take drugs or sleep a lot, or commit suicide. And that's a desire too – seeking to be annihilated.

In fact there's a lot of stuff in the mind that we've forbidden to come up into consciousness. It's natural – in any society, there are certain things that are taboo. You're trained from childhood to allow certain things and to reject others; so, instead of allowing anger, fear, or irrational feeling to become conscious, there's a reaction to reject them. But in meditation, the precepts put you in a safe moral framework; and this allows you to watch your irrational fears and let them go to cessation. Then you are free from them.

If, on the other hand you try to get rid of anger, you end up repressing it. You think it's gone because you can't

see it – then it comes up again and slaps you in the face. In fact, whatever you repress is going to come back again and hit you. So the wise approach is that, although you assume that these problems are yours and that you have to get rid of them, in meditation, you can let fear, doubts, and neurotic habits come and go. They're part of the human condition, and not personal: the understanding of not-self frees you from believing that you're neurotic.

A woman came to me one time and said, 'I get this terrible depression and I'd like to know how to get rid of depression. Can meditation help me to stop my depression?' I said, 'What's wrong with being depressed? Sometimes life is depressing, let's face it.'

She had the attitude that she should never be depressed. But sometimes life is just downright depressing: there's nothing you can do about it: people you love die, it gets cold and wet and rainy, you lose your job, you have no money. Don't expect to be happy all of the time. There are a lot of unpleasant, depressing things happening, but you can endure it. You can recognize it and not create a neurotic problem out of it; then it changes. But when you're attached to depression and you're attached to the idea that you are depressed, then you think, 'I'll never have a joyous moment ever again. I'll be lonely and depressed forever.' Because that's the way it seems. And the more you believe that, the more you reinforce it. The idea of these things being self just makes one more depressed.

I knew a woman in London who was working for the BBC. She had to type, receive visitors, answer the telephone, talk to people all day then she would go home

and try to do mindfulness of breathing. She said, 'I'm so exhausted, I try to do *ānāpānasati*, but I just can't. It just doesn't work.' But when she told me about all the things she did, I said, 'Well, don't think you're going to knock out all that accumulation you've picked up during the day with mindfulness of breathing.' If you have to talk on telephones and type and receive visitors – then you have to reflect on it and not be averse to it. Recognize it.

Assuming that meditation will solve the problem, we use it as a kind of club to bash the mind down. But you can only knock it down for a little while, then it comes up again. That's not the way: you need to patiently coexist with confused mental states. Be kind, be patient. If you can't get away from it, then learn to live with it – but you aren't going to be very tranquil.

Most meditation is just allowing anything that has arisen to cease. That's why I stress patience: allow things to take their natural course to cessation, rather than try to get rid of them. Try to accept even the things you don't like about yourself. Don't try to be too perfect. This is why *mettā* (patient-kindness) is so important. You always have this patient-kindness and peaceful coexistence with whatever comes. When you allow it all to fade away through peaceful coexistence, you find that your mind is very clear.

3

TAMING THE WILD HORSE

When we go forth as bhikkhus and nuns, we have this contemplation in the ordination procedure: *kesā, lomā, nakhā, dantā, taco* – hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin. This is because now that we're living the celibate life, the *brahmacariya*, we're no longer able to grasp and possess the objects of lust, so the approach is to observe the objects of lust with more discrimination. But we're not here to judge the quality of any condition, rather to just recognize it. To be fully conscious of lust, to watch it, rather than just repressing it. To know it as it is without adding any habitual response, such as, 'A monk shouldn't be lustful.' Then we can recognize it: it's just our own creation, a conditioned response.

Lust is a natural human condition, our bodies are made for procreation. The body, male or female, is a condition in nature; bodies have all the organs necessary for procreating the human race. Sexual desire is then a natural human condition, not a personal problem. So we recognize it rather than reject it – and allow it its true place in nature. There is nothing to be frightened of – it's not a personal trait. If we are lay people, we may incline to indulge our sexuality; if we are celibate, we may attach to celibacy, get frightened of the natural functions of the body, and tend to repress them. After all,

indulging in sexual fantasy or expression can get you into a terrible state. But sexual fantasy is always done through heedlessness, through not understanding that lust is just a condition, not a personal problem. We use celibacy as a way of seeing the natural functions of our bodies as natural conditions that are non-self, not personal. We learn to coexist with nature, so we are not obsessed by the conditions in our bodies in the present.

When you are attracted to somebody, you don't see the flaws in them, you don't even want to know about it. If you start looking at the flaws, the lust begins diminishing: So the technique of *asubha* (of reflecting on the impure qualities of the body) is a skilful method for the lustful mind. It is a discriminating practice; you start looking at the separate parts of the body; hair of the head and body, nails, teeth and skin; these are the outer surface of a person – the things that we tend to be attracted to. If we see beautiful hair, beautiful eyebrows and eyelashes, moustache, beard, hair on other parts of the body, beautiful nails, lovely white teeth and beautiful skin, what we see is that there's a beautiful person. But when we start distinguishing the hair, nails, teeth and skin – even if you find the most wonderful blonde hair in your alms-bowl, it doesn't arouse lust. Somebody's tooth, fingernail or skin – even if it's very beautiful skin – it doesn't make you lustful. But if it's all together on a human being – beautiful hair, teeth and skin – then you feel, 'I want it! I've got to have it! I've got to possess it!'

So you begin with contemplating the hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin – that's the surface – then when you go under the surface, it becomes even less attractive. When you see a beautiful person, you reflect that they have bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, tears, spittle, snot and urine. When you become skilled in this practice, then when you see a beautiful person, you don't experience any lust.

These are the skilful means which the Buddha used to observe nature and to develop insight, to learn from it. *Asubha* doesn't mean 'I don't like it' and kidding yourself that beauty is disgusting and loathsome. The practice is not to dwell in aversion on your own body or anyone else's but rather to experience dispassion, rather than strong emotions of attachment or disgust. Dispassion comes with clear awareness, non-delusion around this existing condition. It is calm and impartial.

So monks aren't trying to convince themselves that women are disgusting and loathsome; women aren't trying to convince themselves that there is something wrong with men. That's ridiculous; but you look beyond the appearance of beauty, to see a little more closely. It takes a little more effort – but the effect is to reduce lust in your mind.

The movie industry depends on what we can create around beauty and ugliness. Some movie stars seem to exude flower-like fragrances: you would think that nothing ever came out of their bodies. And in all those dozens of Hopalong Cassidy movies, you never notice Hopalong stop to take a pee! The same applies to boxes of tissues, with a

pink or a blue flower on them – you never see a picture of one that has been used. They would have to wipe the snot off. And if the tissue in the box smelled of something foul we wouldn't want to put it up to our noses, would we?

We can be embarrassed by the conditions of the human form – its stomachache, its pain, its secretions – because we think it's mine. In fact, it's just a condition in nature, it's not a self. So we don't have to make the body appear as if it's always like a flower – that's impossible. Instead, we reflect on the body without attachment or aversion, but with dispassion, so that we can use our body or someone else's to develop *asubha* practice.

On the other hand, if you have a lot of aversion to your own body, then you have to develop the practice of patient-kindness (*mettā*). You find people who are naturally averse personalities, they tend to like the *asubha* practice. The highly discriminating mind sees the ugliness in everything. So I can indulge in it, 'This disgusting body – loathsome, repulsive, stinking'. This is merely a gleeful indulgence in it. When people say that you should practice loving-kindness, your reaction then is: 'That's a ridiculous, sentimental, soppy practice.' That discriminating kind of mind doesn't need to develop the sense of repulsiveness or impurity – it's already conditioned that way. So if you can't develop kindly feelings, then you should just try to not dwell in aversion.

You are not blinding yourself to the faults and flaws in everything, but you are just peacefully coexisting with them. You're aware of the unpleasantness, the pain, the

loathsomeness of some things, but you are not indulging in it. You stop from indulging by kindness, patience, simplicity, peacefully coexisting and not demanding that things be otherwise. So *mettā* doesn't mean that you don't notice what's wrong with yourself and everyone else – it means that you don't develop problems around these conditions.

When you have anger and aversion, you can reflect on the religious life as a restricted one. When you are a monk or a nun, you are tied up, penned in. It's just like being a wild horse – all it can do is try to resist, try to get away; and then when it stops resisting, it can easily be trained. The horse then becomes very useful. It's the same with us: when we are first trying to do mindfulness of breathing, our mind is just like a wild horse. It doesn't want to be tied up; it wants to gallop all over the place. That's its habit, that's its nature. But when you have practised mindful breathing for a while, the wild mind begins to calm down, and it becomes malleable, supple and flexible. The supple mind can be trained. When it stops resisting and fighting everything, then it learns to accept the limitations imposed on it. Then it's very useful.

The monastic life is like being tied to a stake, or put into a corral. You can't go around doing as you like – you have to live within limits. But you still have the old habits, and as you look out over the railing of the corral, you think, 'I want to go over there.' Yet, you remain inside. You are surrendering and resigning yourself to the limits of the robe and precepts. Once you have stopped resisting, then your mind

can start to be trained – to see and know – and no longer be a wild creature that just follows its desires.

When you are tied down, at first there is a lot of anger and resistance. Just after I became a samanera, I remember feeling a lot of resistance – a lot of hatred and anger towards everything and everybody. Some days I just hated everyone. It was resistance to rules, to authority; resentment at all the limitations. Finally, the resignation came. I surrendered to the monastic life: Then my practice began to develop properly.

So you need to recognize what is going on. The advice is not to try acting like an ideal monk or nun; nor to try to make others believe you are a meditation master. There's no need for any masquerade. You're not putting on a costume – but you learn to use these robes as they are: their function is to restrict you. You don't have the freedom that you would have wearing trousers. You can't just leap up into the trees and swing from the branches; you can't race about here, there and everywhere, wearing these clothes.

As a monk or nun, you are a marked person. Everybody knows, so you can't get away with anything; you go out on the town, thinking, 'Now I'm away from the monastery, now I can really let my hair down and have a good time.' You're still a monk or a nun in the middle of Bangkok. You take your corral with you. Somebody asked me once, 'Do you ever take off your robes and have a holiday?' They were surprised to find out that we don't put on a Hawaiian shirt, and pop down to the beach. Our holiday is

in the mind rather than outside; you have to find the real holiday resort within yourself.

A common attitude is to 'kill the *kilesas* (defilements).' But you see monks who try to kill hatred – and they're still trying although they have been monks for many years. It is sad to see them still repressing everything. Defilements are not a problem, as long as one does the investigation properly. So let your inclination be towards *nibbāna*: then you have the freedom to bring up the nastiness in yourself, to take a good look. Because once you know what it is, then it diminishes, and goes to cessation.

Sometimes when we're angry and hateful, we can bring it up and observe it. We don't have to act it out or try to resist it. If you want to kill me, I would prefer that you don't – but make it fully conscious so you can see it. 'I hate Venerable Sumedho and I want to kill him. I want to pull him apart, limb from limb. I want to poke his eyes out.' That's the way to make it fully conscious. You see it is only a condition in your mind and you can let it go.

Usually when we feel hate or anger we get frightened of it or we feel guilty: 'I hate Venerable Sumedho ... oh I shouldn't ... Oh, a good bhikkhu should love the teacher but I hate him.' It goes on; and you're never really aware of what's going on, you just vacillate between the emotion of hatred and the guilt around it. So have the courage to really hate – fully, consciously hate, but listen to it rather than act on it.

I remember when I was at Ajahn Chah's monastery, I'd really hate him sometimes. First of all I got very frightened of that feeling; I felt guilty. And then I decided to really

hate, I would sit there and think of all the hateful things that I could think about Ajahn Chah. Then I'd listen to that. There was no intention to harm Ajahn Chah; I did it to recognize the hatred. But when you really listen to hatred you see it for what it is. You can stir it up for a while and then you let it go. But when there's guilt around the hatred, we repress our hatred. Then, we're always getting caught up in feelings of remorse, self-hatred and guilt.

Reactions like this contain a lot of conceit, a lot of *attā*, 'self.' We have the idea that these emotions are my problem rather than seeing them as conditions. If somebody tells me I'm a no-good so-and-so, and they are angry and very aggressive to me, it is natural to feel fear or anger. If they tell me how wonderful I am, it's natural to feel happy. It's nice to hear praise and offensive to hear criticism. Praise, blame; happiness, suffering; success, failure; high status, low status – they're all natural conditions. You might think, 'I shouldn't be happy when I'm praised, I shouldn't be unhappy when I'm criticized.' But this is being very idealistic. Instead, by allowing all the mental attachments to be fully conscious, you get to understand them. If you can endure, you'll observe that their nature is to go away, not to stay. And you become peaceful. This is the way of catharsis in meditation, in which you relieve the mind from its habitual repressions.

When you understand hatred, you're not creating more kamma (intentions which will bear fruit). In the training rules, there is no such thing as a mental offence. Hating the teacher is not an offence, it is not a breach of the monastic

discipline – as long as you don't threaten or hit me. That point is very important to realize.

In Christian teachings it is wrong to have bad thoughts so the priests often have tremendous guilt in their minds. In the 'Sermon on the Mount', Jesus said: 'If you look at a woman with lust you have already committed adultery.' That's a really hard teaching! It makes you feel guilty about lust, but will not solve the problem. Sometimes we do feel lust, let's face it. But there's no need to feel all guilty about it.

So there's a clarity in Buddhist morality that Christian morality doesn't have. A Buddhist monk who thinks the most dreadful thoughts, but doesn't act on them has not committed any offence. So we can allow dreadful thoughts to become fully conscious. We are not committing any breach of our training rules; so in that freedom to allow things to be conscious, we let them go and they go to cessation rather than into the subconscious. Psychologically then, Buddhism works so well because it's not a guilt-conditioning religion. Christianity makes you feel guilty about being a person, even about having a body. You are born in sin, born a sinner and that means you're not a nice person. If you are born a sinner but you are also a child of God, it becomes very confusing.

I was brought up in a devout Christian family, and sometimes I used to feel guilty simply about living. As a teenager, I had strong lustful obsessions, and I felt there was something terribly bad about me. I couldn't help having them but as much as I tried not to, I seemed to have them anyway. What was I supposed to do? I became

very disillusioned about Christianity. It's a bad joke, isn't it? You're a child of God who created you out of love, then you have these obsessions which you're not supposed to have and you don't know what to do about them: the more you try to get rid of them, the more obsessed you become. There is this endless cycle of guilt and repression, self-hatred. It all comes from this unfortunate and mistaken ideal.

How you deal with these things is all up to you. The guidelines are your actions and speech as suggested by the precepts. When lust or anger comes, you can investigate and know it. In Buddhist training we are not condemning nature, we are understanding it. So simply reflect: 'I know you Māra.' You don't think, 'I have to kill the *kilesas*' and start bashing away. Recognizing, that's knowing Māra. Mara is that force in the mind, in nature, which will never let you rest until you are perfectly free from *kilesas*. This devil then performs a useful function in testing you out – no matter how successful or virtuous you might be.

4

BUDDHA, DHAMMA, SANGHA

When people ask: 'What do you have to do to become a Buddhist?', we say that we take refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, and to take refuge we recite a formula in the Pali language:

Buddhaṁ saraṇaṁ gacchāmi:
I go to the Buddha for refuge
Dhammaṁ saraṇaṁ gacchāmi:
go to the Dhamma for refuge
Saṅghaṁ saraṇaṁ gacchāmi:
I go to the Sangha for refuge.

As we practise more and more and begin to realize the profundity of the Buddhist teachings, it becomes a real joy to take these refuges, and even just reciting them inspires the mind. After many years as a monk, I still like to chant '*Buddhaṁ saraṇaṁ gacchāmi*' – in fact, I like it more than I did at first, because then it didn't really mean anything to me; I just chanted it because I had to, because it was part of the tradition.

Merely taking refuge verbally in the Buddha doesn't mean you take refuge in anything: a parrot could be trained to say *'Buddhaṁ saraṇaṁ gacchāmi'*, and it would probably be as meaningful to a parrot as it is to many Buddhists. These words are for reflection, for looking at them and actually

investigating what they mean, what 'refuge' means, what 'Buddha' means.

When we say, 'I take refuge in the Buddha', what do we mean by that? How can we use that so it is not just a repetition of nonsense syllables, but something that really helps to remind us, gives us direction and increases our devotion, our dedication to the path of the Buddha?

The word 'Buddha' is a lovely word – it means 'the One Who Knows' – and the first refuge is in Buddha as the personification of wisdom. Unpersonified wisdom remains too abstract for us: we can't conceive a bodiless, soul-less wisdom, so as wisdom always seems to have a personal quality to it, using Buddha as its symbol is very useful. We can use the word 'Buddha' to refer to Gotama, the founder of what is now known as Buddhism, the historical sage who attained *parinibbāna* in India 2,500 years ago, the teacher of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, teachings from which we still benefit today.

But when we take refuge in the Buddha, that doesn't mean we take refuge in some historical prophet. We take refuge in that which is wise in the universe, in our minds; that which is not separate from us, but is more real than anything we can conceive with the mind or experience through the senses. Without any Buddha-wisdom in the universe, life for any length of time would be totally impossible; it is the Buddha- wisdom that protects. We call it Buddha-wisdom; other people can call it other things if they want, these are just words. We happen to use the words of our tradition. We don't argue about Pali words, Sanskrit words, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, English or any other

words. We just use the term 'Buddha-wisdom' as a phrase that helps remind us to be wise, to be alert, to be awake.

Many forest bhikkhus in Thailand use the word 'Buddho' as their meditation object. They first calm the mind by following the inhalations and exhalations using the syllables 'BUD-DHO', and then begin to contemplate: 'What is Buddho, the "One Who Knows"? What is the knowing?'

When I used to travel around in North-East Thailand on *tudong*, I liked to go and stay at the monastery of Ajahn Fun. Ajahn Fun was a much-loved and deeply respected monk, the teacher of the Royal Family, and he was so popular that he was constantly receiving guests. I would sit by his kuti and hear him give the most amazing Dhamma talks, all on the subject of 'Buddho' – as far as I could see, it was all that he taught.

He could make it into a really profound meditation, whether for an illiterate farmer or an elegant Western-educated Thai aristocrat. The main part of his teaching was not just about mechanically repeating 'Buddho', but about reflecting and investigating, awakening the mind to really look into the 'Buddho', 'the One Who Knows', to really investigate its beginning, its end, above and below, so that one's whole attention was stuck to it.

When one did that, 'Buddho' became something that echoed through the mind. One would investigate it, look at it, examine it before it was said and after it was said, and eventually one would start listening to it and hear beyond the sound, until one heard the silence.

A refuge is a place of safety, and so when superstitious people came to my teacher Ajahn Chah, wanting charmed medallions or little talismans to protect them from bullets, knives, ghosts and so on, he would say, 'Why do you want things like that? The only real protection is taking refuge in the Buddha. Taking refuge in the Buddha is enough.' But their faith in Buddha usually wasn't quite as strong as their faith in those silly little medallions. They wanted something made out of bronze and clay, stamped and blessed. That is what is called taking refuge in bronze and clay, taking refuge in superstition, taking refuge in that which is truly unsafe and cannot really help us.

Today in modern Britain we find that generally people are more sophisticated. They don't take refuge in magic charms, they take refuge in things like their bank – but that is still taking refuge in something that offers no safety.

Taking refuge in the Buddha, in wisdom, means that we have a place of safety. When there is wisdom, when we act wisely and live wisely, we are truly safe. The conditions around us might change. We can't guarantee what will happen to the material standard of living, or that our bank will survive the decade. The future remains unknown and mysterious. But in the present, by taking refuge in the Buddha, we have the presence of mind now to reflect on and learn from life as we live it.

Wisdom doesn't mean having a lot of knowledge about the world; we don't have to go to university and collect information about the world in order to be wise. Wisdom means knowing the nature of conditions as we

experience them, not just being caught up in, reacting to and absorbing into the conditions of our bodies and minds out of habit, fear, worry, doubt, greed and so on. It is using 'Buddho', the 'One Who Knows,' to observe that these conditions are changing. It is the knowing of that change that we call 'Buddha' and in which we take refuge. We make no claims that Buddha is 'me' or 'mine'. We don't say, 'I am Buddha', but rather, 'I take refuge in Buddha.' This is a way of humbly submitting to that wisdom, being aware, being awake.

Although in one sense taking refuge is something we do all the time, the Pali formula we use is a reminder, because we forget; we habitually take refuge in worry, doubt, fear, anger, greed and so on.

The Buddha-image is also a reminder; when we bow to it we don't imagine that it is anything other than an image, a symbol. It is a reflection which makes us a little more aware of Buddha, of our refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. The Buddha-image sits in great dignity and calm, not in a trance but fully alert, with a look of wakefulness and kindness, not caught in the changing conditions around it. The image is made of metal, while we have flesh-and-blood bodies which make things much more difficult for us, but still it is a reminder.

Some people become very puritanical about Buddha-images, but here in the West I haven't found them to be a danger. The real idols we believe in and worship, and that constantly delude us, are our thoughts, views and opinions, our loves and hates, our self-conceit and pride.

The second Refuge is in the Dhamma, in ultimate truth or ultimate reality. Dhamma is impersonal; we don't in any way try to personify it, to make it any kind of personal deity.

When we chant the verse on Dhamma in Pali, we say it is '*sandiṭṭhiko, akāliko, ehipassiko, opanayiko, paccattaṁ veditabbo viññūhi.*' As Dhamma has no personal attributes, we can't even say it is good or bad, or anything that has a superlative or comparative quality; it is beyond the dualistic conceptions of mind. So when we describe Dhamma or give an impression of it, we do so through words such as '*sandiṭṭhiko*', which means immanent, here-and- now. That brings us back into the present; we feel a sense of immediacy, of the now. You may think that Dhamma is something 'out there', something you have to find elsewhere, but *sandiṭṭhikadhamma* means that it is immanent, here-and-now.

Akālikadhamma means that Dhamma is not bound by any time condition. The word *akāla* means 'timeless'. Our conceptual mind can't conceive of anything that is timeless, because our conceptions and perceptions are time-based conditions, but what we can say is that Dhamma is *akāla*, not bound by time.

Ehipassikadhamma means coming and seeing, turning towards or going to the Dhamma. It means looking, being aware. It is not that we pray to the Dhamma to come or wait for it to tap us on the shoulder; we have to put forth effort. It is like Christ's saying, 'Knock on the door and it shall be opened.' *Ehipassiko* means that we have to put forward that effort, to turn towards that truth.

Opanayiko means leading inwards, towards peace within the mind. Dhamma doesn't take us into fascination, excitement, romance or adventure, but leads to *nibbāna*, to calm, to silence.

Paccattaṁ veditabbo viññūhi means that we can only know Dhamma through direct experience. It is like the taste of honey – if someone else tastes it, we still don't know its flavour. We may know the chemical formula for honey or be able to recite all the great poetry ever written about it, but only when we taste it for ourselves do we really know what it is like. It is the same with Dhamma; we have to taste it, we have to know it directly.

Taking refuge in Dhamma is taking another safe refuge. It is not taking refuge in philosophy or intellectual concepts, in theories, ideas, doctrines or beliefs of any sort. It is not taking refuge in a belief in Dhamma, in God, or in some kind of force in outer space or something beyond or separate, something we have to find later. The descriptions of the Dhamma keep us in the present, in the here and now, unbound by time. Taking refuge is an immediate, immanent reflection in the mind; it is not just repeating '*Dhammaṁ saraṇaṁ gacchāmi*' like a parrot, thinking, 'Buddhists say this, so I have to say it.' We turn towards the Dhamma: we are aware now, take refuge in Dhamma now, as an immediate action, an immediate reflection of being the Dhamma, being that very truth.

Because our conceiving mind always tends to delude us, it takes us into becoming. We think, 'I'll practise meditation so that I'll become enlightened in the future. I will take the Three Refuges in order to become a Buddhist.

I want to become wise. I want to get away from suffering and ignorance, and become something else.' This is the conceiving mind, the desire mind, the mind that always deludes us. So rather than constantly thinking in terms of becoming something in the future, we take refuge in being Dhamma in the present.

The impersonality of Dhamma bothers many people because devotional religion tends to personify everything, and people coming from such traditions don't feel right if they can't have some sort of personal relationship within a religion.

I remember a French Catholic missionary who came to stay in our monastery and practise meditation. He felt at something of a loss with Buddhism because he said it was like 'cold surgery'; there was no personal relationship with God. One cannot have a personal relationship with Dhamma: one cannot say, 'Love the Dhamma!' or 'The Dhamma loves me!' – there is no need for that. We only need a personal relationship with something we are not, like our mother, father, husband or wife, something separate from us. But we don't need to take refuge in mother or father, someone to protect us and love us and say, 'I love you no matter what you do. Everything is going to be all right', and pat us on the head.

The Buddha-Dhamma is a very mature refuge; it is a religious practice that is a complete sanity or maturity, in which we no longer seek a mother or father because we don't need to become anything any more. We no longer need to be loved or protected by anyone; instead we can love and protect others, and that is all that is

important. We no longer have to ask or demand things from others, whether from other people, or even some deity or force that we feel is separate from us and has to be prayed to and asked for guidance. We give up all our attempts to conceive Dhamma as being this or that, or anything at all, and let go of our desire to have a personal relationship with the truth. We have to be that truth, here and now. Being that truth, taking that refuge, calls for an immediate awakening: for being wise now, being Buddha, being Dhamma in the present.

The third Refuge is the Sangha, which means a group. 'Sangha' may be the Bhikkhu-Sangha, the order of monks, or the Ariya-Sangha, the group of Noble Beings, all those who live virtuously, doing good and refraining from evil by bodily action or speech. Here, taking refuge in the Sangha with '*Saṅghaṁ sāranaṁ gacchāmi*' means we take refuge in virtue, in that which is good, virtuous, kind, compassionate and generous. We don't take refuge in those things in our minds that are mean, nasty, cruel, selfish, jealous, hateful, angry – even though admittedly that is what we often tend to do out of heedlessness; out of not reflecting, not being awake, but just reacting to conditions.

On the conventional level, taking refuge in the Sangha means doing good and refraining from doing evil by bodily action or speech.

All of us have both good thoughts and intentions and bad ones. *Sankhāras* (conditioned phenomena) are like that: some are good and some aren't, some are neutral, some are wonderful and some are nasty. Conditions in the world are changing conditions. We can't just think the best, the most

refined thoughts, and feel only the best and the kindest feelings; both good and bad thoughts and feelings come and go, but we take refuge in virtue rather than in hatred. We take refuge in that in all of us which intends to do good, which is compassionate, kind and loving towards ourselves and others.

So the refuge of Sangha is a very practical refuge for day-to-day living within the human form, in this body, in relation to the bodies of other beings and the physical world we live in. When we take this refuge we do not act in any way that causes division, disharmony, cruelty, meanness or unkindness to any living being, including ourselves, our own body and mind. This is being '*supaṭipanno*', one who practises well.

When we are aware and mindful, when we reflect and observe, we begin to see that acting on impulses that are cruel and selfish only brings harm and misery to both ourselves and others. It doesn't take great powers of observation to see that. If you've met any criminals in your life, people who have acted selfishly and wickedly, you'll find them constantly frightened, obsessed, paranoid, suspicious: having to drink a lot, take drugs, keep busy, do all kinds of things, because living with themselves is so horrible. Five minutes alone with themselves without any dope or drink or distraction would seem to them like eternal hell, because the kammic result of evil is so appalling mentally. Even if they're never caught by the police or sent to prison, don't think they're going to get away with anything. In fact, sometimes it is the kindest thing to put them in prison and punish them; it makes them feel better.

I was never a criminal, but I have managed to tell a few lies and do a few mean and nasty things in my lifetime, and the results were always unpleasant. Even today when I think of those things the memory is not pleasant, it is not something that I want to go to announce to everybody, not something that I feel joy about when I think of it.

When we meditate, we realize that we have to be completely responsible for how we live. In no way can we blame anyone else for anything at all.

Before I started to meditate I used to blame people and society: 'If only my parents had been completely wise, enlightened arahants, I would be all right. If only the United States of America had a truly wise, compassionate government that never made any mistakes, supported me completely and appreciated me fully ... If only my friends were wise and encouraging and the teachers truly wise, generous and kind ... If everyone around me was perfect, if society was perfect, if the world was wise and perfect, then I wouldn't have any of these problems. But all have failed me.' Well, my parents had a few flaws and they did make a few mistakes, but now when I look back, I think they didn't make very many. When I was looking to blame others and desperately trying to think of my parents' faults, I really had to work at it.

My generation was very good at blaming everything on the United States, and that is really easy because the United States makes a lot of mistakes. But when we meditate we can no longer get away with that kind of lying to ourselves. We suddenly realize that no matter what anyone else has done, or how unjust society might be, or what our parents might

have been like, we can in no way spend the rest of our lives blaming anyone else – that is a complete waste of time. We have to accept complete responsibility for our life and live it. Even if we did have miserable parents and were raised in a terrible society with no opportunities, it still doesn't matter. There is no one else to blame for our suffering now but ourselves, our own ignorance, selfishness and conceit.

In the crucifixion of Jesus we can see a striking example of a man in pain, stripped naked, made fun of, completely humiliated and then publicly executed in the most horrible, excruciating way, yet without blaming anyone: 'Forgive them, Lord, they know not what they do.' This is a sign of wisdom – it means that even if people are crucifying us, nailing us to the cross, scourging us, humiliating us in every way, it is our aversion, self-pity, pettiness and selfishness that are the problem, the suffering. It is not even the physical pain that is the suffering, it is the aversion.

If Jesus Christ had said, 'Curse you for treating me like this!' he would have been just another criminal and would have been forgotten a few days later. Reflect on this, because we easily tend to blame others for our suffering, and we can justify that because maybe other people are mistreating us, or exploiting us, or don't understand us or are doing dreadful things to us. We don't deny that, but we make nothing of it any more. We forgive, we let go of those memories, because taking refuge in the Sangha means doing good here and now, and refraining from doing evil by bodily action and speech.

So may you reflect on this and really see Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha as a refuge. Look on them as

opportunities for reflection and consideration. It is not a matter of believing in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha – not a faith in concepts, but the using of symbols for mindfulness, for awakening the mind here and now; being here and now.

5

ĀNĀPĀNASATI
(MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING)

Wisdom does not come from studying great theories and philosophies, but from observing the ordinary. We tend to overlook the ordinary. For example, we are usually only aware of our breath when it's abnormal, like if we have asthma or when we've been running hard. But with *ānāpānasati* we take our ordinary breath as the meditation object. We don't try to make the breath long or short, or control it in any way, but simply to stay with the normal inhalation and exhalation.

The breath is not something that we create or imagine; it is a natural process of our bodies that continues as long as life lasts, whether we concentrate on it or not. So it is an object that is always present; we can turn to it at any time. We don't have to have any qualifications to watch our breath. We do not even need to be particularly intelligent – all we have to do is to be aware of and content with one inhalation and exhalation.

The breath lacks any exciting quality or fascination, and so we can become very restless and averse to it. Our desire is always to 'get' something, to find something that will interest and absorb us without any effort on our part. If we hear some music, we don't need to think, 'I must concentrate on this fascinating and exciting rhythmic

music' – we can't stop ourselves, because the rhythm is so compelling that it pulls us in. The rhythm of our normal breathing is not interesting or compelling; it is tranquillizing and most beings aren't used to tranquillity. Most people like the idea of peace but find the actual experience of it disappointing or frustrating. They desire stimulation, something that will draw them into itself. With *ānāpānasati* we stay with an object that is quite neutral – we don't have any strong feelings of liking or disliking for our breath – and just note the beginning of an inhalation, its middle and end, then the beginning of an exhalation, its middle and end. As the gentle rhythm of the breath is slower than the rhythm of thought, it takes us to tranquillity; we begin to stop thinking. But we don't try to get anything from the meditation, to achieve *samādhi* or *jhāna*, because when the mind is trying to achieve or attain things rather than just being humbly content with one breath, it doesn't slow down and become calm, and we become frustrated.

At first the mind wanders off. Once we are aware that we have wandered off the breath, we very gently return to it. We use the attitude of being very, very patient and always willing to begin again. Our minds are not used to being held down; they have been taught to associate one thing with another and form opinions about everything. Being accustomed to using our intelligence and ability to think in clever ways, we tend to become very tense and restless when we can't do that, and when we practise *ānāpānasati* we feel resistance, a resentment of it.

We are like a wild horse when it's first harnessed, becoming angry with the things that bind it. When the mind wanders we grow upset and discouraged, negative and averse to the whole thing. If, out of frustration, we try by sheer will to force the mind to be tranquil, we can only keep that up for a short while before the mind is off somewhere else. So the right attitude to ānāpānasati is being very patient, having all the time in the world, letting go or discarding all worldly, personal problems.

During this time there is nothing we have to do except watch our breath. If the mind wanders on the in-breath, then put more effort into the inhalation. If the mind wanders on the exhalation, then put more effort into that. Keep bringing the mind back. Always be willing to start anew. At the start of each new day, at the beginning of each inhalation, cultivate the beginner's mind, carrying nothing from the old to the new, leaving no traces, like a big bonfire. One inhalation and the mind wanders, so we bring it back again – and that itself is a moment of mindfulness.

We are training the mind like a good mother trains her child. A little child doesn't know what it is doing: it can wander off, and if the mother is angry with it and spanks it, the child becomes terrified and neurotic. A good mother will just leave the child, keeping an eye on it, and if it wanders she will bring it back. Having that kind of patience, we're not trying to bash away at ourselves, hating ourselves, hating our breath, hating everybody, getting upset because we can't become tranquil with *ānāpānasati*.

Sometimes we're too serious about everything, totally lacking in joy and happiness, with no sense of humour,

just repressing everything. Gladden the mind, put a smile on your dial! Be relaxed and at ease, without the pressure of having to achieve anything special – nothing to attain, no big deal, nothing special. And what can you say you have done today to earn your board and keep? Just one mindful inhalation? Crazy! But that is more than most people can say of their day.

We're not battling the forces of evil. If you feel averse to *ānāpānasati*, note that too. Don't feel it's something you have to do, but let it be a pleasure, something you really enjoy doing. When you think 'I can't do it', recognize that as resistance, fear or frustration, and then relax. Don't make this practice into a difficult thing, a burdensome task.

In my early years as a monk I was dead serious, very grim and solemn about myself, like a dried-up old stick, and I used to get into terrible states, thinking, 'I've got to ... I've got to ...' At those times I learned to contemplate peace. Doubts and restlessness, discontent and aversion – soon I was able to reflect on peace, saying the word over and over, hypnotizing myself to relax. The self-doubt would start coming – 'I'm getting nowhere with this, it's useless, I want to get something' – but I was able to be peaceful with that. So when we're tense, we relax and then resume *ānāpānasati*.

At first we feel hopelessly clumsy, like when we're learning to play the guitar – when we first start playing, our fingers are so clumsy it seems hopeless, but when we've done it for some time we gain skill and it is quite easy. We learn to witness what's going on in our mind, so we can know when we're becoming restless and tense, or when we're becoming dull. We recognize that: we're not trying

to convince ourselves it's otherwise; we're fully aware of the way things are. We sustain effort for one inhalation. If we can't do that, then we sustain it for half an inhalation at least. In this way we don't try to become perfect all at once. We don't have to do everything just right according to some idea of how it should be, but we work with the problems that are there. If we have a scattered mind, it's wisdom to recognize the mind that goes all over the place – that is insight. To think that we shouldn't be that way, to hate ourselves or feel discouraged because that is the way we happen to be – that is ignorance.

We don't start from where a perfect yogi is; we're not doing complicated postures before we can bend over and touch our toes. That is the way to harm ourselves. We may look at all the postures in yoga books and see people wrapping their legs round their necks in all kinds of amazing postures, but if we try to do them ourselves they'll cart us off to hospital. So we start from just trying to bend a little more from the waist, examining the pain and resistance to it, learning to stretch gradually.

The same with *ānāpānasati*: we recognize the way it is now and start from there; we sustain our attention a little longer and we begin to understand what concentration is. Don't make Superman resolutions when you're not Superman. Don't say, 'I'm going to sit and watch my breath all night', and become angry when you fail. Set periods that you know you can do. Experiment, work with the mind until you know how to put forth effort and how to relax.

We have to learn to walk by falling down. Look at babies: I've never seen one who could walk straightaway. Babies

learn to walk by crawling, holding onto things, falling down and then pulling themselves up again. It is the same with meditation. We learn wisdom by observing ignorance, by making a mistake, reflecting and keeping going. If we think about it too much, it seems hopeless. If babies thought a lot they'd never learn to walk; when you watch a child first trying to walk it seems hopeless. When we think about it, meditation can seem completely hopeless too, but we just keep doing it. It is easy when we're full of enthusiasm, really inspired with the teacher and the teaching – but enthusiasm and inspiration are impermanent conditions, they take us to disillusionment and boredom.

We really have to put effort into the practice when we're bored; we want to turn away and be reborn into something fascinating and exciting. But for insight and wisdom, we have to endure patiently through the troughs of disillusionment and depression. It is only in this way that we can stop reinforcing the cycles of habit and come to understand cessation, to know the silence and emptiness of the mind.

If we read books about not putting any effort into things, just letting everything happen in a natural, spontaneous way, we tend to start thinking that all we have to do is lounge about, and then we lapse into a dull passive state In my own practice, when I lapsed into dull states I came to see the importance of putting effort into physical posture. I saw that there was no point in making effort in a merely passive way. I would pull the body up straight, push out the chest and put energy into the sitting posture, or else I would do headstands or shoulder stands. Even though in the early

days I didn't have a tremendous amount of energy, I still managed to do something requiring effort. I would learn to sustain it for a few seconds and then I would lose it again, but that was better than doing nothing at all. The more we take the easy way, the path of least resistance, and just follow our desires, the more the mind becomes sloppy, heedless and confused.

It is easier to sit and think all the time than not to think – it's a habit we've acquired. Even the thought, 'I shouldn't think' is just another thought. To avoid thought we have to be mindful of avoiding it, to put forth effort by watching and listening, by being attentive to the flow in our minds. Rather than thinking about our mind, we watch it. Rather than just getting caught in thoughts, we keep recognizing them. Thought is movement, energy, it comes and goes, it is not a permanent condition of the mind. When we simply recognize thought as thought without evaluating or analyzing it, it slows down and stops. This isn't annihilation, this is allowing things to cease. It is compassion. As the habitual obsessive thinking begins to fade, great spaces we never knew were there begin to appear.

We are slowing everything down by absorbing into the natural breath, calming the kammic formations, and this is what we mean by *samatha* or tranquillity: coming to a point of calm. The mind becomes malleable, supple and flexible, and the breathing can become very fine.

But we only carry the *samatha* practice to the point of *upacāra samādhi* (access concentration), we don't try to

absorb completely into the object and enter *jhāna*.[3] At this point we are still aware of both the object and its periphery. The extreme kinds of mental agitation have diminished considerably, but we can still operate using wisdom. With our wisdom faculty still functioning we investigate, and this is *vipassanā*[4]: looking into and seeing the nature of whatever we experience, its impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality. *Anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* are not concepts we believe in, but things we can observe. We investigate the beginning of an inhalation and its ending. We observe what a beginning is; not thinking about what it is but observing, aware with bare attention at the beginning of an inhalation and its end. The body breathes all on its own: the in-breath conditions the out-breath and the out-breath conditions the in- breath, we can't control anything. Breathing belongs to nature; it doesn't belong to us, it is not-self. When we see this we are doing *vipassanā*.

The sort of knowledge we gain from Buddhist meditation is humbling. Ajahn Chah called it earthworm knowledge – it doesn't make you arrogant, it doesn't puff you up, it doesn't make you feel that you are anything or have attained anything. In worldly terms, this practice doesn't seem very important or necessary. Nobody is ever going to write a newspaper headline: 'At eight o'clock this evening Venerable Sumedho had an inhalation'! To some people,

3. '*samatha*' means 'calm' and '*jhāna*' means a state of absorption into the meditation object (such as breathing).

4. *Vipassanā* means 'insight', an aspect of meditation, which is generally coupled with *samatha*, calming. In the Theravada tradition, *vipassanā* has been encouraged through a range of systems and techniques. The Thai Forest Tradition, including Ajahn Sumedho, favours a non-systematic approach, that of wise reflection.

thinking about how to solve all the world's problems might seem very important – how to help all the people in developing countries, how to set the world right. Compared with these things watching our breath seems insignificant, and most people think, 'Why waste time doing that?'

People have confronted me about this, saying, 'What are you monks doing sitting there? What are you doing to help humanity? You're just selfish, you expect people to give you food while you just sit there and watch your breath. You're running away from the real world.' But what is the real world? Who is really running away, and from what? What is there to face? We find that what people call the real world is the world they believe in, the world they are committed to, or the world they know and with which they are familiar. But that world is a condition of mind. Meditation is actually confronting the real world, recognizing and acknowledging it as it really is, rather than believing in it, justifying it or trying mentally to annihilate it.

Now, the real world operates on the same pattern of arising and passing as the breath. We don't theorize about the nature of things, taking philosophical ideas from others and trying to rationalize with them, but by watching our breath we actually observe the way nature is. When we watch our breath we're actually watching nature; through understanding the nature of the breath, we can understand the nature of all conditioned phenomena. If we tried to understand all conditioned phenomena in their infinite variety, quality, different time span and so on, it would be too complex; our minds wouldn't be able to handle it. We have to learn from simplicity.

So with a tranquil mind we become aware of the cyclical pattern; we see that all that arises passes away. That cycle is what is called *saṁsāra*, the wheel of birth and death. We observe the *saṁsāric* cycle of the breath. We inhale and then we exhale. We can't have only inhalations or only exhalations; the one conditions the other.

It would be absurd to think, 'I only want to inhale. I don't want to exhale. I'm giving up exhalation. My life will be just one constant inhalation.' If I said that to you, you'd think I was crazy; but that is what most people do.

How foolish people are when they want only to attach to excitement, pleasure, youth, beauty and vigour: 'I only want beautiful things and I'm not going to have anything to do with the ugly. I want pleasure and delight and creativity, but I don't want any boredom or depression.' That is the same kind of madness as if you were to hear me saying, 'I can't stand inhalations. I'm not going to have them any more.' When we observe that attachment to beauty, sensual pleasures and love will always lead to despair, our attitude becomes one of detachment. That doesn't mean annihilation or any desire to destroy, but simply letting go, non-attachment. We don't seek perfection in any part of the cycle; we see that perfection lies in the cycle as a whole, including old age, sickness and death. What arises in the uncreated reaches its peak and then returns to the uncreated, and that is perfection.

As we start to see that all *sankhāras* have this pattern of arising and passing away, we begin to go inwards to the Unconditioned, the peace of the mind, its silence. We begin to experience *suññatā* or emptiness – which is not oblivion

or nothingness but a clear and vibrant stillness. We can turn to the emptiness rather than to the conditions of the breath and mind. Then we have a perspective on the *sankhāras* and don't just react blindly to them any more. There is the conditioned, the Unconditioned and the knowing.

What is the knowing? Is it memory? Is it consciousness? Is it 'me'? I've never been able to find out, but I can be aware. In Buddhist meditation we stay with the knowing: being aware, being awake, being Buddha in the present, knowing that whatever arises passes away and is not- self. We apply this knowing to everything, both the conditioned and the Unconditioned. It is transcendent – being awake rather than trying to escape – and it is all in our ordinary activity. We have the four normal postures of sitting, standing, walking and lying down – we don't have to stand on our heads or do backflips. We use the four normal postures and ordinary breathing because we are moving towards that which is most ordinary, the Unconditioned.

Conditions are extraordinary, but peace of mind, the Unconditioned, is so ordinary that nobody ever notices it. It is there all the time, but we don't ever notice it because we're attached to the mysterious and the fascinating. We get caught up in the things that arise and pass away, the things that stimulate and depress. We get caught up in the way things seem to be – and forget. But in meditation we go back to the source, to peace, to that position of knowing. Then the world is understood for what it is, and we are no longer deluded by it.

The realization of *saṁsāra* is the condition for *nibbāna*. As we recognize the cycles of habit and are no longer

deluded by them or their qualities, we realize *nibbāna*. The Buddha-knowing is of just two things: the conditioned and the Unconditioned. It is an immediate recognition of how things are right now, without grasping or attachment.

At this moment we can be aware of the conditions of the mind, of feelings in the body, of what we're seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling and thinking, and also of the emptiness of the mind. The conditioned and the Unconditioned are what we can realize. So the Buddha's teaching is a very direct teaching. Our practice is not 'to become enlightened', but to be in the knowing, now.

6

HAPPINESS, UNHAPPINESS AND NIBBĀNA

The goal of Buddhist meditation is *nibbāna*. We incline towards the peace of *nibbāna* and away from the complexities of the sense realm, the endless cycles of habit. *Nibbāna* is a goal that can be realized in this lifetime. We don't have to wait until we die to know if it's real.

The senses and the sense world are the realm of birth and death. Take sight, for instance: it's dependent on so many factors – whether it's day or night, whether or not the eyes are healthy and so on. Yet we become very attached to the colours, shapes and forms that we perceive with the eyes, and we identify with them. Then there are the ears and sound: when we hear pleasant sounds we seek to hold on to them, and when we hear unpleasant sounds we try to turn away. With smells, we seek the pleasure of fragrances and pleasant odours, and try to avoid unpleasant ones. With flavours we seek delicious tastes and try to avoid bad ones. And touch: how much of our life is spent trying to escape from physical discomfort and pain and seeking the delight of physical sensation? Finally there is thought, the discriminatory consciousness; it can give us a lot of pleasure or a lot of misery.

These are the senses, the sense world. This is the compounded world of birth and death. Its very nature is *dukkha*, it is imperfect and unsatisfying. You'll never find

perfect happiness, contentment or peace in the sense world; it will always bring despair and death. The sense world is unsatisfactory, and so we suffer from it when we expect it to satisfy us. We suffer when we expect more from it than it can possibly give, things like permanent security and happiness, permanent love and safety, hoping that our life will only be one of pleasure and have no pain in it: 'If we could only get rid of sickness and disease, and conquer old age.'

I remember that some years ago in the States, people hoped that modern science would be able to get rid of all illnesses. They'd say, 'All mental illnesses are due to chemical imbalances. If we can just find the right chemical combinations and inject them into the body, schizophrenia will disappear.' There would be no more headaches or backaches. We would gradually replace all our internal organs with nice plastic ones. I even read an article in an Australian medical journal about how they hoped to conquer old age! As the world's population kept increasing, we'd keep having more children and nobody would ever grow old and die. Just think what a mess that would be!

The sense world is unsatisfactory, and that's the way it's supposed to be. When we attach to it, it takes us to despair, because attachment means that we want it to be satisfactory; we want it to satisfy us, to make us content, happy and secure. But just notice the nature of happiness – how long can you stay happy? What is happiness? You may think it's how you feel when you get what you want. Someone says something you like to hear

and you feel happy. Someone does something you approve of and you feel happy. The sun shines and you feel happy. Someone makes nice food and serves it to you, and you're happy. But how long can you stay happy? Do we always have to depend on the sun shining?

In England the weather is very changeable: happiness about the sun shining in England is obviously very impermanent and unsatisfactory! Unhappiness is not getting what we want: wanting it to be sunny when it's cold, wet and rainy, people doing things that we don't approve of, having food that isn't delicious and so on. Life becomes boring and tedious when we're unhappy with it.

So happiness and unhappiness are very dependent on getting what we want or what we don't want. But happiness is the goal of most people's lives; the American constitution speaks of the right to 'the pursuit of happiness.' Getting what we want, what we think we deserve, becomes our goal in life.

Happiness always leads to unhappiness, because it's impermanent. How long can you really be happy? Trying to arrange, control and manipulate conditions so as always to get what we want, always hear what we want to hear, always see what we want to see, and never have to experience unhappiness or despair, is a hopeless task. It's impossible. We feel happy when we're healthy, but our human bodies are subject to rapid changes and we can lose our health very quickly. Then we feel terribly unhappy at being sick, at losing the pleasure of feeling energetic and vigorous. Happiness is unsatisfactory, it's *dukkha*. It's not something to depend on or make the goal of life. Happiness

will always be disappointing, because it lasts so briefly and then is succeeded by unhappiness. It is always dependent on so many other things.

Thus the goal for the Buddhist is not happiness, because we realize that happiness is unsatisfactory. *Nibbāna*, the goal, lies away from the sense world. This distancing is not through a rejection of the sense world, but through understanding it so well that we no longer seek it as an end in itself and no longer expect it to satisfy us. We no longer demand that sense consciousness should be anything other than an existing condition which we can use skilfully according to time and place. We no longer attach to it or demand that sense-contact should be always pleasant, or feel despair and sorrow when it's unpleasant. But *nibbāna* isn't a state of blankness, a trance where you're totally wiped out. It's not nothingness or annihilation; it's like a space. It's going into the space of your mind where you no longer attach, where you're no longer deluded by the appearance of things. You no longer demand anything from the sense world. You just recognize it as it arises and passes away.

Being born in the human condition means that we must inevitably experience old age, sickness and death. One time a young woman came to our monastery in England with her baby, who had been badly ill for about a week with a horrible racking cough. The mother looked totally depressed and miserable. As she sat in the reception room holding the baby, it turned red in the face and started screaming and coughing horribly.

The woman said, 'Oh, Venerable Sumedho, why does he have to suffer like this? He's never hurt anybody, he's

never done anything wrong. Why? What did he do in some previous life to have to suffer like this?' But he was suffering because he was born! If he hadn't been born, he wouldn't have had to suffer. When we're born we have to expect these things. Having a human body means that we have to experience sickness, pain, old age and death. This is an important reflection. We can speculate that maybe in a previous life the baby liked to choke cats and dogs, or something like that, and has to pay for it in this life, but that's mere speculation and it doesn't really help. What we can know is that his suffering is the kammic result of being born. Each one of us must inevitably experience sickness and pain, hunger, thirst, the ageing process of our bodies and death; that's the law of kamma. What begins must end, what is born must die, what comes together must separate.

We're not pessimistic about the way things are, but we observe and so we don't expect life to be other than it is. Then we can cope with life, endure it when it's difficult and delight in it when it's delightful. If we understand life, we can enjoy it without being its helpless victims. How much misery there is in human existence because we expect life to be other than what it is! We have romantic ideas that we'll meet the right person, fall in love and live happily ever after, never fight, have a wonderful relationship. But what about death? You may think, 'Well, maybe we'll die at the same time', but that's just hope.

And then there's despair when your loved one dies before you do, or runs away with the dustman or the travelling salesman.

You can learn a lot from small children, because they don't disguise their feelings, they just express what they feel in the moment. When they're miserable they start crying, and when they're happy they laugh. Some time ago I went with a layman to his home. When we arrived his young daughter was very happy to see him. Then he said to her, 'I have to take Venerable Sumedho to Sussex University to give a talk.' As we walked out of the door the little girl turned red in the face and began screaming in anguish, so her father said, 'It's all right, I'll be back in an hour.' But she wasn't old enough to understand 'I'll be back in an hour.' The immediacy of separation from the loved meant immediate anguish.

Notice how often in our life there is that sorrow at having to separate from something we like or someone we love, from having to leave a place where we really like to be. When you are really mindful you can see the not wanting to separate, the sorrow. As adults, we can let go of the sorrow immediately if we know we can come back again, but it's still there. For several months I travelled around the world, arriving at airports where somebody always met me with 'Hello!'; and then a few days later it was 'Goodbye!' And there was always this asking, 'Come back', and I'd say, 'Yes, I'll come back'... and so I've committed myself to do the same thing again. We can't say, 'Goodbye forever' to someone we like – we say, 'I'll see you again,' 'I'll phone you up,' 'I'll write

to you', or 'Until next time we meet.' We have all these phrases to cover over the sense of sorrow and separation.

In meditation we just note, observe what sorrow really is. We don't say that we shouldn't feel sorrow when we separate from someone we love; it's natural to feel that way. But as meditators we begin to witness sorrow so that we understand it, rather than trying to suppress it, pretending it's something more than it is or just neglecting it. In England, people tend to suppress sorrow when somebody dies. They try not to cry or be emotional, they don't want to 'make a scene', they 'keep a stiff upper lip'. Then when they start meditating, they can find themselves suddenly crying over the death of someone who died fifteen years before. They didn't cry at the time, so they end up doing it fifteen years later.

When someone dies, we don't want to admit our sorrow or make a scene, because we think that if we cry we're weak, or it's embarrassing to others. So we tend to suppress and hold things back, not recognizing the nature of things as they really are, not recognizing our human predicament and learning from it. In meditation, we allow the mind to open up and let the things that have been suppressed and repressed become conscious, because when things become conscious they have a way of ceasing rather than just being repressed again. We allow things to take their course to cessation, we allow things to go away rather than just pushing them away.

Often we push certain things away from us, refusing to accept or recognize them. If we feel upset or annoyed with anyone, if we're bored or unpleasant feelings arise, we

look at beautiful flowers or the sky, read a book, watch TV, do something. We're never bored fully consciously, fully angry. We don't recognize our despair or disappointment because we can always run off to something else. We can always go to the refrigerator, eat cakes and sweets, listen to the stereo. It's so easy to absorb into music, away from boredom and despair into something that's exciting, interesting, calming or beautiful. Look at how dependent we are on watching TV and reading. There are so many books now that they'll have to be burnt – there are useless books everywhere, produced by writers who have nothing worth saying. Today's not-so-pleasant film stars write their autobiographies and make a lot of money. Then there are the gossip columns: people get away from the boredom of their own existence, their discontent with it, its tediousness, by reading gossip about movie stars and celebrities.

We've never really accepted boredom as a conscious state. As soon as it comes into the mind we start looking for something interesting, something pleasant. But in meditation we allow boredom to be. We allow ourselves to be fully, consciously bored, utterly depressed, fed up, jealous, angry, disgusted. We begin to accept into consciousness all the nasty, unpleasant experiences of life that we have suppressed from consciousness and never really looked at, never really accepted not as personality problems any more, but just out of compassion. Out of kindness and wisdom we allow them to take their natural course to cessation, rather than just keeping them going round in the same old cycles of habit. If we have no way

of letting things take their natural course, we're always controlling, always caught in some dreary habit of mind. When we're jaded and depressed we're unable to appreciate the beauty of things, because we never really see them as they truly are.

I remember an experience I had in my first year of meditation in Thailand. I spent most of that year by myself in a little hut and the first few months were really terrible. All kinds of things kept coming up in my mind; obsessions, fears, terror and hatred. I'd never felt so much hatred. I'd never thought of myself as someone who hated people, but during those first few months of meditation it seemed I hated everybody. I couldn't think of anything nice about anyone, there was so much aversion coming up into consciousness. Then one afternoon I started having this strange vision – I thought I was going crazy, actually. I saw people walking off my brain. I saw my mother just walk out of my brain and into emptiness, disappear into space. Then my father and my sister followed. I actually saw these visions walking out of my head. I thought, 'I'm crazy! I've gone nuts!', but it wasn't an unpleasant experience.

The next morning, when I woke from sleep and looked around, I felt that everything I saw was beautiful. Everything, even the most unbeautiful detail, was beautiful. I was in a state of awe. The hut itself was a crude structure, not beautiful by anyone's standards,but it looked to me like a palace. The scrubby-looking trees outside looked like a most beautiful forest. Sunbeams were streaming through the window onto a plastic

dish, and the plastic dish looked beautiful! That sense of beauty stayed with me for about a week and then, reflecting on it, I suddenly realized that is the way things really are when the mind is clear. Up to that time I'd been looking through a dirty window, and over the years I'd become so used to the scum and dirt on the window that I didn't realize it was dirty, I'd accepted the way it was. When we become used to looking through a dirty window, everything seems grey, grimy and ugly. Meditation is a way of cleaning the window, purifying the mind, allowing things to come up into consciousness and letting them go. Then with the wisdom faculty, the Buddha-wisdom, we observe how things really are. This is not just attaching to beauty, to purity of mind, but actually understanding. It is wisely reflecting on the way nature operates, so that we are no longer deluded into living habitually.

Birth means old age, sickness and death, but that's to do with your body, it's not you. Your human body is not really yours. No matter what your particular appearance might be, whether you are healthy or sickly, beautiful or not beautiful, black or white, or whatever, it's all non-self. This is what we mean by *anattā*. Human bodies belong to nature and follow the laws of nature; they are born, they grow up, they age and they die.

We may understand that rationally, but emotionally there is a very strong attachment to the body. In meditation we begin to see this attachment. We don't take the position that we shouldn't be attached, saying, 'The problem with me is that I'm attached to my body. I shouldn't be. It's bad, isn't it? If I was a wise person I wouldn't be attached to

it.' That's starting from an ideal. It's like trying to start climbing a tree from the top, saying, 'I should be at the top of the tree. I shouldn't be down here.' But much as we'd like to think we're at the top, we have to accept humbly that we aren't. To begin with we have to be at the trunk of the tree, where the roots are, looking at the most coarse and ordinary things, before we can start identifying with anything at the top of the tree.

This is the way of wise reflection. The practice is not one of purifying the mind and then attaching to purity. It's not just trying to refine consciousness so that we can induce high states of concentration whenever we feel like it, because even the most refined states of sensory consciousness are unsatisfactory; they're dependent on so many other things. *Nibbāna* is not dependent on any other condition. Conditions of any quality, be they ugly, nasty, beautiful, refined or whatever, arise and pass away, but they don't interfere with *nibbāna*, with the peace of the mind. We don't incline away from the sense world through aversion, because if we try to annihilate the senses, that too becomes a habit we blindly acquire, trying to get rid of what we don't like. That's why we have to be very patient.

This lifetime as a human being is a lifetime of meditation. See the span of meditation as the rest of your life rather than just a ten-day retreat. You may think, 'I meditated on retreat for ten days. I thought I was enlightened, but when I got home I somehow didn't feel enlightened any more. I'd like to go back and do a

longer retreat where I can feel more enlightened than I did last time. It would be nice to have a higher state of consciousness.' In fact, the more refined your experience on retreat, the more coarse your daily life must seem. You have highs, but when you go back to the mundane daily routines of life in the city, it's even worse than before. After going so high the ordinariness of life seems much more ordinary, gross and unpleasant.

The way to insight wisdom is not having preferences for refinement over coarseness, but recognizing that both refined and coarse consciousness are impermanent conditions: that they're unsatisfactory, their nature will never satisfy us, and they're *anattā*, they're not what we are, not ours.

Thus the Buddha's teaching is very simple. What could be simpler than 'What is born must die'? It's not some great new philosophical discovery; even illiterate tribal people know that. You don't have to study in university to know it. When we're young we think, 'I've got so many years left of youth and happiness.' If we're beautiful we think, 'I'm going to be young and beautiful forever,' because it seems that way. When we're twenty years old, having a good time, life is wonderful, and if somebody says, 'You're going to die some day', we may think, 'What a depressing person. Let's not invite him to our house again.'

We don't want to think about death, we want to think about how wonderful life is, how much pleasure we can get out of it. But as meditators we reflect on growing old and dying. This is not being morbid, sick or depressing; it's considering the whole cycle of existence, and when we know that

cycle, we are more careful about how we live. People do horrible things because they don't wisely reflect and consider that they will die; they just follow their passions and feelings of the moment, trying to obtain pleasure and feeling angry and depressed when life doesn't give them what they want.

Reflect on your own life and death and the cycles of nature. Observe what delights and what depresses you. See how we can feel very positive or very negative. Notice how we want to attach to beauty, pleasant feelings or inspiration. It's really nice to feel inspired, isn't it? 'Buddhism is the greatest religion of them all', or 'When I discovered the Buddha I was so happy, it's a wonderful discovery!' When we become a little doubtful, a little depressed, we read an inspiring book and get high. But remember, being high is an impermanent condition. It's like becoming happy: you have to keep sustaining it, and after you keep doing something over and over again, you no longer feel happy with it. How many sweets can you eat? First they make you happy, then they make you sick. So, depending on religious inspiration is not enough.

If you attach to inspiration, when you become fed up with Buddhism you'll go off and find some new thing to inspire you. It's like attaching to romance; when it disappears from a relationship you start looking for someone else to feel romantic about.

Years ago in America I met a woman who'd been married six times, and she was only about thirty- three. I said, 'You'd think you would have learned after the third or fourth time. Why do you keep getting married?' She said, 'It's the romance. I don't like the other side but I love the romance.'

At least she was honest, but not terribly wise. Romance is a condition that leads to disillusionment.

Romance, inspiration, excitement, adventure: all these things rise to a peak and then condition their opposites, just as an inhalation conditions an exhalation. Just think of inhaling all the time – it would be like having one romance after another. How long can you inhale? The inhalation conditions the exhalation, both are necessary. Birth conditions death, hope conditions despair and inspiration conditions disillusionment. So when we attach to hope we're going to feel despair. When we attach to excitement it will take us to boredom. When we attach to romance it will take us to disillusionment and divorce. When we attach to life it takes us to death. So recognize that it's the attachment that causes suffering, attaching to conditions and expecting them to be more than what they are.

For so many people so much of life seems to be waiting and hoping for something to happen, expecting and anticipating some success or pleasure – or maybe worrying and fearing that some painful, unpleasant thing is just lying in wait. You may hope you will meet somebody you'll really love or have some great experience, but attaching to hope takes you to despair.

By wise reflection we begin to understand the things that create misery in our lives. We see that we are actually the creators of that misery. Through our ignorance, through not having wisely understood the sensory world and its limitations, we have identified with all that is unsatisfactory and impermanent, the things that can only take us to despair and death. No wonder life

is so depressing! It's dreary because of the attachment, because we identify and seek ourselves in all that is by nature *dukkha* – unsatisfactory and imperfect.

When we stop doing that, when we let go, that is enlightenment; we are enlightened beings, no longer attached, no longer identified with anything, no longer deluded by the sense world. We understand the sense world, we know how to coexist with it. We know how to use the sensory world for compassionate action, for joyous giving. We no longer demand that it be here to satisfy us, to make us feel secure and safe or to give us anything, because as soon as we demand that it should satisfy us, it takes us to despair.

When we no longer identify with the sense world as 'me' or 'mine' and see it as *anattā*, we can enjoy the senses without seeking sense-contact or depending on it. We no longer expect conditions to be anything other than what they are, so that when they change we can patiently and peacefully bear the unpleasant side of existence. We can humbly endure sickness, pain, cold, hunger, failures and criticisms. If we're not attached to the world we can adapt to change, whatever that change may be, whether it's for the better or the worse. If we're still attached, we can't adapt very well; we're always struggling, resisting, trying to control and manipulate everything, and then feeling frustrated, frightened or depressed at what a delusive, frightening place the world is.

If you've never really contemplated the world, never taken the time to understand and know it, it becomes a frightening place for you. It becomes like a jungle. You

don't know what's behind the next tree or bush or cliff – a wild animal, a ferocious man-eating tiger, a terrible dragon or a poisonous snake. *Nibbāna* means getting away from the jungle. When we incline towards *nibbāna* we move towards peace of mind. Although the conditions of the mind may not be peaceful at all, the mind itself is a peaceful place.

Here we make a distinction between the mind and the conditions of mind. The conditions of mind can be happy, miserable, elated, depressed, loving or hating, worrying or fear ridden, doubting or bored. They come and go in the mind, but the mind itself, like the space in this room, stays just at it is. The space in this room has no quality to elate or depress. It is just as it is.

To concentrate on the space in the room we have to withdraw our attention from the things in it. If we concentrate on the things in it, we become happy or unhappy. We say: 'Look at that beautiful Buddha-image', or if we see something we find ugly we say: 'Oh, what a terrible, disgusting thing.' We can spend our time looking at the people in the room, thinking whether we like this person or dislike that person. We can form opinions about people being this way or that way, remember what they did in the past, speculate about what they will do in the future, seeing others as possible sources of pain or gratification to ourselves. However, if we withdraw our attention, that doesn't mean we have to push everyone else out of the room. If we don't concentrate on or absorb into any of the conditions we have a perspective, because the space in the

room has no quality to depress or elate. It can contain us all, all conditions can come and go within it.

Moving inwards, we can apply this to the mind. The mind is like space, there's room in it for everything or nothing. It doesn't really matter whether it is filled or has nothing in it, because we always have a perspective once we know the space of the mind, its emptiness. Armies can come into the mind and leave, butterflies, rain clouds or nothing. All things can come and go through it without our being caught in blind reaction, struggling resistance, control or manipulation. So when we abide in the emptiness of our minds we move away, not getting rid of things, but no longer absorbing into conditions that exist in the present or creating any new ones. This is our practice of letting go. We let go of our identification with conditions by seeing that they are all impermanent and not-self.

This is what we mean by *vipassanā* meditation. It's really looking, witnessing, listening, observing that whatever comes must go. Whether it's coarse or refined, good or bad, whatever comes and goes is not what we are. We're not good, we're not bad, we're not male or female, beautiful or ugly. These are changing conditions in nature, they are not-self. This is the Buddhist way to enlightenment: going towards *nibbāna*, inclining towards the spaciousness or emptiness of mind rather than being born and caught up in the conditions of mind

You may ask, 'If I'm not the conditions of mind, if I'm not a man or a woman, this or that, then what am I?' Do you want me to tell you who you are? Would you believe me if I did? What would you think if I started asking you who

I am? It's like trying to see your own eyes: you can't know yourself, because you are yourself. You can only know what is not yourself – and that solves the problem, doesn't it? If you know what is not yourself, there is no question about what you are. If I said: 'Who am I? I'm trying to find myself', and started looking under the shrine, under the carpet, under the curtain, you'd think, 'Venerable Sumedho has really flipped out, he's gone crazy, he's looking for himself.' 'I'm looking for me, where am I?' is the most stupid question in the world. The problem is not who we are, but our belief and identification with what we are not. That's where the suffering is, that's where we feel misery and depression and despair. It's our identifying with everything that is not ourselves that is *dukkha*. When you identify with that which is unsatisfactory, it's obvious that you'll be dissatisfied and discontented.

So the path of the Buddhist is a letting go rather than trying to find anything. The problem is blind attachment, blind identification with the appearance of the sensory world. You needn't get rid of the sensory world, but learn from it, watch it, no longer allow yourselves to be deluded by it. Keep penetrating it with Buddha-wisdom; keep using this Buddha-wisdom so that you become more at ease with being wise, rather than making yourself become wise. Just by listening, observing, being awake, being aware, the wisdom will become clear. You'll be using wisdom with regard to your body, thoughts, feelings, memories, emotions, all of those things. You'll see and witness them, allow them to pass by and let them go. So at this time you have nothing to do except be wise from one moment to the next.

7

NOTHING IS MORE JOYLESS THAN SELFISHNESS

During the last week we have had the opportunity to practise together here at the International Forest Monastery. We met together in the mornings and evenings, at teatime, on Vesākha Pūjā Day and for Pāṭimokkha, all during a brief ten days. There were times for listening, for talking and for discussing Dhamma, wonderful occasions to contemplate and reflect on our practice.

'Mindfulness' is an interesting word for most of us. We think it's something that we have to try and get. Actually it's just a very natural way of being receptive. When we drive a car we have to be mindful, unless we are drunk or in a really terrible state. We don't think, 'I've got to try to be mindful.' If we are not a very disturbed, heedless and foolish kind of person, we just are mindful, because it is quite apparent that when driving a car we have a dangerous machine under our control. If we are not mindful we may hit somebody, kill ourselves or do some damage, so just that sense of self-preservation, respect for life and not wanting to hurt others while driving a car makes us mindful. We don't just *practise* mindfulness while driving – we *are* mindful.

In monastic life, if we think of mindfulness as something we must practise, we form an opinion about it as something we have to develop. If we are mindful we are aware of the

whole way of thinking: 'I've got to be more mindful – I must develop mindfulness in order to get out of the death-bound state and become an enlightened person.' We are aware of the forces, intentions and habits that affect us at that moment. If I am thinking, 'I've got to be mindful' while I am being mindful, I can see and be aware that I have this idea, 'I've got to be mindful'. That's mindfulness. But if I just follow the view that I must be mindful – I can be quite heedless! One example of this is when I was at Wat Pah Pong.

I would go on *pindapaht*[5] to Bahn Gor, which is a three-kilometre walk. One day it looked like it was going to rain and we thought it advisable to take our umbrellas. So I took my umbrella and started off. But it didn't rain, so we left our umbrellas outside the village. I said to myself: 'You must be mindful, Sumedho, and when you come back from your alms-round you must remember your umbrella. Remember where it is so that you can take it back to the monastery.' So I went on *pindapaht* being very mindful of each step, got back to the monastery and realized I'd forgotten my umbrella. I had concentrated and was maybe very composed while on my alms-round, but I was not terribly mindful about other things. In other words, when one just concentrates on walking in a certain way or doing something else, one is not necessarily mindful.

We need to take into our minds the way it is, what all that implies and what is involved. This does not mean just having the idea that one has to be mindful

5. *pindapaht* (pronounced 'pindabaht') is the Thai rendition of *piṇḍapāta*, the alms-round.

of each step while walking on an alms-round, as a kind of fixed view of mindfulness. That can be merely concentration. Mindfulness allows us really to notice the way it is, where we are, the time and the place.

Another time I was walking on *pindapaht* at Tum Saeng Pet. I was trying to be very mindful, walking barefoot, and my right leg was very sensitive; I had to be most careful of it. It was very bumpy, rocky and rooty up at Tum Saeng Pet, and I said to myself: 'You must be mindful while walking, Sumedho!' So I tried to be incredibly mindful, ever so careful – and I stubbed my toe. It was very painful and I said to myself: 'You're not being mindful, Sumedho!' While I was saying that, I stubbed my toe again and it was absolutely excruciating. So I heard myself saying, 'You're not mindful at all! You're just a hopeless case!' – and I stubbed my toe for the third time. I was about ready to faint. And there I was, thinking, 'You've got to be mindful; be mindful; try to be more mindful; I wasn't mindful.' I was completely caught up with my ideas about being mindful, and my poor toe was suffering along with the rest of me.

People don't wisely consider their limits and what mindfulness and wisdom really amount to. They develop fixed ideas about following certain meditation techniques or special practices, and do not take into account the nature of the human body with its limitations, or the time and the place. For example, one time I stayed at a meditation monastery where people develop mindfulness by doing everything incredibly slowly. But there was an occasion when we were asked to attend an important meeting.

Everyone was to congregate at two o'clock in the *sālā*.[6] I arrived on time, but then we had to wait for forty-five minutes – because some people were walking slowly and the rest of us had to wait for them. This didn't strike me as being very wise or considerate; if one wants to walk slowly then maybe it's best to set off well in advance. Or you can walk at a normal pace just for that occasion – in order to arrive in time. Whatever you decide, you should consider and contemplate time and place, what is appropriate, what is beautiful, what is kind. This takes wisdom rather than just mere willpower or blind grasping of conditions.

Here in Wat Pah Nanachat, contemplate this monastery as a place to practise, as a community where we share our lives together, being mindful of our Vinaya, our customs and traditions. What is the way things are done here? One doesn't make up one's own rules or go one's own way in a community. In the Sangha we determine to agree to live in a certain way. If we don't want to live in that way, we shouldn't be here. We should go where we can do what we want. The advantages of community life lie in our ability to be sensitive and caring, to be considerate and thoughtful of other human beings. A life without generosity, respect and giving to others is a joyless life.

Nothing is more joyless than selfishness. If I think of myself first, what I want and what I can get out of this place, that means I might live here, but I will not have any joy living here. I might because of my seniority be able to intimidate, and because of my size be able to push

6. The *sālā* is the meeting hall in a monastery.

my weight around and get my way, but I am not going to be joyful by doing that. Just asserting myself and getting my way is not the way to peacefulness, equanimity and serenity of the heart. As we gain seniority in the Sangha, we have to think more about other people. We need to consider how to train and look after the juniors and how to help the seniors. Nothing is more depressing than to be in a community of bhikkhus who don't really bother and just want to do what they want. They are so blind or self- centred they don't look and see, they don't ask, they don't notice – you have to tell them everything. It is very frustrating to have to live with people who are not willing to put forth the effort to try to notice and to take on responsibility.

In other words, we have to grow up. Maybe some of you came to be monks so you could get out of marrying and having children, the responsibility of having to take care of somebody else. Maybe you weren't Prince Siddhartha[7] leaving your beautiful wife and child, those you loved most in the world, in order to realize the ultimate truth and be enlightened. Maybe you came here because you couldn't stand the idea of having to work and make money to be able to support a wife and kids. Does that ring true for any of you? It can be pretty dreary to have to go around taking care of someone. You can't go your own way if you're married. You have to think of somebody else. You have to include somebody else in your life, the one you marry, and not many people who get married do that these days. When

7. Prince Siddhartha was the name of the future Buddha when we was a young man.

you start having children, you have to open up your heart even more to include them too.

Babies are pretty helpless, they can't do anything, so you have to do everything for them. You have to give up your freedom and independence, your rights and privileges, in order to look after a little baby with stinking nappies, and a wife and maybe a mother-in-law ... We have to open our hearts wide to be able to look after and meet the needs of a situation like that.

For Buddhist monks here in Thailand it's easy just to go off and find a nice cave and live there. The lay people are so generous in this country, they love to feed monks. They think monks are wonderful and will give them nice robes and build them lovely kutis. If a monk is a fairly decent and pleasant type of person, they will send him to the best doctors in Bangkok for any treatment he might need. So in Thailand a monk can be a very selfish kind of person, working on the basis of the idea: 'I must get enlightened and nobody else matters but me.' But this is a very joyless and dry way to live. Operating in this narrow- minded way becomes increasingly dreary.

I was pushed into a more responsible position by Ajahn Chah. I didn't want it. I didn't want to have to teach or be responsible for anything. I had all kinds of romantic ideas about being a monk: going off to an island, living in a cave in the Himalayan Mountains, developing magical powers, living in a state of bliss for months at a time. I had all kinds of hopes in that direction. Having to think about somebody else was not something I found very attractive. I had been married and I didn't like that, it was

a drag. As a monk in Thailand I was even praised for being totally selfish: 'He's really a good monk, very strict, doesn't speak to anyone, likes to be alone, practises hard.' One gets praised for that. But life sometimes forces us to look in different directions. That's obviously what Ajahn Chah did for me. He put pressure on me, so I began to see and realize that if I just kept going the way I was, I would be a miserable, unhappy, selfish person. I began to think in terms of: 'How can I help? What can I do?'

When I went to India in 1974 I had a strong experience of what is called *kataññū katavedī:* gratitude – to Gotama the Buddha, to Ajahn Chah, to Thailand and to all the lay people who had been supporting and helping me. This sense of gratitude was very strong. At that time I had really wonderful opportunities. After five months in India I had a lot of adventures. I had gone *tudong*, just wandered and begged for food. I met some wealthy people who wanted me to spend the vassa at a marvellous place in southern India. There was another invitation to go to Sri Lanka. All kinds of places in rather nice settings and idyllic environments were suddenly made available to me. But all I could think of was that I must go back to Thailand, I must find a way of serving Ajahn Chah.

So I thought: 'What is the best way I can help and serve Ajahn Chah?' I had left Thailand and gone to India to get away from all those Westerners who were piling up at Wat Pah Pong at that time. I was the only one who could speak Thai then, so they depended a lot on me for translating. Well, I thought the least I could do was go back and help translate for Ajahn Chah, so I left India, came

back to Thailand, went to Wat Pah Pong and offered my services. I decided to be a non-complaining monk, just do what Ajahn Chah wanted me to do, and no longer ask for anything for myself. I determined that if he wanted me to stay at Wat Pah Pong, I'd stay at Wat Pah Pong, or if he wanted to send me off to the worst, most horrible branch monastery, I'd go there. Wherever I could help I would do that, without asking for any special privileges.

I thought of Ajahn Chah's worst branch monastery. At that time it was called Wat Suan Gluay. I remember going there once and I was taller than all the trees there. It is called 'Banana Garden Monastery', but I don't think there's a banana tree in the whole place. It was a hot, unattractive and difficult place with rather coarse villagers and terrible food. So, hoping to do some kind of ascetic practice, I thought, 'I know, I'll help Ajahn Chah by volunteering to go to Wat Suan Gluay, because nobody wants to go there. He always has difficulty keeping monks there.' I went to Ajahn Chah and said: 'Luang Por, I volunteer to go to Wat Suan Gluay', and he said: 'No, you can't go.' I was quite disappointed. I was actually looking forward to it. But then a year or so later we started this monastery here. 'Wat Pah America' it was called as a joke, because most of the bhikkhus then were Americans. It was my responsibility to try and look after it.

In England one has to give up any selfish desires for one's practice. In England, Buddhist monasticism somehow forces us to be selfless, while here in Thailand, as I've said before, we can feed our selfishness very much. The reason is that there aren't many options. One can go to Amaravati,

Chithurst, Devon or Harnham, and that's about the only choice one has, so sometimes people start thinking of going to Thailand. But very seldom do any of the bhikkhus in England ask for anything. This is quite impressive. Hardly anyone ever asks to go to one of the branch monasteries. They will just go wherever they're needed. Even if they get tired of one place, they don't think or say, 'I'm tired of Amaravati, I want to go to Chithurst', or 'I'm tired of Chithurst, I want to go to Amaravati.' Generally the attitude is, 'How can I best help and how can I serve the Sangha?' This is the advantage of living in England as a Buddhist monk; one can't be selfish there! Selfishness stands out like a sore thumb. It's an inappropriate attitude and way of behaving. Here in Thailand, whether we want to be selfish or not is up to us.

If we want to think of ourselves first and do our own thing, that's our privilege. We have the opportunities to do that here in this country. But we should also recognize how we can help each other. Do we really care about or take an interest in serving and trying to help in various ways, say in taking on a responsible position for which junior monks are maybe not yet ready? Perhaps it is good practice for the senior monk to do everything and not have any help, but for us it is not. So I want to encourage everyone. A community is as good as its members. One person can't make this community good by himself. The goodness of this community depends on all its members. This is for your consideration. If we want to have a really good monastery and a place that is worth living and practising in, we all have to give something to it. We all have to give ourselves

to it by opening our hearts and taking on responsibilities. Being sensitive to the needs and the type of people we are with, the time and the place, and the kind of culture we are in – all of this is part of our practice of being mindful.

To offer one's services and be eager to help is really praiseworthy. It is something I appreciate very much. It is not always what one wants to do, but it is a very lovely gesture and very important. Many of you are new monks. Without senior monks who are willing to help out, there would be no possible way for you to be trained. In a monastery we work together, each member reflecting wisely on how to support and help the whole community in the position where he finds himself.

At Amaravati, for example, I am the abbot and the teacher, so I reflect on how to use this position for the welfare of the whole community, rather than saying, 'I am the abbot, I am the teacher. I have many rights and privileges. I am senior to you; I can do this and you can't. You'd better obey me because I'm the powerful figure here. Let's see what I can get out of this for myself.' That's not a wise reflection, is it? A tyrant is like that, but not an abbot.

If we want to be a proper bhikkhu and we happen to be abbot, teacher or senior monk, we reflect on how to use that position for the prosperity of the sangha. This also applies to the most junior member, the last anagarika or the guests. Whoever is living here can reflect: 'In my position, what can I do for the welfare and happiness of the community?' As a new bhikkhu, a middling bhikkhu or a senior bhikkhu, as a samanera, an anagarika or a visitor, we consider: 'How can I best serve this community with my

talents and abilities, and the limitations I have?' Then we have a very harmonious community, because everybody is reflecting in a way that supports it.

We are willing to give according to our abilities and our position within it. We are not trying to get something for ourselves anymore, or if we are, we can see that as an inferior attitude, not to be grasped or followed. We can always think in terms of our rights: 'Now that I have ten vassas, what are my rights? What are the advantages? What perks do I get for having ten vassas? But if we cultivate a more mature attitude in the spirit of Dhamma, we no longer demand rights and privileges, but offer our services. 'How can I best help and serve this community?' Ask yourselves that.

Here in Thailand, after five vassas one gets the inevitable five- vassa *tudong*-itch.[8] One thinks: 'I've got my five *vassas*, now I can go *tudong*. Whoopee!' This can become a not very nice tradition if one is encouraged to think in that way.

I used to be concerned about training monks in England, because Thailand always seemed the ideal place to be a monk. I've had to establish monasteries one after another, always being in the process of building things and trying to set up situations for monks and nuns to train. For the past fourteen years since I left Wat Pah Nanachat, I have been put in this position of always having to start and initiate things, to set up everything. But the results of, say, twelve years in England are very good. The monks and nuns are

8. After his fifth *vassa* – which concludes the initial period of training – a monk may be allowed to go wandering (*tudong*) on his own. As Ajahn Sumedho suggests, the idea of this can result in restlessness.

very worthy. Their practice and understanding of Dhamma don't seem to be harmed or in any way inferior on account of the conditions they live in. So one has more confidence in just loving Dhamma and determining to realize the truth.

We learn to do the best one can with the conditions around us. Here you have long periods of time to practise meditation, *tudong* experiences and so on. There's nothing wrong with all that, but to grasp those ideas and expect and demand it is really a hindrance to the understanding of Dhamma. It's not that one shouldn't go on *tudong* after five *vassas*. I'm not saying that. But to hold on to that view without seeing it for what it is can be a great obstacle to one's practice. To be dishonest with oneself, demand rights and follow one's own views and opinions is not the way to *nibbāna*.

If we really look at mental states of selfishness, self-concern and grasping, we see that they are painful, *dukkha*. They don't lead to peace and clarity, to letting go, cessation, 'desirelessness' or *nibbāna*; and that is what we are here for, isn't it? – to realize *nibbāna*.

It's quite wonderful to see so many new monks here. I haven't been to Thailand for two years, and now there is an impressive line of inspired and aspiring bhikkhus. This is something for all of us to really treasure, encourage and protect. I try to do everything I can to help and support this monastery, because I want to encourage you and make offerings that will benefit you in your training and your understanding of Dhamma, in your aspiration to realize truth.

8

LIFE IS QUITE SAD, ISN'T IT?

Reflecting on this moment, we can see the interconnectedness between meeting and separation. Everyone who comes together here must separate. This is one reflection on travelling. We are always leaving a place and moving on to meet someone else. When we are invited somewhere, we fly from airport to airport. When it's time to leave, there is always this feeling of sadness, especially when we have liked being with the people. There is always a gladness in meeting people who are Buddhists or who are pleased to have us with them, or interested in what we are doing. We can watch this in the mind when going to a Buddhist group; the happiness of people receiving us and then the sadness of separation from people who have treated us well and have been very respectful.

This is the way things are. We don't need to make anything out of it, but reflecting on Dhamma helps us to understand what it means to be human. We don't try to feel nothing so that we would be able to be totally blank, and indifferent. Not daring to feel gladness, sadness or any other emotional state, but being indifferent and insensitive is not the Middle Way at all. Sensitivity requires us to feel these things, to know what they are. Because we were born into this form, we are very sensitive and

have emotions. That's just the way it is, the way we feel, and will feel until we die – when we're dead we won't feel anything. Being human is like this. We have these human attractions and aversions. Male and female: there it is, human attractions on the human plane with its sensory consciousness. We feel hot or cold and well or sick. We enjoy being with people who have common interests. We are angry or annoyed with people who do things we don't like. This is the way it is, but as meditators we reflect on the whole process, seeing and understanding it with wisdom and knowledge; not just trying to cut our heart out so we don't have to feel anything whatsoever. Trying to avoid forming any attachments and cutting our hearts out means having very callous ideas about Dhamma-practice.

My mother wasn't an emotional person at all. She never cried. She couldn't cry. She didn't play emotional games with anyone. She was a quite honest and very good person. Because she wasn't an emotional person, people sometimes tended to think she didn't feel things. Before she died, she told me about a scene that showed this. When my father was dying in hospital he was very emotional. He cried and felt terrible about dying and leaving her. She stood there and didn't cry. He yelled at her, 'You don't care, do you?' She said quietly, 'I feel just the same as you do, but I can't cry. I'd like to be able to cry for you, but I just can't do it.' She wasn't trying to hold back or resist her feelings; it just was her manner, her way. Later on, when she was eighty-seven, I said to her, 'Life is quite sad, isn't it?' And she said, 'Yes, very sad', not

in a complaining or bitter way, but simply as a woman at the end of her life, who had lived quite well and wisely, and realized that there's a pathos and sadness to our life. That's just the way it is. There is always dying. This is the death-realm. The sense-world and the conditioned realm are a realm of death, but we are always trying to find life there. We always try to hang on to that which is dying, changing. And because of that there is always this sense of desperation, anxiety and worry. It pursues and haunts us like a spectre walking behind us; we can't quite see it but we can feel it.

Actually, sadness is not depressing. We can become depressed by wanting things to be otherwise, thinking, 'There must be something wrong with me.' But this realm is a realm of death, sadness, separation, of having to separate from the loved. We give our hearts and have great feelings of love for each other, and then come the separation that is part of that and the sadness that comes from separation. We can see this in our own everyday experiences. We can contemplate it in our life, just noticing it in little ways. Children, before they become egos and personalities, are very immediate and spontaneous about their feelings. When a young child's father leaves to go to work, it cries, 'Don't leave, daddy!' He says, 'I'll be back in a couple of hours', but a couple of hours doesn't mean anything to a young child. It will mean something later on, but for a young child there is only that feeling of separation. Daddy's leaving – and the immediate response is crying, not wanting to separate.

I used to notice that it is difficult to say goodbye to someone you are not going to see again. It's always, 'See

you again', 'When will you come again?' There is the idea of meeting again in the mind, because even if there is not a lot of attachment, there's something in us that doesn't want to say goodbye forever, a very sad feeling. I had lived away from my family for many years, but there was always, 'See you again' in my mind. I took leave in August during the vassa in England to attend my father's funeral. My mother said, 'I'll see you again in March. I'll welcome you back in March.' She was very happy that I would be back in March, and when I went back in March she was there, but then she died. Now I can't say, 'I'll see you again.' I'll never see her again. At the funeral, when they took her coffin to the cemetery, I thought, 'I'll never see you again.' It was a very sad feeling.

We can witness this as a characteristic of our humanity. If we take it personally, we might think: 'Well, if we're really mindful we won't feel anything. We won't feel any sadness. It's just *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. That's it. "Mother" is only a perception anyway. Death is the end of something that's not-self, so why make a problem about it? Just dismiss the whole thing as *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*.' This is an intellectual reaction in our head, but it's not looking penetratingly into the nature of things. It's just applying a nice theory so as simply to dismiss life and not feel anything. We needn't be frightened of or resist feeling, but can contemplate it instead – because this is the realm we have to put up with and live in for a lifetime. Emotions, feelings and intuition are an inseparable part of that realm. If they are not recognized, witnessed and understood, we become callous and insensitive rationalists. We shut sadness, gladness and other feelings down because we don't want

to be bothered with them. We sometimes resist and feel quite frightened of this realm of emotional experience. For men there is a very strong resistance to it. We can see that constantly seeking a heartfelt emotional state can become an indulgence and a bit sickening and silly. But to understand the nature of sensitivity is not being morbid, foolish or indulgent. It means being really willing to allow our senses to be what they are, to learn from this realm of perception, feeling, emotion and consciousness. In a monastery we use our situation to observe these things.

Something really moving in Thailand is the *dāna* aspect. Thai people are so generous. That really touches me and means a lot to me. I didn't expect anything like that. As I'm a foreigner, why should anyone bother feeding and looking after me? And they don't really ask for very much in return. When I was a junior monk they didn't expect me to do anything. I'd just sit there like a bump on a log. In fact, they often want to give you too many things. They really love to support people living the holy life. This gave me the intention to be worthy of that kind of generosity.

One way of trying to be worthy is to be as good a monk as possible, to practise and keep the Vinaya and practise the Dhamma. We can quite deliberately bring to mind the generosity of this country. It's probably one of the most generous countries we could ever live in – the amount of giving to people living the holy life is amazing. And they expect hardly anything from us; maybe a smile now and then, or a friendly gesture. This is something that touches the heart. It touches my heart. I wouldn't say, 'Well, generosity is *anicca, dukkha, anattā*, don't get attached to

it!' This is using feeling in a way that's uplifting. When I contemplate the goodness, generosity and compassion of Ajahn Chah, it has an elevating influence on my heart. It helps in our practice and in developing *samādhi*. This sense of devotion and gratitude is a powerful foundation on which to build up *samatha* and *vipassanā*.

In the community itself we can learn from each other. We also have to forgive each other, and as a reminder we perform the ceremony of asking for forgiveness. We learn from each other's ways when we don't understand them. We see each other in fixed ways and feel threatened by certain types of character. We have to work through that, so we need to allow each other that space of forgiveness for not being perfect, totally wise and without flaws all the time. Even monks like myself who have been bhikkhus much longer than others still ask forgiveness for wrongdoing, for anything said or done, intentionally or unintentionally, that may have offended or upset anyone, or caused some kind of unhappiness. This is a way of clearing and cleaning, of setting things right in ourselves and in our relationships with each other.

Fourteen years ago, when I first came here and began to teach, I wasn't very confident as an abbot at all. I had never been one before, so I was petrified. Western monks are full of ideas and all kinds of different views and opinions. And I was supposed to be the abbot, sitting there with all these monks giving me a piece of their minds and throwing opinions at me. There was always conflict, until things became really awful. I remember one morning I became really stern and laid things down, saying, 'I'm the

abbot here; you follow me and shut up! I can't operate in this position if you're going to do this to me. One person wants to do it this way, another wants to do it that way. How am I supposed to function as an abbot?'

Westerners believe firmly in their own views. They follow their opinions strongly: 'This is the way it's got to be done! It can't be done any other way!' We also have our own views about Ajahn Chah: 'Ajahn Chah said. Ajahn Chah would do it this way. Ajahn Chah would never do that.' I had that thrown at me, always being compared to the top man. It was my first year as an abbot and everyone was already comparing me with the best. That was not fair, so I would react by saying things like, 'Shut up' and 'Obey.' I tried being heavy-handed and domineering. That actually helped in the beginning. I think everyone appreciated it, because it did somewhat clarify the situation. They were good monks, so they stopped those habits. But I didn't want to live in that style as a way of life: 'You shut up! Just follow and obey!' We keep learning – everybody learns. So eventually we find a way of living that is truly beautiful and sensitive and fair.

When we rise to a senior position, we find out what happens. If we're insecure we'll tend to revert to certain patterns that we've seen before. I tried to copy Ajahn Chah or Ajahn Jun.[9] I'd spent a vassa with Ajahn Jun. He was really quite fierce. If you got up during an all-night sitting, he would follow you to your kuti. All the time he was on your back. That's also a way of keeping control over

9. Ajahn Jun was one of Ajahn Chah's most senior disciples; he passed away in 1994.

everything and not letting anyone get away with anything. As soon as you see a little sign of weakness, one tiny mistake, you jump on it: 'Stop that! Shameless monk!' But my character is not like that at all. I began to hate the idea and just tried not to look at things, developing a way of not seeing, squinting my eyes so that there was a haze. I don't like always feeling obliged to tell people off and set them straight; that's a really awful way to live one's life. And that isn't what Ajahn Jun does anyway. He's actually a very kind monk. His behaviour wasn't coming from a nasty place, and I found him very helpful. But in that same supervisory position I used to get pretty nasty, because I resented the role. I would be quite unpleasant, but this is how we learn. We learn from all this by reflecting on the results. More and more I realized that I was just trying to copy someone else. I could never be like Ajahn Chah. I could never be like anyone else. I had to trust my own quality and character and develop from there.

Here at Wat Pah Nanachat there are senior monks, junior monks, novices, Eight-Precept men and women. We can all use our reflective minds more instead of creating problems. Slowly we develop a sense of supporting and helping each other, rather than forming factions or becoming very insensitive and demanding, feeling disappointed because someone doesn't live up to our expectations. We can suffer a lot by wanting the senior monk to be perfect, never do anything wrong and always understand things properly. Sometimes that isn't so, and we feel very disillusioned and disappointed, but I recommend using such situations as Dhamma. Even if

we've been treated unfairly, we watch that. Actually, we can learn a lot from being treated unfairly. There is much resentment when we're accused of something we haven't done or are treated badly for no reason that we can see. We feel bitterness and anger. But we can try and use these experiences as Dhamma in our lives. When I now hear people gossip, or when I hear stories about myself that aren't true, and people blame me for things I haven't done, I can sit back and just watch my mind. If my mind starts saying, 'It's not fair!' I try to use the experience for reflection. So I am not bitter about the injustices and unfairness that I might experience.

I remember the first winter at Amaravati. It was a cold winter, very snowy, and we were having a winter retreat. The heating system wasn't very good then. We had a fireplace in the meeting hall and they put me right in front of this lovely fireplace. Being the head monk, I had the best and warmest position. Of course, everybody else at the back was freezing. We did an hour's sitting and then an hour's walking. The bell would go and it would be time to go out and walk. Sitting in front of a warm fire while it's freezing outside, I could see in my mind this strong resistance to going out into the cold. Thoughts would come up such as, 'What about my health? I'm not getting any younger' – the kind of way the mind starts operating to justify being comfortable. So I went out to walk in the snow. It was very bleak and cold, and I just started meditating on that. After some time I realized it was all right. There was nothing bad or even uncomfortable about it. We had warm things to wear, so it wasn't painful

or dangerous to our health. It's just that warmth is so attractive. There is always this aversion to cold, this wanting to get to the warmest place. I just contemplated this, the bare trees, the bleak landscape and the grey sky in the colourless winter light, and I began to quite enjoy being out in the cold. It was really nice and peaceful. I could see the desire inside of wanting the warmth again, like having a mother to protect me, something nice to hold me, feed and nurse me and keep me warm. But out in the cold we had to be aware of what we were doing. There was something strengthening and ennobling about being out there, being mindful and not complaining or running away. In this way we learn to let go of that tendency to choose. It's like growing up a little bit more. Just through that reflection I felt a sense of growing confidence.

What are the worst things that could happen to a human being? Starving, being ostracized and thrown out into the cold; humiliated and misunderstood by the community, accused of something one hasn't done, being old and sick with wild animals howling in the distance and no hope of anyone ever coming to the rescue; total deprivation of anything comfortable, reassuring or nurturing, and even being tortured and persecuted. I realized that if all that happens in life, one can cope with it, that even the worst is somehow all right. When I thought about it more, I realized how much of life we live on the level of cowardice and laziness. We're afraid to take any risks because we might suffer just a bit; or something might go wrong and we might be a little uncomfortable; or we might lose something we really think we must have. How easily we

compromise just for mediocrity and comfort and a false sense of security. We don't really bring attentiveness to our ordinary life. It's very unlikely I would be tortured or thrown out of the Sangha. I don't expect that to happen, but at the same time I don't really care if it does. I don't mind. I can see now how to work with those kinds of situations, how to use the misfortunes of life with wisdom. They're just the way life flows. This gives us a sense of courage.

Anything I've said during this time is for reflection. It's important for us to understand Dhamma for ourselves. I'm not trying to tell anyone how they should practise or what they should do. It's for us to consider how to cultivate our own reflective mind, because in this life the effort has to come from ourselves. In the holy life we have to develop that effort from the heart. There is no way that anybody else can make us enlightened. I can push and intimidate everyone by using fear and fierceness, keeping everyone awake through making them frightened, but that just tends to condition us to be frightened creatures who are obedient and do all the right things because we're afraid of being punished and beaten up if we don't. But this life as a monk or as a nun is a matter of rising up, growing up and developing effort from there. We need to cultivate *sammā-vāyāma*, right effort, *sammā-sati*, right mindfulness, and *sammā-samādhi*, right concentration. They are part of the Noble Eightfold Path. I encourage everyone to do that and use the situation here for practice. It's a good situation, something to treasure, to respect and to use properly.

9

WE CAN'T ATTAIN IT – WE REALIZE IT

In Buddhist meditation we distinguish between *samatha* and *vipassanā*, and it is important to develop them both. *Samatha* means learning how to concentrate the mind on an object like the breath, or whatever sign we are using. It is to be developed until we contain the mind and keep it from wandering. We hold and sustain our attention on the object we have chosen. It's a mental exercise that gives the mind a kind of sharpness, but as an end in itself it cannot enlighten us. We can't be enlightened through just concentrating our mind to even a very refined level like the *arūpa-jhānas*, the formless states of absorption. Insight into the true nature of things is not possible until we start reflecting and looking into, examining and investigating the way things are.

Samatha is actually a very simple practice. We tend to complicate it by analyzing and thinking about it – and then, of course, it becomes an impossibility. But it's merely the ability to choose an object and hold our attention on it, a way of training the mind. Most of our minds were not trained in that way before we became Buddhist monks. We're from a society that uses discursive and associative thought. Our minds are conditioned to think in rational ways. Our critical faculties are sharpened through modern attitudes like competitiveness. We're

always busy comparing: 'This is better than that. This is good. That is bad. Bad, worse, worst – good, better, best.' All this sharpens our critical faculties, but also increases our ability to doubt; the more we think about life, the more we experience doubt, uncertainty and anxiety.

Samatha is often easier for people who are illiterate, whose critical faculties aren't highly developed; their minds tend not to wander or doubt so much. People with a lot of confidence, faith and conviction find *samatha* much easier than those caught in anxiety, insecurity, worry and despair – conditions which are the result of a self created out of desires and fear.

We tend to introspect and analyze ourselves. We evaluate and criticize. These kinds of mental habits make concentration increasingly difficult. Here in Thailand the Thai monks already have a tremendous amount of faith in and devotion to the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. They have a foundation of trust and confidence, of *saddhā*. This is not found so commonly among Westerners, because most of us come to Buddhism out of an intellectual interest. We can be quite impressed by the brilliance of the teaching, but still not feel very much devotion and gratitude, or any of these more heartfelt qualities which are definitely helpful and supportive in practising *samatha* meditation.

Conditions around us are also important. We can't very well do *samatha* in a place where there are lots of sensory impingements and demands. The less there is to impinge on us, the easier it is to concentrate our minds. We could go off to a sensory deprivation tank, a cave or some isolated place where we could stay without having demands and

expectations placed on us, where there are no harsh, aggravating and annoying impingements. Then we could become quite naturally calm, with no sounds and nothing to look at. After the initial restlessness and resistance, we would go into a concentrated state of mind quite naturally.

In *vipassanā* we use wisdom. The surrounding conditions are not the important issue any more – we look into the nature of things without seeking ideal conditions to do so, but just observe the way things are. We use the three characteristics of *anicca, dukkha, anattā*, the Four Foundations for Mindfulness, *paṭiccasamuppāda*.[10] All these different teachings are part of *vipassanā*. They are ways of contemplating, reflecting and observing the way things are.

The five *khandhā*[11] for example: how do we use that particular sequence? In themselves those five concepts of *rūpa, vedanā, saññā, saṅkhārā, viññāṇa* are conventions and not to be considered from a doctrinal position. They're perceptions to use and to work with.

What is being conscious, anyway? Even though we're conscious, we may not investigate consciousness. Obviously everyone here is conscious, but how many of us really know what that means? What is the difference between perception, volition and feeling? These are just ways of examining and looking at the way things are. All of us have the five *khandhā*, so they are something we can examine and investigate.

10. *Paṭiccasamuppāda* means 'dependent arising' and refers to the Buddha's teaching on the dependent arising (or origin) of suffering and stress – and how this can cease.

11. *khandhā*: see Glossary.

Or let's say we investigate the eye and the object. We really examine them in a practical way, looking at something with our own eyes and then examining the eye-consciousness that arises through the contact with the object. We do the same with sound, smell, taste, touch or thought and their objects. All of this we can observe and investigate. Sound is going on all the time, but we're not always conscious of it. When we look at something, we're conscious through the eye, but we're not conscious through the ear. Consciousness can move very rapidly, so it seems we can be conscious through all the senses at the same moment, but if we examine more carefully we begin to see that at the time when we look at something, we're no longer conscious of a sound. When eating food, notice the consciousness of taste. We can be thinking about something while we're eating, and not be aware of eating. How many people really taste their food? When eating they are often in a rush, talking or busy; or they like to have snacks every now and then while reading or watching the television.

When the eye is concentrated on an object of sight, we're no longer conscious through the body. At that time hot and cold, pleasure and pain don't exist. So to deal with physical sensation, maybe to get away from physical discomfort, we can distract ourselves by looking, listening or turning to something else. That's one way of dealing with discomfort. Another way is the investigation of physical pain: going right to the actual sensation of pain, looking into the pain itself, getting to know the difference between the sensation of pain and the aversion we mentally develop around that sensation.

For example, we have pain in our legs. If we concentrate our attention on the actual sensation, we stop thinking about it. We're with the sensation, but we're not creating mental aversion to its seemingly unpleasant appearance. Generally, though, we are not so refined and aware. We tend just to be averse to physical pain and discomfort, and try to suppress them or use willpower to endure them. But when we go to the sensation itself, there is body-consciousness. We're not adding aversion on to the pain: 'I can't stand it! I don't want it!' Those are emotional reactions to physical discomfort and pain of any sort. This is to be investigated and observed.

When we bring attention to the sensations of the body, whether they are pleasant, painful or neutral, the body will relax more and more. When we feel tension or stress, if we concentrate on that spot with just an attitude of bare attention, without aversion, the condition for pain can diminish. What we really can't stand is the emotional reaction. Most pain we can bear; it's when we think: 'I can't stand any more of this' that we give up and try to get away from it. If we're caught in the emotional realm of, 'I can't bear it!' we may even have that thought before there is any actual pain – 'What if pain arises? I won't be able to stand it.' We can already be suffering from the possibilities of experiencing pain we don't yet have, because of our ability to remember pain we've had before and couldn't stand.

So we investigate how the mind works, the way things are. If our body is giving us pain, that's the way it is. It's not something we've created. We're not deliberately,

intentionally trying to make pain arise in our body. But ignorance, desire and fear cause the reaction of aversion, wanting not to have or to get rid of. Notice how lust and sexual desire make us dull, so we lose our ability to discriminate. We can be caught in lustful fantasies, seeking sensual pleasures with mind and body, and lose our sense of perspective. We may become so eager to get what we want and experience the pleasure we anticipate that our ability to discriminate becomes inoperative. Aversion and anger tend to make us very critical. Lust does just the opposite – its push is to get what we crave, that is our sole aim and purpose. We can lose our sense of propriety and integrity, and many other virtuous qualities, when we are caught in that lustful tendency of the mind.

I remember that at Wat Pah Pong there were hardly any sweets or sweet drinks, so whenever there was the possibility of anything sweet, we would become obsessed with that idea. Once someone gave me a bag of sugar. I took it back to my kuti and tasted it. Suddenly that taste of sweetness created such greed in my mind that I consumed the whole bag of sugar in a very few minutes; I was completely out of control. That was surprising, because I wasn't into sweets very much as a lay person. Then I would have thought it was disgusting to eat a whole bag of sugar in five minutes. But the conditions for greed were supportive: the fact that I was alone, nobody was watching and no one would know. Also, sweetness is a very attractive taste, especially if we're eating one meal a day and we're celibate.

For a lay person, greed is usually spread out, scattered over quite a range of things, so we don't notice it so much. Thought doesn't collect on anything as simple and ridiculous as a bag of sugar. But in the homeless life we might find ourselves lusting after a bag of sugar, something that would not have interested us at all as lay people. Who would ever eat just sugar granules if they could get pralines, fudge and all kinds of much more pleasurable sweets to indulge in?

But one thing that this incident allowed me to see and contemplate was the sweet taste of sugar, and how it created the desire for more in the mind. If we follow that impulse and are caught in that desire, we start stuffing ourselves until we have had so much we can't handle any more. That's what lust and greed are like. But with mindfulness we can taste sweetness and just be aware of its pleasant qualities. Through investigation and understanding we no longer create lust around it. It's as it is. We don't follow it, seeking to have it again and again and again until we're absolutely satiated. Mindfulness allows us to know and be aware of time and place, appropriateness and suitability. It allows us to have integrity, to be considerate and thoughtful in our lives.

My generation of Americans never admitted to being afraid of anything. To be a man one had to put on the act of being what they call 'macho', strutting around wanting to give an impression of fearlessness. Strangely enough, often some of the most aggressive types of men are the most frightened. In meditation, these masculine and aggressive types have to deal with tremendous fear and

terror. A natural fear can arise, like the instinctive fear if a tiger is chasing us. That's a natural protective device. It's not personal and it's not a fault; it doesn't make us heedless. That kind of instinctive fear when we see a tiger who looks ready to attack us makes us act very swiftly in order to protect our life.

Then there is also the fear of things that haven't yet occurred, of possibilities in the future; all the anxieties and worries we create in our lives about the possibility of being hurt or damaged, ostracized or humiliated and insulted, being deprived of what we want. There's the fear of the unknown. We can look into the black night and become frightened, because our eyes can't see in the darkness of the night. Or we can be afraid in a closed room with no light – anything could be there. Our sense of security, of knowing isn't present. We could imagine ghosts, monsters, or there might be scorpions, tarantulas or cobras. In this country it's quite possible to go into a room where there is a cobra we can't see.

There's a lot to be afraid of in this life as human beings. Things we know are quite possible could happen to us. We could be hit by a car or attacked by somebody. Think of the fear and anxiety women have to bear because they are an attractive force to men. They have to be careful not to put themselves in positions where they might be sexually attacked. That's a possibility of which they're very much aware. These are natural kinds of fears and anxieties coming from our human condition. Because we are born in this state, this is the way it is.

But then fear may become neurotic, obsessive and unreasonable. We can be driven by fear that we've never really looked at, but are just suppressing or repressing from consciousness. We can be concerned about what people think of us. We're creatures who care about what other people think of us. We can be anxious and worried that others don't like us or don't want us. We can become quite obsessed and read being unwanted, despised or looked down on into every situation.

Anxiety, worry and doubt – all these imply dealing with unknown things. Instinctive fears deal with the known, with a definite situation. But because we think and imagine, we create a self, a personality, a person who can always be hurt, insulted or offended in some way or another. It's so fragile, isn't it? We worry about the future and we feel guilty about the past. We're anxious about a situation we're in, that something might go wrong, that something bad might happen. Note this state of mind. Uncertainty, insecurity and worry are so ordinary in our daily life experience, and yet we do not understand them and merely try to get rid of them: 'How can I get rid of my worries?'

What I've found helpful is to notice and be aware of what it's like not to know, or to be uncertain about things; and then to investigate not knowing, rather than always trying to know or to dismiss uncertainty and insecurity. The desire to know and to have security is very strong. We like to feel that we're practising in the right way: 'This is really the best monastery in the whole world. This is definitely our Path. It's the right religion, the right philosophy and psychology. Yes, we're definitely doing

the right thing.' Maybe we want somebody to affirm that what we're doing is right. We want affirmation from teachers, other monks or people around us, to be told, 'Yes, you're on the right Path. Yes, this is the perfect place.' But what happens if somebody comes here and says: 'Oh, this monastery isn't very good – you should go somewhere else and take so-and-so's retreat'? Then what does our mind do? If we're not really investigating the way things are, we're caught up in doubt and uncertainty about what we're doing. Then we go to a senior monk like me and say, 'Is this the right way?' and I say, 'Yes, it is. This is the right place for you.' 'Oh, thank goodness. Somebody said it wasn't, so I was a bit worried that maybe I was in the wrong place.'

Look at fundamentalist Christianity, where everything is affirmed over and over again. At a born-again Christian meeting there's a continuous affirmation of: 'This is the only way. Jesus is our Saviour. This is right. All the others are wrong. It's the only way.' 'Do the Buddhists ...?' 'No, no! They're totally wrong. It's wrong, wrong! Jesus didn't teach Buddhism: he taught Christianity.' 'What about Roman Catholics?' 'No! No Popery! ... and all that.' Endless prejudices, except about one particular form of fundamentalist Christianity which is the only way. So I might say: 'Venerable Sir, please give me a testimonial about your experience with this particular religion, and how the Lord came and saved you.' The Venerable Sir gets up and says: 'I used to be a sinner and drink liquor. Then I discovered Jesus and now I am saved. My whole life has changed. I used to be an alcoholic, and gamble, and was

totally immoral. Now I've given it all up.' Everybody weeps and cries, and everybody exclaims, 'Praise the Lord!'

But in Buddhism we look at doubt, rather than trying to convince ourselves that Buddhism is the right way. We want to investigate and look into the nature of things. It's not a matter of trying to tell everyone that this is the best way: 'Buddhism is the only way, that's for certain!' In *vipassanā* we look at the way things are, so when there's doubt we investigate what it is to be wobbly, anxious and worried. Real confidence comes with *sotāpatti*, stream-entry,[12] when we're not affirming the Eightfold Path as a belief, but actually getting through doubt by understanding its nature.

To enter the stream we have to really know *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* and *vicikicchā*: personality view, attachment to practices and conventions, and doubt.[13] They're not to be rejected but to be investigated. Often we just want affirmation and ask, 'Am I a *sotāpanna*, a stream-enterer, Ajahn Sumedho?' People love to speculate about who's a stream-enterer or an arahant. But it's not a matter of somebody becoming a stream-enterer, but of recognizing those fetters for what they are and no longer being deluded by them; because as long as we are caught in doubt and uncertainty and keep following them, we're definitely not going to see the Path, the way out of suffering.

To receive affirmation isn't the way out of suffering

12. *Sotāpatti*, 'stream-entry', is the first stage of awakening. See Glossary for details.

13. These are the three fetters cut through by stream-entry.

either, because it always needs to be reinforced. People have to agree with us: 'Yes, this is the way.' 'Yes, you have attained.' 'Yes, yes, yes.' 'All the great Ajahns have agreed that I am a fully fledged stream enterer. I have a certificate. Here, see, it has the signature of important bhikkhus on it. There's a seal and even the *sangharaja*[14] signed it.'

This is being preposterous, of course. What matters is not affirmation that we are anything, but recognizing the nature of doubt, and the attachment to self-view and to conventions. What is more preposterous than wanting to become a *sotāpanna*? If we ask, 'Am I a *sotāpanna* yet?' there's still doubt in our mind, isn't there? That's *vicikicchā*. And if we say, 'I am a *sotāpanna*', that's self-view, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. So we investigate this way of thinking, 'I am, I should be, I am not, am I? Have I?'

The value of teachings like *sotāpanna, anāgāmī*, arahant is not as attainments, but that they are to be used as reflections. Then more and more relinquishment and letting go can take place, rather than achieving or attaining something. We can't attain these things – we realize them through letting go and understanding the nature of things. On the personal level we want to attain them, but once we appreciate these teachings as ways for reflecting on attachments, there's no need to hold on to a view of having become something or not become anything. We can equally well hold the view that we haven't attained anything, even though we may have been a monk for many years, or to be super modest: 'Oh, I couldn't possibly, little old me,

14. The *sangharaja* is the head of the Thai Sangha.

dare to assume that I've entered the stream? Someone might condemn me as boasting of *uttarimanussadhamma*. That's *pārājika*!'[15] So we use our reflective capacity, instead of judging that there are certain things we have to get rid of in order to become a stream-enterer.

Some people take the idea of not being attached to the opposite extreme and say we shouldn't have rules and traditions: 'Ceremonies and celibacy: it's all rubbish. One just gets attached to it and one shouldn't be attached to anything.' That kind of thinking is still *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*.

Other people really hang on to the Vinaya and tradition, trying to protect them by all possible means in order to make sure that everything is going to be all right. We have to get rid of, kill, annihilate and burn at the stake any blasphemers or heretics who threaten the purity of our tradition: 'Got to keep my Vinaya pure, and if some woman comes along and touches me – dares to touch me – am I pure or not? How do I know I didn't set myself up? Maybe latent sexual tendencies are lurking, and I'm placing myself in a very convenient position for a woman to come along and touch me. Then I'll have an offence.' We can make the whole Vinaya structure incredibly burdensome through foolish and blind attachment to it, and strange views about purity and impurity, rather than using it for restraint and as a way of reflecting and of establishing limits we can use and standards to work from.

15. '*Uttarimanussadhamma*' means 'a state beyond that of the normal human'. To claim such an attainment, if it is untrue, is a 'defeat' offence (*pārājika*), one that would entail disrobing and never being allowed to train as a bhikkhu again in this lifetime.

I talk about my own experiences so others don't have to be ashamed about having foolish thoughts and attachments – as long as we are willing to learn from them and see them clearly, rather than to suppress or believe them.

I remember I spent a *vassa* at Wat Khao Chalahk. The Vinaya there is very strict and the monks are quite obsessed about it. I thought, 'I'm from Wat Pah Pong. We have good Vinaya', and so I announced myself. They said, 'Oh yes, the Wat Pah Pong Vinaya is not so good. Ours is much better.' So I was intimidated: 'Their Vinaya is better than ours. I want to keep the best Vinaya', and I became really interested. Then I went to a small island where one of these monks was living as a kind of hermit. I stayed with him for a while and then left. Later he told the other monks that I didn't have a very good understanding of Vinaya. When I heard that I was really angry. I was ready to go right back to that island and punch him on the nose. I thought my Vinaya was really good, but he said it wasn't. That seemed like an insult to me. But it's also *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. Is that a skilful use of Vinaya, comparing: 'My Vinaya is better than yours. How dare you accuse me of not keeping good Vinaya'? It's not the Vinaya that is the problem – the danger lies with *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* and *vicikicchā*.

Another aspect to reflect on is the two sects of Dhammayut and Mahanikaya.[16] If we go to a Dhammayut

16. Dhammayut(ika) and Mahanikaya are the two branches of the Thai Sangha. The Dhammyut arose in the nineteenth century as a reform movement, to establish pure standards in the Thai Sangha. Mahanikaya is the much larger branch. Dhammayut monks will often not recognize Mahanikaya bhikkhus as valid bhikkhus at all. Ajahn Chah and his bhikkhus are forest or 'practising' (kammaṭṭhāna) bhikkhus within the Mahanikaya, they keep to the standards espoused by the Dhammayut.

forest temple thinking we're very strict and pure (not touching money, practising like good *kammaṭṭhāna* forest monks), they look at us suspiciously, once they find out we're Mahanikaya. Sometimes they put us at the end of the line for food and treat us as if we're not really proper monks. In such situations we might see *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* arising: 'How dare they!' – these kinds of self-views. To me it seems much better to watch them than to make much of them, and be carried away by indignation because we're being treated in a way we think we shouldn't be treated.

When we practise Dhamma we take life as it is. We don't try to make everything fair and just, straighten out the world and make everything as it should be. We're willing to use life's unfairness and each experience for practising Dhamma, to recognize the way things are. If we feel angry for being looked down on and regarded as something inferior, not as good, though we think we are quite as good or even better, this is an opportunity to see *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. We investigate and learn to use life's experiences wisely.

Western women who come to Thailand are easily offended by the fact that monks, the men, get all the attention. Women are always at the back, flat against the wall in the part of the room that is farthest away from the monks, and they're always supposed to lower themselves and be respectful in the presence of monks. Western women can be quite upset and indignant about this. They even write articles about how unfair and wrong it is, how women can become enlightened just like men, that there's no difference at all. I'm not justifying this monastic standard as an ideal form for women, but if we're

really serious about understanding Dhamma, if we want to get beyond suffering, it's good to use the situation for watching our minds, rather than stomping away in a huff thinking it's not fair and we're being looked down on.

Much more benefit comes from just observing and using such experiences through reflection, not going around asking life to be fair. In England that's the whinger's cry – 'It's not fair. It shouldn't be like this!' I'm all for fairness, actually, but so much of life is unfair anyway. In Dhamma we can use the unfairness of life with wisdom, rather than being offended and upset, and thereby missing the opportunity for enlightenment.

When we first moved to Chithurst years ago, I could observe how my mind, if I let it, would become involved with wanting the monastery to be successful, or doubting whether it was the right decision to move there. But more and more we just work with the flow of life. We see what we are doing and the things that are happening to us, how they affect the mind: the 'I am,' the self-view, the doubts that arise; having very set views about how things should be done in a monastery, and then feeling threatened when we can't force the situations into being exactly as we think they should be. In Thailand the monasteries are an integrated part of society, but in a country like England we are on the fringes; we're oddballs. There we can't make the monasteries exactly as they are in Thailand. We observe the mental and emotional reactions. I could see things like the fear of everything falling apart and going wrong. If I had given in to that fear, everything would have degenerated and fallen apart, leading to panic and

hysteria: 'You've got to hang on and hold it up! Make it and force it, and push it into being exactly what it should be.' It was a terrible mental state to have to live with.

More and more in our lives, if we develop our reflective capacities, we keep learning from life's experiences as we move into different situations. We develop all kinds of strengths and abilities to cope with exotic, strange, difficult or uncertain situations that before would have absolutely overwhelmed us. If we practise in order to observe the way things are, there's a fearlessness in the mind. We go beyond the fear of life and the possibility of humiliation, of falling apart or losing control. After being investigated, all that is no longer a problem in the mind. There's a willingness to look at life honestly and courageously, rather than being wimpy monks hiding away because we might lose our purity if we step out of our cave.

If we're frightened, worried and anxious, and we don't investigate, confront and learn from these mental states, we will always be worried and anxious about things. By becoming obsessed with states of mind, we make cowards of ourselves; we can't rise up to life at all, but always have to make sure everything is going to be all right, with nothing to threaten us. We settle for mediocrity and comfort, for security and safety, because going to the unknown – looking into the possibilities and potentially threatening situations that await us in the future – completely overwhelms our minds. We want to have a guarantee that we're going to be safe. But monastic life, the life of a samaṇa, is one of uncertainty: one meal a day, not hoarding things, not having security like money in the bank and food stored away in

our kutis, always living on the edge with the possibility of having to go without a meal, of not getting what we want.

But in the situation we're in now, at this moment, we have the opportunity to use the tradition, the Vinaya, the practice of Dhamma. We use the form as a criterion and a standard to observe with; rather than as an attachment or forming opinions about it as being useless.

This monastery here, this is the way it is. Wat *Pah Nanachat* – it's like this. We can think, 'I want a more remote monastery without a lot of visitors coming.' We can be very offended by a coachload of tourists coming to watch *phra farang*,[17] and take pictures of them. We can be caught up in *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* and *vicikicchā* over something like that. But if we turn towards Dhamma, we can use the situation for watching our minds and observing the way things are.

There was a *phra farang* years ago who was always looking for the perfect monastery. I went to visit him once but he wasn't there. It was a beautiful place with caves, absolutely ideal. A few months later I met this monk in Bangkok and said, 'You aren't at that monastery any more?' And he said, 'No, it wasn't the right place.' 'Why? It seemed like a wonderful place to me.' He said, 'Oh, I couldn't bear it. They gave me a kuti that was too close to the next one. Every time I walked to the meeting hall I had to pass right in front of this other monk's kuti. That disrupted my practice, so I left.' Then he said, 'But I found this really fantastic place in the South and I'm going there.'

17. *phra farang* is the term for Western monks.

A few months later I met him again, so I asked how his super-duper place in the South was. He said, 'Well, I thought it was really going to be the ideal place. But you see, every time on alms-round these dogs would start chasing and biting me, so I had to leave.' He ended up disrobing. Endlessly looking for the ideal place is still being bound to the three fetters.

Here at Wat Pah Nanachat, can we accept the way it is without judging it? I'm not asking anyone to approve or like the way it is, and I'm not dwelling on the things we dislike about it. I'm asking people to observe: it's like this; this is the way it is here, it's this kind of a place. Then we can be aware of our own opinions: 'I like it; I don't like it; I want to find a better and more quiet place; I want to be alone, I don't want to be in a community with a lot of monks' – and so on and so forth.

I remember years ago visiting a monastery where the *farang* monks said, 'Oh, this is the best monastery. There are hardly any monks here. Tan Ajahn[18] will only accept eighteen monks at the most at any time. Most of the time there are less. It's a really good place for practice.' A few years later they were complaining, 'Oh, now we have about twenty-five monks. It's not like it used to be. We can't practise any more. We've got to find another place.' Endless measuring, thinking there's a perfect place in this world to meditate; all we have to do is to find it. The perfect forest monastery with just the right number of monks, an enlightened teacher, the ideal kuti and walking path, everything just

18. 'Tan Ajahn' (Thai) means 'Venerable Teacher', the mode of address by which a disciple would refer to their teacher.

super-duper perfect. Remote, without tourist coaches coming in, no noise from the highway and no low-flying aircraft or transistor radios from the rice paddies. The food is adequate, vegetarian, wholegrain, organically grown, and the abbot is a certified arahant – it's the perfect place.

I keep looking for it. Maybe it exists somewhere. But rather than spending our life trying to find it, the way of Buddha-Dhamma is to see the way things are. Nothing is preventing us from looking at the way it is. Tour coaches, noise from the highway, low- flying aircraft, any kind of food: there is nothing that isn't Dhamma about them. They may not be what we want, and so *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* arises because we don't like them. In order to develop, we need to really penetrate this. We use the situation, the frustrations, the injustices, the unfairness, the mosquitoes, the hot weather, the interruptions and distractions to observe, allowing ourselves to witness greed, hatred and delusion, and the whole range of fetters that affect us if we're ignorant and heedless.

10

INNOCENCE IS CORRUPTIBLE; WISDOM IS INCORRUPTIBLE

In our practice we need to learn what right effort is, in contrast to just willpower. In Thailand the attitude is always to sleep little, speak little, eat little. This has quite a strong influence on one's mind. It sets in motion the idea of pushing and striving, but it also tends to create a kind of mental state that is very suppressive. One isn't really aware of what one is doing. Many people become so tired and exhausted that their reflective capacities no longer operate. In a group there's also a lot of pressure to conform and keep up.

People don't always notice and observe the effect of these things. At Amaravati, I once gave a very strict retreat: getting up at three in the morning, dismissing everyone at eleven at night, and so forth. The results of that retreat were not very good, actually. Some of the people were very diligent at doing all that, but others just couldn't keep up with it. So then I considered, 'What are we in this for anyway? What is the purpose of what we're doing?' A lot of illness comes from that suppressive tendency just to hold everything down and drive oneself, or perhaps try to keep up with the very strong and healthy people. So, in England I have found it much more helpful not to emphasize trying to become a super-diligent

kind of monk, or to think that strictness is the way that everything should be.

The mind tends to be very much impressed by things like asceticism and the use of will- power. But I remember that in my early years when I was a samanera, I had the most insight when I had enough rest and my mind and body were relaxed. I had some powerful insights when I wasn't just pushing and striving against sleepiness or trying to keep up with others.

In the Western world, the people who commit themselves to monastic life are usually already quite determined in their own way, so one is not carrying a lot of dead weight, having to teach monks who are just following a tradition as part of a cultural pattern. This is of course a lovely thing, to have people in whom one can have confidence, so that they can begin to trust and motivate themselves. We need to learn how to motivate ourselves, rather than depend on someone else to drive and push us. I notice when we're put in teaching or leadership positions we tend to feel a sense of insecurity, so often we become almost militaristic. This is quite common. I've seen it in England with monks who are in the position of being an abbot for the first time. It's almost like sitting over people and forcing them to conform. But when contemplated, the results are not terribly impressive.

The beauty of the holy life doesn't lie in driving people. Instead we encourage people to rise up to things and learn how to put effort into what they're doing. We learn from experience what seems to be most useful, helpful and of value. There is no need to make

an absolute position that one has to do things a certain way. The whole purpose of contemplation and reflection is to observe the results of what we do. I think we're quite used to employing willpower alone as a compulsive and obsessive tendency of the mind. We hold things back, we force and drive ourselves. Notice that the Western mentality always has the idea we should be doing or developing something. It's very hard for us just to sit around and not feel guilty about it. There's always this compulsion to do something, something more, get better or get rid of some flaw, weakness or bad habit.

What I'm saying is for reflection. It's not meant to do anything other than encourage us all to look at what's compelling us to do what we're doing. So as we begin to look at our motivations, what willpower is, we become aware of the compulsive tendencies of our mind.

In a community there is a lot of intimidation. There are always those who sit straighter and are always on time, those who never nod and always eat little, those we call the diligent ones. And then there is always somebody in the community who can't do any of it very well, ranging from those who try desperately to conform and live up to an image to those who just try to do the best they can. There's a tendency to look at somebody else and copy, idealize and emulate. Then there are feelings of guilt, remorse or inferiority regarding the fact that we might not be able to live up to what we think the best ones can do. All this is to be witnessed and observed.

Community life can be just mass conformity, or it can be a very skilful way of understanding the nature of

things. Nobody wants to live in a community for very long under a lot of pressure, feeling intimidated and put upon by others so that life becomes very dull or despairing. What appealed to me about Vinaya- discipline was that it wasn't asceticism but a reasonable way to live a life. Personally, I used to like to do ascetic practices and be very strict, but I realized that one can only do those things for periods of time, not indefinitely. I didn't really want to have to do all that as a way of life, or feel obliged always to operate on that level. I felt that the Buddha had meant monastic life to be something simple and easy, relaxed and peaceful, rather than harsh and ascetic.

In England we've had to take care of sick people. Some monks have very poor health: various back problems, knee problems and endless ailments calling for consideration as to how to work through them, not only by the monks with their particular health problems themselves, but also by the community as a whole. Do we want just a community of healthy and tough young men, or can a community perhaps also include and open up to a wider range of ages, abilities and levels of health?

I know that for a lot of young men it's very important to prove they are tough and can practise austerity. This is also to be recognized, that we might be motivated by the masculine need for rites of passage into the adult male world. Nevertheless, it is good to get to know our limits. What is it like to go without sleep or food? If we want to test ourselves, that's fair enough. It's good practice, actually. But we each have to know our limits. Some of us have to learn how to operate within the

limits of poor health, having little physical reserve and a weak constitution. We need to apply mindfulness and wisdom when the body is not healthy and needs quite frequent rest or certain kinds of nourishment. One of the monks has so much tension all the time that he's been extremely constipated for most of his monastic life. These constipation problems arise because of the tension of driving and willing oneself. Learning how to practise is about finding a balance, finding out when to take it easy and when to tighten things up.

This is something each one of has to really observe, in ourselves and in the community. We can be very idealistic, thinking what a good monk should be like: wearing rag robes, only eating what is offered, able to live in whatever place is given, surviving with just fermented urine for medicine; taking his ideal from our basic reflections, the ideal of not sleeping very much, not eating very much, not speaking very much. But if we attach to those ideals without understanding what we're doing, the result is that we lose our sense of humour and become very tense. All kinds of unpleasant results can occur.

Maybe we can keep it up for a while, but then we find ourselves falling apart. When the supportive conditions for such a practice aren't there, we lose our momentum. By observing this we can begin to see how to relax, how to apply more effort and how to let go. We learn when to push ourselves and create energy, but without adopting or holding onto an idealistic position of how things should be permanently: 'Good practice is being strict all the time!' If we believe so firmly in our high ideals,

we may quite suddenly feel despair. Many people leave because they cannot stand the idea of living in that way while always feeling a sense of failure with regard to it.

When I talk about reflection, I mean just looking at what's driving us, what kind of ideals we have. It's not that we shouldn't have ideals, but what are our expectations, and what are the results of our life so far? What are we attached to and holding on to? What are the causes and results of any action? This is a means of self-knowledge, of looking into the way things are. We don't judge that we shouldn't be strict or push ourselves. I'm not taking a position for or against those things, but I emphasize the need to recognize what we are actually doing and its result. Practice is all about what we're actually doing. We're not just trying to live up to an ideal of what a good monk should be, but observing the results of what we're doing.

What would good results be? Well, if we're still suffering and full of anxiety, doubt, stress, fear and dullness, caught in restlessness, jealousy, envy, anger, greed and all that, then we're obviously doing something not quite right. Maybe we're trying to purify ourselves, getting rid of our defilements, killing our *kilesas*, making ourselves into something else and trying to annihilate the bad habits. Maybe we want to prove ourselves or win approval from others, or maybe we're trying to be what we think we should be. But anything that comes from self-view will always take us to some kind of negative result and despair. They go hand in hand. If we have a sense of self, we'll also have disillusionment an a sense of despair.

When we read Ajahn Mun's biography, what does that do to us? People think they would really like to be like Ajahn Mun and do all the things that he did. We seem to forget that this is an idealized biography of a great monk. What actually is the mental state when we want to become like that, wanting to become something or thinking we have to do all those things in order to become enlightened? This is a drawback of biographies.

To be honest, if I were to write my biography, there are a lot of things I just wouldn't tell you. I'd want to write about the time when I nearly died, under a tin roof with little flies going up my nose, my ears, my mouth: the terrible food, the heat, the infection and the utter despair ... but then I roused myself to sit up straight and suddenly I saw the light. That's a very inspiring story. What I would write in my biography would be things on that level, interesting, inspiring examples of practice.

But there are a lot of things I think others wouldn't be interested in, they are so ordinary and boring. I wouldn't want to fill page after page with the monotony of monastic life that we experience most of the time in this form. I'd take the choice bits, the supreme challenges – and maybe the failures and successes of this life. With them I might create a very fascinating biography.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not condemning the biography of Ajahn Mun either. But we can observe how we can idealize monasticism and try to live up to very high standards of asceticism and practice, not realizing what we're actually doing because there's no understanding of what's motivating us, and what we're grasping.

One problem that arises when there is any ideal set form is that some seem to fit into it more than others. Those who feel they don't quite fit into the ideal form might draw the conclusion that this isn't a suitable life for them. Maybe some of us can't chant very well, can't recite the *Pāṭimokkha*; and not everyone can be a gifted, charismatic teacher. Maybe we never learned to be really fluent in Thai, or be charming and get all the praise. Of course, it's always nice to be appreciated. But you may be the old sour-grapes type of monk who criticizes the one who chants well and never makes a mistake in the *Pāṭimokkha*, or the one who speaks perfect Thai and gets all the praise. If we're being negative, we can regard these things as superficial and not the practice. We can look down on the more popular monks – but that's another delusion, isn't it? We each have our own particular character to live with. This life isn't meant for just one particular kind of character, suitable only for some and not for others. We always have to keep in mind that the priority of this life is to see the Dhamma here and now.

It's not our purpose to become teachers, missionaries or popular and charismatic figures, or to be able to do everything perfectly well, have a lot of disciples, have many monks and set up branch monasteries. All of this is not what we're here for – at least, that's not what I'm here for. If these things happen, it's all right. One is willing to encourage and try to create suitable situations for teaching, practising and listening to Dhamma. But the priority always has to be seeing the Dhamma in the present moment, not being deluded and pushing aside

the truth of the way it is now because we are caught up in a mission or something important on the worldly plane.

In my position, for example, people have all kinds of expectations of me. Sometimes I used to find that really unbearable and began to feel a lot of resentment about it. But the priority was always to observe the way things were in the present moment. If I followed this resentment, of course I'd then suffer. But through just looking at that particular thing, or any other thing, the tendency to create a problem about them dropped away. More and more, I found confidence, space and strength arising and was able to be present here and now, without making comments; neither being pulled in nor intimidated, nor wanting to please and be an impeccable monk who fulfilled other people's expectations. Thus we keep learning from life's experiences.

My reflection in daily life is always: this is the way it is, it's like this. If people leave, monks disrobe, anagarikas run away or nuns fall in love with swamis, we might feel quite disappointed. Life goes up and down: for instance, a monk for whom we had great expectations may suddenly leave. But instead of creating a problem about that, we remember the practice is about here and now, not about personalities, the expectations we have, the way we might be disappointed about somebody or the hurt feelings. They're just part of our human experience. They can always be seen here and now as Dhamma. All that arises, ceases; that is the way things are.

We don't try to make ourselves into unfeeling, indifferent people, to the point where we don't care

what anybody thinks, so that if everybody left it wouldn't mean anything to us; the world could fall apart, but we'd be totally indifferent, no longer sensitive and not feeling anything at all. Sometimes we may imagine that's what an arahant is like – no matter what's happening, he's completely indifferent and unimpressed. But is that really the way it is? From my experience, the way it is, is that this is a very sensitive world. Planetary life, consciousness and the human form – the whole realm is one of great sensitivity, feeling, emotion, and even psychic phenomena. The reflection that 'all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing and is not self,' isn't a dismissal of that or an insensitivity to the way it is, to its power or quality. It's the ability to be patient, to bear with the vicissitudes of life and learn from them.

The quality of things can vary. Some can be very important and urgent, others might be totally trivial, silly and idiotic. In daily life some experiences have the quality of being very important, but a lot of daily life experiences are quite trivial and foolish. Seeing that 'all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing,' isn't dismissing the quality of anything, but giving that quality a perspective. By seeing things in the perspective of impermanence, rather than judging and paying attention only to the important ones and not bothering with the trivial ones, we begin to open to the existence of weakness, cowardice, wishy-washiness and wimpiness. They are all seen as 'what arises, ceases', instead of judging such states as being horrible, bad and something we don't want. We're willing

to observe and note that these states are impermanent, and so are the big, serious, grand and urgent ones.

So what is being a human being, a *manussa*? If we reflect on this, we see we have a body and we have a mind. Just this, without a judgement: I'm not saying it's good or bad in any absolute way. Being masculine what is the effect on the mind of being masculine? For women, what is the effect on the mind of having a female body? As a way of reflecting, I try to encourage observing how things are affecting our minds. Women's bodies with their wombs, their nourishing equipment, menstrual periods and the whole functioning process of femininity: what effect does that have on their minds? Do the women here dismiss it or take it personally? What is the nature of masculinity? A male body doesn't have nurturing organs. It is not designed for nursing or for bearing children. That's why it's difficult for men to understand those aspects of women, because we don't have that kind of experience of life at first hand. That's the way it is. Being a man or a woman is not a failure or a fault; neither is better than the other. Any facile judgements and prejudices are not to be believed, but to be observed. This whole psychophysical process is to be observed.

Mindfulness is the way to the Deathless. The word 'mindfulness' is often used without really being understood. We can be concentrated on an object or caught in thoughts and mental patterns. But mindfulness is the reflective ability to witness, observe and let go, so that the mind is open rather than concentrated and absorbed into an object. If we take this to its logical

conclusion of, say, the Buddha being mindful of the Dhamma, there is no person or personality who could be seen as an object. Male and female, all the seemingly very personal differences, emotional tendencies and psychological quirks, can be seen as *ārammaṇā*, mental states, rather than being judged and grasped as self. This is the meaning of not-self.

Mindfulness is not a blank, vacuous or expressionless thing, but brightness, intelligence and clarity. And it's not personal. If I say, 'I am that,' 'that' becomes personal. But if there is 'that' alone, it's not anybody. When there is no attachment to the *ārammaṇā* that arise out of delusion, there is mental clarity. This is not stupidity or dullness, because we don't go towards annihilation or nihilistic views. For the whole lifespan of this form here called 'Sumedho', this is where there is knowing. At this level of speech and convention, I assume that when others are mindful it's the same thing for them. And out of compassion for others, we try to encourage, direct and teach people to look at this, to know that this is the way it is.

These sensitive forms are like radios or receptors, and as long as there is ignorance they distort information, which becomes blocked and deformed. But when the human form is released from defilements and those blockages, these receptors and transmitters can be a real blessing to planetary life. Gotama the Buddha, just one human being in history, had a tremendous effect that we can still appreciate over 2,500 years later on different parts of this planet.

We can begin to realize the human potential for enlightenment, our ability to be free from the distorted attachments and defilements of the mind that we create out of ignorance. When they are relinquished, the human form is a transmitter of wisdom and compassion, of loving-kindness, joy and serenity. On the other hand, what does the selfish human being manifest? When I am thinking about myself, caught in selfish attitudes, I manifest greed, hatred and delusion to others. When we only think in terms of what we want, what we're trying to get rid of and what we don't like about others, the human being becomes just a nuisance and an unpleasantness to the other creatures on this planet. We can see how ignorant humanity has created so many problems on planet earth! All the pollution, corruption, destruction of the forests, diminishing numbers of whales and dolphins, fish and birds – if we keep going in this way, we're just public nuisances.

But we can also see the potential of human beings, because there always have been those like a Buddha, the arahants and the bodhisattvas. Through selflessness, wisdom and enlightenment they manifest the *brahmavihāras*. That should be our function on the planet, if we have one. To me that would be the most lovely thing to point to as a potential for humanity, rather than just being negative and cynical about the nature of human beings as selfish and greedy, with the pervading attitude of, 'Look out for yourself because no one else will.' There certainly are human beings who function in that way and believe in that pattern, but we don't have

to be like that. We can transcend that realm of survival of the fittest, the law of the jungle, the strong dominating the weak. We can rise above that. We can rise above our own psychic realm of 'me as a sensitive personality' to a transcendent understanding where these forms are more like transmitters, rather than being grasped as a person, or 'me', or 'mine'. We need to be able to realize that this form isn't 'mine'.

Cultivating the Noble Eightfold Path means no longer making any demands or claims on the personal plane. We trust and develop this path in daily life, so that these forms can manifest compassion, kindness, joy and equanimity towards other beings. We have the example of Gotama the Buddha and the compassion of his teaching. This form of a bhikkhu has been a brilliant form for transmitting his teaching for more than 2,500 years. It has been established in such a way that it can be carried onwards through a long period of time. That's the effect of just one human being called a Buddha. We're disciples of the Buddha and in the conventional form we use Buddhist teaching. We're his inheritors and we have the Dhamma and Vinaya. We live in the restraint of Vinaya and the spirit of the Dhamma. As long as we surrender ourselves to this form, we become its inheritors.

Enabling this particular form to be transmitted onwards benefits not only us, but also future generations. What it's ultimately about on the macrocosmic level, in our puny human predicament, all we can do is wonder. We sense a kind of marvel and mystery in being a rather vulnerable and fragile little person, a tiny body on this

planet. When we look up at the sky on a clear night, we have a sense of wonder about it. We can't pin it down to the limited ability of our perceptions, thoughts or views. But what the human mind can do is open to the mystery of it all, to where the mind is really mindful. We don't try to fix and attach to ideas, to fit the totality into a narrow perception. This is why human ignorance is so strong: because we want to figure everything out with words and perceptions, rather than open our hearts to the Dhamma, the whole and the completeness of it. If we allow enough space we can trust the mystery, the unknown, the vastness, infinity.

It's a strange predicament, one that I often contemplate. Why is it this way? Why are we like this? And what can we actually know, beyond the conditioning process of our own mind? If we let the mind open up, we're able to wonder. When the mind is filled with wonder or is wonderful, there is no perception. It's not black or white, male or female, this or that. The mind stops. There is no need to grasp a perception or force anything into a viewpoint. But it is also mysterious. We can't know it through the desire to know it. We can only open the mind with mindfulness, not by trying to figure it all out with analysis, opinions and words.

In the cynical world I grew up in, the tendency was to dwell on faults and flaws, to be critical and picky, always emphasizing what was wrong with everything. The minds of critics of life, cynics and doomsday prophets are very ugly, and to be stuck in that realm is painful. When I was a young university student I really enjoyed being

cynical, negative and critical. We seemed maybe to be developing those faculties at that time. It might have been an important thing to do, but to be stuck on that level is suffering.

One thing we love about children is their innocence. Young children wonder about things. They don't have to have perceptions for everything. While they still have innocence, they marvel at life. They discover nature and reflect on things. But as they become more conditioned by our society, class, ancestry and all that, they lose their innocence and become conditioned into being a member of the family and society, believing and doing all the things they're expected to do in that position. But in the long run it's very painful to be caught up in duties, responsibilities or ideas of having rights and privileges and demanding them, being jealous of others and competitive. That whole realm becomes quite meaningless and distressing to us. So then there's the aspiration of Buddha- Dhamma: to become like a child again - but being wise rather than innocent.

Wisdom is incorruptible. Wisdom also allows us to wonder again, to be open to the unknown and not frightened by it anymore, allowing this conditioned self we carry through ignorance to cease in the mind. Then the mind is reflective and open to the mystery, the Dhamma and the way things are. It's not just an attachment to the view that everything that arises ceases. It's a reflection, a way of teaching us to look at a pattern of things, rather than a position we take and hold onto.

11

EVERYTHING AROUND US IS DHAMMA

The purpose of our life as monks is to realize the ultimate truth, the truth of the way it is. The Buddha used the word '*nibbāna*', which means 'complete non- attachment' – that is, not being attached through delusion and ignorance to the experiences we have from birth to death in this form as a human being. When we go forth as bhikkhus we do so to realize non-attachment (*nibbāna*), 'desirelessness' and fading away (*virāga*), and cessation (*nirodha*). These three terms, *virāga, nirodha* and *nibbāna*, are quite significant.

To realize *virāga* we have first to understand what *rāga* or desire is. In the second Noble Truth we have the arising of craving and attachment to it. We can divide craving into three types: *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava- taṇhā*. Desire is energy that's always looking for something or another. If there is attachment to craving, it becaomes craving and one is never content. There's always restlessness, trying to get something or do something, or aiming at something or other, perhaps picking up this or doing that or just saying something.

When it's not understood and seen for what it is, desire pulls us around. *Kāma-taṇhā* is the desire for sense-pleasures. We distract ourselves with the sense-world. This can be done in so many ways: by eating, drinking, smoking, taking drugs, sexual activities,

watching television or other types of entertainment, and so on. The possibilities for distracting ourselves are endless. In the form of a bhikkhu, the life of celibacy very much restricts our ability for *kāma-taṇhā*, but sometimes it definitely gathers round, let's say, food. We can feel tremendous desire for sweets or to listen to music, for a chance to distract ourselves with sound, sight, smell, taste or touch.

Kāma-taṇhā is still quite coarse and obvious, but *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā* can be subtle. *Bhava-taṇhā* is the desire to become, and *vibhava-taṇhā* is the desire to get rid of. In this life, which can be very altruistic and based on high-minded ideas, we can have a strong desire to become an arahant or an enlightened person. It seems like a good desire, in fact. We try to become something better, or even to become the best. Or we try to get rid of the terrible things; we desire to get rid of greed, anger and delusion, jealousy weakness and fear. These seem like righteous kinds of desire. It must be good to get rid of the bad, the obstacles, the hindrances. Our minds can support and defend *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā* on these levels of becoming and getting rid of. But we should remember that *taṇhā* is always connected to ignorance, *avijjā*. They go hand in hand; so as long as there is *avijjā*, there'll be *taṇhā*, and the desire to become and to get rid of. This is where we really need to understand what desire is, and not just have an idea that we shouldn't have any desires, because then we form the desire not to have any desires, or the desire to get rid of the desire to get rid of desires – and it gets complicated. It's not necessary to get rid of desire, but to understand it.

So the second Noble Truth is the insight that supports letting go. Desires should be let go of, and to let go of something we have to know what we're holding on to. Letting go has nothing to do with annihilation. It isn't a throwing away, since no aversion accompanies it. We let desire be. It's not a matter of getting rid of desire, but of letting it cease. We contemplate the words 'letting go' until we eventually realize that desire has been let go of. Then we know letting go.

So *kāma-taṇhā, bhava-taṇhā, vibhava-taṇhā* are to be examined and investigated. Just observe the nature of desire. How does it feel to sit here and want to get rid of something, or to move or go away, or do or say something? How much of our formal practice is based on desires to become and desires to get rid of? We should ask ourselves that question. So our aim and intention when going forth is to realize *nibbāna*.

But this is not a desire – there's a difference here. We make our decision not from desire but from a deliberate choosing, the rational ability to turn towards the realization of complete understanding and freedom from delusion. Whether we think we can do it or not isn't the issue. Whether we think we're capable, or that anyone is capable, isn't the point at all. We learn how to use our minds, how to use what we have skilfully. So we train as bhikkhus to realize dispassion and non-attachment to the five *khandhā*, taking us to the cessation of desire and ignorance. We don't just do this when we're ecstatic and inspired, and in a high mood: 'I want to realize *nibbāna* – it's the most wonderful thing to do!' It's not that, but something quite deliberate,

from a very rational and clear place in our minds. We might ask, 'Well, are there any arahants these days? Has anybody here realized *nibbāna*?' This is doubt and the self-view operating. But whether anybody here has realized *nibbāna* or not isn't the point. Our goal for the holy life is to be free from all delusion and free from grasping, to see and know the Dhamma and to realize the truth. What's the point of being a monk otherwise? The whole structure and form, the surrounding conditions, support and encourage that. They help to remind us and enable us to recollect, from a deliberate, rational position of the mind – not from desire and ignorance, trying to become an enlightened person. But this is right intention if it's grounded in wisdom and clear understanding.

Our practice and mental cultivation in this life are to observe the way things are: suffering and the arising of suffering. We should understand and acknowledge what suffering is, not just react to it. The second Noble Truth offers the insight that reminds us to let go of desire. The third Noble Truth is the realization of cessation. Cessation doesn't mean annihilation. It's not the end of everything, total destruction, but when we let go of desire it ceases. It's natural for whatever arises to cease. That's just Dhamma, the way of things. All conditions are impermanent, so whatever comes into being falls away. This is the focus of the third Noble Truth: to realize the cessation of things. This is quite subtle, and if we don't set our minds on practising for that realization, we miss it all the time.

Who notices how things end or cease? We're much more interested in the arising conditions of life, like sexual activities, delicious flavours and beautiful sights. We want pleasurable experiences, an exciting lifetime with romantic relationships and adventures, so what we tend to become dazzled and fascinated with is the arising of desire. But then it reaches its peak and we can't stay fascinated, inspired and interested forever. We can only stay that way for a while: it reaches its peak and then we seek another exciting object to follow. This is what *saṁsāra* is about, the endless seeking after rebirth, after some kind of new, absorbing condition to become. And then we become bored, disillusioned, depressed and uncertain. That's cessation, what we don't notice and what we tend to ignore.

How many of us try to find something interesting to do to distract ourselves whenever we're bored? We don't like to be bored. Nobody wants to be bored. But when we live a life of one exciting adventure after another, we become incredibly bored. We become bored with excitement. What was exciting yesterday is boring today so we have to think of something even more exciting than that. There are endless experiments with sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, to be reborn into something fascinating because yesterday's fascination is boring.

Monastic life is generally quite boring. What could be more boring than our chanting or sitting for an hour? But it's through observing boredom that we realize the cessation of suffering, being willing to be bored and to look at our sense of despair, depression or disillusionment. It's

easy to be a monk as long as we're inspired. We think, 'I want to be a Buddhist monk. That's the most wonderful thing a human being can ever do, to realize the ultimate reality – that's terribly inspiring. And to dedicate one's whole life to the Dhamma – that's really inspiring. And to give up sexual desire – oh, that's very noble. And to be an alms- mendicant, just eating whatever the faithful put into one's bowl. To wear a rag-robe, to live at the foot of a tree, sitting in the full lotus posture. To go on *tudong* and be able to put up with mosquitoes, malaria and stifling heat. And to live out in charnel grounds and graveyards.' One can make a real adventure out of Buddhist monasticism as an ideal. The reality of it is that one usually becomes a monk through some kind of inspiration.

Inspiration is the arising side of our experience, but then it expires – or perspires; there's a lot of perspiration in this place! If we want to be inspired all the time we have to keep going somewhere else. We might be inspired when we come to Wat Pah Nanachat, but we won't stay that way because we get too much perspiration here – or desperation. So then we think, 'Oh, I'd like to go on *tudong*, off to the cave, the mountains, the Burmese border or the islands in the Gulf.' Once the inspiration has worn off, any place looks more inspiring than the place we're in. This is when it's important not to move, to really determine not to follow that kind of restless desire for distractions and adventures, or simply for a change, but be able to put up with the desperation, perspiration and expiration until it doesn't matter any more whether we stay or go. Ajahn Chah was always saying, 'When you want to go, don't

go', because we need to stay and observe our boredom, disillusionment and restlessness. Then we might have insight into the third Noble Truth, the cessation of desire. If we think of *nirodha* in black-and-white terms, it sounds like annihilation. This is where we need to see what grasping and letting go are, and the cessation that follows. *Nirodha* isn't a conscious rejection of anything. It's a realization of where desire based on ignorance is let go of. We can actually see desire: then it ceases and there is the realization of the cessation of desire. When there is no more desire, what is our mind like? We really have to observe this. Mindfulness is the way to the Deathless. We sit and watch, being able to observe desire, not suppressing or trying to get rid of it, not following it blindly and believing our minds are ultimately us. We turn towards that cool, calm position of 'Buddho', knowing and seeing, witnessing and recognizing the way things are.

With *ānāpānasati* it's the same pattern. I've always contemplated that: there's inspiration with the inhalation and expiration with the exhalation. When we inhale there's this sense of the spirit rising up in a way. We tend to draw and pull the air in, and the body fills out. It's like inspiration. When we're really proud and full of life, we have that sense of being inspired, full of the breath of life. But we can only inhale to a certain degree; we can't just keep inhaling, even though it's a nice thing to do. Imagine yourself only inhaling and never exhaling. What would that be like? What is an exhalation, then? The breath is leaving the body, and when we can't exhale any more we can observe that there's a real desire to inhale again. And

we can't just stop and stay exhaled for very long without almost panicking with the desire to inhale, to fill ourselves up with air again.

I've noticed that it's easier for me to concentrate on my inhalation than on my exhalation. My mind wanders more easily on the exhalation. So much of life is like that. Boredom, disillusionment – that side of life is where we wander, looking for something else. It's not easy just to stay with being bored, the other side of happiness and pleasure, the other side of inspiration. To be mindful of that, to stay with that, we have to determine to do so. We determine to stay with the exhalation from its beginning to its end: just that is not terribly significant in its seeming appearance, but we can use the pattern of *ānāpānasati* as a reflection. We try to contemplate the actual experience we all have of inhalation, exhalation, inspiration and disillusionment.

When we're born, we start to grow and develop. We have youth and vigour and reach a peak of physical maturity, then we grow old and feeble. Our society doesn't want to get old. We see so many older people trying to remain young, youthful and vigorous. There's so much money now in cosmetic surgery. People can have their wrinkles taken out, their double chin, their sagging jowls, the crow's feet around their eyes. They try to make the nose more attractive, the lips fuller and the teeth white and straight. A youthful complexion is really desirable.

Let's take flowers as an example. I used to contemplate roses in England, because they are so beautiful and have such a lovely fragrance. When is the rose perfect? On the day when it reaches its perfect fullness in colour, form and

fragrance. From a bud it opens out and reaches the point where it's perfect. But after that peak, what happens to it? It starts to grow old and wilt. Its perfection and peak have passed and it starts getting a little worn looking. The next day it's definitely old, but still attractive enough. Finally it starts turning brown and looks pretty horrible, so we throw it away. This is one way of reflecting on life and sensual experience, always arising and passing away.

We can learn from watching roses, ourselves and the people around us, the day and night and the seasons of the year. In England with its four seasons we can observe that sequence. The days are very long in summer, and they keep getting longer until the summer solstice. Then they gradually get shorter and the nights get longer. So we have this reflection on the days being very short, the nights being very long. Then they reverse, and the light- element increases until the days are very long and nights are very short. We all have this experience of living in the sensory realm, with seasons and changes, and a body that was born, grows up, gets old and will die.

Everything is based on that pattern where all conditions are impermanent. Inhalation and exhalation are something we can observe right now; there are six months between observing the winter solstice and the summer solstice. But right here and right now we can observe inhalation and exhalation and reflect on them, not just becoming mesmerised by our breath, but really contemplating it, noticing and observing the way it is.

Everything around us is Dhamma; it teaches us about the way things are. Reflecting on the Four Noble Truths

is an ongoing process, working with things that we can actually observe in daily life. Watching the breath, we notice that actually it's the body that is breathing, not us. When somebody dies, the body doesn't inhale again after the last exhalation. When the body is about to die there's one last exhalation, and then – finished. But as long as the body is alive it will breathe. That's its nature.

Breathing is a physiological function that sustains the life of the body. Breathing is much more important than eating. We can ask ourselves, 'Who is it that breathes?' Even when we are sleeping our body is breathing. We don't have to be awake and make our body breathe. So we can observe the breath of the body because it's not- self. The breath isn't something about which we feel possessive or with which we identify. It doesn't arouse vanity in our minds – at least, not in my mind. I've never considered myself as breathing better than somebody else, or envied somebody else's breathing. Thinking that men breathe better than women, or that the King of Thailand breathes in a way vastly superior to me would be ridiculous, because breathing is just the way it is. It's a physiological function, like the heart beating and the metabolism operating. It functions quite on its own without our thinking about it or identifying with it.

With *ānāpānasati* we can tranquillize the mind by concentrating on the inhalation and exhalation at the tip of the nose. The more refined our breath becomes, the more tranquil we are. We can use *ānāpānasati* only for tranquillity, or for reflection too. We have to examine something thoroughly to really understand it, so that's why we reflect on the inhalation and exhalation – to know that

pattern 'all that arises, ceases' and realize letting go of the arising. When we let go of desire and are no longer attached to the arising, what arises ceases. That's the natural way of things. That's Dhamma. '*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe dhammā anattā*' – 'all conditions are impermanent, all conditions are not-self.'

Sometimes it seems more interesting to develop *jhāna* and have magical powers, things that are more attainment-oriented, so we can feel we're getting somewhere and have attained something or can do something special. Just contemplating the exhalation doesn't seem as if we're doing anything of much significance at all. But notice this reflection on Dhamma. The way out of suffering is to understand the way things are, not to become Superman or be able to do miraculous things.

What is enlightenment? To me this term means to be able to see the way things are clearly. It is not the kind of light that blinds us. Light can be so strong that it blinds us and we can't see anything. If we try to look at the midday sun it'll burn our eyes out. Is that enlightenment? Or is it knowing things as they are? The amount of light needed to see things clearly isn't a blinding light, but what kind of light is it? The light of wisdom and reflection, being able to learn the truth from very humbling and ordinary things in daily life. We don't need to know the ultimate purpose and meaning of everything in the whole universal system, the macrocosm in its totality. We learn just from watching the breath, the way the body

breathes, the ageing process of the body itself, the hope and despair in life, the happiness and the suffering, all of this. We learn from seemingly very subjective, personal and insignificant details of daily life, and from them we can arrive at the ultimate truth: being able to see and know things as they are. When we reflect like this we're not putting enlightenment on a pedestal.

This is what happens to a lot of Buddhists. *Nibbāna* becomes something exalted and fantastic: '*Nibbāna*! That's the most difficult thing. Is there anybody in Thailand who has realized *nibbāna*? Are there any enlightened monks? They must be supermen with radiant auras, most fantastic and elevated, exalted above everyone else.' The human mind tends to idealize or idolize. But if we examine how the Buddha used the term '*nibbāna*', we see it doesn't mean much of anything. It's certainly not an exalted term. It means 'cooling'; the Buddha's advice is to cool it. But through human ignorance the word is put up on a pedestal and worshipped as something so far beyond anyone's reach that we have no inspiration even to try to reach it. What was meant to be a very skilful teaching and useful convention for getting beyond ignorance is made into an idol and worshipped.

This is where teachers like Ajahn Chah really bring our attention to how to use these conventions in the way that the Buddha intended, because they are for freedom and liberation; for seeing clearly and understanding things as they are. We can do them; they are not beyond our ability. This is a teaching for human beings.

12

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN AJAHN SUMEDHO AND AJAHN KHANTIPALO[19]

at Wat Pah Nanachat, December 1982

Ajahn Khantipālo: I have heard that the bhikkhu life is 'hiding away', not facing things, you know, escaping. People say, 'What are you all lurking in this patch of forest for? Eh? Are you afraid of something?' Many people in Australia look down on the *wat*[20] because we don't earn money ... 'Why don't you go out and hold down an honest job of work?' Lots of people think like that. How do you feel about that one?

Ajahn Sumedho: We are very often faced with that one ourselves. What are you running away from? Too lazy to get a job? Fact is with the unemployment rate so high, they should be putting Buddhist meditation on the National Health soon. Then this 'running away from the world,' what is that?

Living in London, going to the pub, watching television: this is the real world and living in the forest isn't the real world. But actually, in the forest you are up against it, forced to face up to it. You don't have a television set, a wife, children, a job, books to read, you can only eat once a day at

19. Ajahn Khantipālo was an English bhikkhu who was abbot of Wat Buddha Dhamma, which is situated in a National Park near Wiseman's Ferry in New South Wales, Australia.

20. A '*wat*' [Thai] is a Buddhist monastery.

the designated time. You're just left with yourself. And then you really have to face up to things; when you look at how most people spend their days, their lives are spent in a state of constant distraction. There are all sorts of hobbies ... all kinds of things to keep you occupied.

In the monastic life, on the contrary, it is not just an aimless distraction from the present, from boredom and the fear of living. Even when you only practise Eight Precepts – including celibacy – the sense pleasures are very limited. You can't sleep a lot, eat a lot, listen to music, go to shows or football matches, and therefore your ability to escape is restricted and curbed considerably. And a lot of sexual activity is more an aimless distraction from life in the present than a way of creating a family.

The monastic life, that is where you really come to terms with life, where you really face up to it. Because if for example I told you a lie earlier in the morning, then when I am meditating here this evening, it keeps coming up in my mind all the time. You can hardly get away with anything in this life.

AK: Yep. People come out to see us in the bush at Wiseman's Ferry. After driving through ten miles of National Park to get to the monastery, they think, 'Well, this is no longer the real world, this is life on the fringe among the marginals ...'. That was the attitude of a TV crew who came to shoot some footage. What they failed to grasp is that you never can get beyond reality. The outward conditions may change, but you won't get away from it. Wherever you go, you take it with you. People delude themselves that the monk's life is

no longer relevant, an anachronism; when in fact there is more need of this lifestyle today than at any other time.

AS: The average living standard today is what only wealthy people could enjoy 100 years ago. People today have pushed pleasure to the ultimate, via drugs – such extreme doses of pleasure. Now they see *dukkha*. Before clothes and television were all so alluring, today the ordinary man can have it all. Now, the idea of piling up more of it seems to be absurd. More and more people are wishing to return to a natural simple, spiritual life. Twenty years ago in the States, I recall there was still the faith that science could solve all our problems. In psychiatry, with the effect of new drugs on schizophrenia, they even speculated that mental illness would become extinct – wiped from the face of the earth, like smallpox. Cancer and all diseases would have their definite cures. We would all be happy and healthy, and our faith and hope in science and psychiatry would usher in the Utopian age.

Twenty years later we see the result. Science did not bring what we hoped for, the result is not what we expected. In fact, everything is worse than ever. Science has brought with it the prospect of nuclear war – the most horrifying kind of devastation that anyone could possibly experience. Rather than Utopia, science is taking us to total destruction, and people have lost their respect and faith in it.

AK: There is also the confusion caused by having too many choices. Thirty years ago you could buy Australian cheese in two or three varieties at the most. One day in

Sydney I saw a shop selling nothing but cheese in about 150 varieties from all over the world. In 200 years you'll have cheese from the moon. There is no end to it: 'this or that, or this'. Sense-desire spells trouble, and is an endless source of confusion, conflict and trouble.

AS: One advantage of the monastic life is that the choice is so restricted. Before I became a monk I'd never had a sweet tooth, seldom had sweets, and was not at all interested in sweet things. But as a monk, because of celibacy and the restriction placed on the '*kāma-loka*',[21] I acquired this tremendous 'sugar *kilesa*'. It was so absurd, you know, because all my lust and greed centred around sugar. Previously the range of my lust had been spread over a broad area, so that the sugar one wasn't especially noticeable. But as you know, in a monastic form where the objects of greed are quite restricted, all the greed and kammic craving you have accumulated goes into that one thing.

So I thought it was very wise of the Buddha to put a seven-day allowance on sweets,[22] because a lot of wisdom can come from that reflection. Because it is absurd that a man aged thirty-two or thirty- three should have these vivid dreams at night ... but I'd be going into sweet shops, cake shops ... and I'd order a plate of really delicious sugary pastries and sitting down, I'd just about get one in my mouth ... and I'd wake up! And I thought if only I could just sleep to the point where I actually could eat the whole cake!

21. *kāma loka*: the world as an object of sense-desire

22. According to the Vinaya, the Monastic Rule, sugar and its derivatives can be kept for up to seven days as a tonic, but then it must be relinquished.

However, because you resign yourself to these restrictions – and once you begin to meditate – you experience the fulfilment that restraint brings. You begin to find that all those pleasures that were so alluring in the sensual world are in fact quite unsatisfying and unpleasant. If I hear some rock music these days, its rhythm is very unpleasant to me, whereas at one time I found it very appealing and exciting. Now, the attractive rhythm that wants to excite the mind is just noise; I now no longer find any inclination towards it. But that took many years with meditation to really see the *dukkha* of happiness.

AK: Greed only unwraps itself slowly. I recall seeing a list of Pali words used by the Buddha. The words connected with hatred and delusion numbered five or ten – quite few – whereas for greed, desire and craving there were about thirty or forty different words.

Also, regarding sweets – it is an attempt to find a substitute for love. Kids from wealthy families are always on about sweets; it is a craving due in large part to their not really being loved; their parents don't know how to love them. The heart is not there and the sweets are in attempt to compensate in some way. *Mettā* – loving-kindness is the answer. In the contemplative life we have so many opportunities; there aren't so many difficult and troublesome characters. This is what the monk's life is all about; making use of its possibilities and advantages for cultivating loving-kindness.

AS: A week after I arrived in Britain, I met people at the Hampstead Vihara and you could see there was no joy in their lives at all and I asked them about their meditation practice, 'Do you ever do any loving-kindness meditation?' 'Oh no, we can't stand that,' they said, 'it's so artificial – pretending to love everybody.' They liked to meditate in small cells out the back garden: go in the cell and stay in the cell and get insight. Many of them did experience certain insight, but they were certainly lacking in *mettā*.

After spending all those years in Thailand where there is such a lot of love and kindness, I was struck at the noticeable lack of it in that atmosphere. And the lack of warmth in the way people regard themselves and each other. The critical faculty was highly developed – complaining about the weather, criticizing the government – a lot of intelligence had developed but there was a noticeable lack of *mettā*.

When I asked them what they thought *mettā* was, most of them saw it as a sort of brainwashing technique, convincing yourself that you loved everybody. 'May I be happy, free from hatred' was too soppy, too naive and disgusting to even contemplate. So, rather than use the word 'love', which is much more misused in the English vocabulary, I began to use 'Not dwelling in aversion' as an interpretation, bringing *mettā* down to the immediate, and not as elevated as 'love' tends to be. It was more a practice of not spending all your time examining what's wrong with yourself or the world; just becoming kinder, more patient and gentle with your own mental condition, your physical condition, the people around you and the country you are in.

Then I'd use *mettā* as a meditation subject quite a lot. Some people could not do mindfulness of breathing because they would get too nervous: trying to concentrate on a nostril or follow the breath would drive them crazy, so I'd get them to do *mettā* practice. A lot of them really began to relax. If they had anger or hatred arise in their mind, then they would spread *mettā* to that. Being kind and gentle even with the most unpleasant mood. Then I'd say: 'That's what I mean by "*Ahaṁ sukhito homi*" ("May I be happy").' It doesn't mean 'I love myself' – but simply not dwelling in aversion, not feeling guilt or hatred to what may not be a very pleasant condition in the mind or body, peacefully coexisting with, being kind to what is present now.

Following on from that, a friendly atmosphere becomes natural. If you are patient and kind towards your own mental-physical condition, then it is not difficult to have it for others. That hard idea of 'killing defilements' and 'annihilating the devil' has to be seen through.

AK: It has a background in previous religious ideas: evil is something to be stamped on, or eliminated in some violent way. Meditators who have no guidance often hold on to such destructive ideas. I say to them, 'You've got this idea that there is you and your defilements, how many people are there, is there more than one of you? No? Then you're mistreating yourself.' If I get a representative selection of Australians, then Australia sure is in deep trouble. The level of hatred, anger, and frustration there is very high indeed. People have a low opinion of themselves, look

down on themselves, criticize themselves, all the time making a heap of *dukkha* (suffering) for themselves. If you don't have any good opinion of anything ... well, if you don't practise anything good, then of course you don't have a good opinion of yourself. If you break the precepts, harm others and abuse yourself – you'll have remorse and look down on yourself.

AS: A few months ago I was reading the 'Sermon on the Mount' where Jesus says, 'Even if you look with lust at a woman, you have committed adultery.' I thought, 'That's not right.' In Buddhism, one thing is clear and helpful: the Buddha made it clear that moral conduct deals only with speech and action, not mental phenomena. Christians feel very guilty about the bad thoughts they have – all because no qualitative distinction was ever made between thought and action. Because they might feel hatred towards parents or someone they are supposed to love, they then develop this tremendous guilt complex and they have no way of seeing it merely as a general condition of the human mind which changes. They tend to regard it as some latent evil force that is really rotten inside them, something basically wrong with them personally that they don't really want to know about. There is that kind of dread.

Teaching in Britain I noticed how relieved people are when they begin to realize there is nothing lurking down deep inside them; and that if there is, then they begin to let it out and just recognize it. They learn a skilful way of letting go of all fear and terror of what they assume might be.

In Buddha's teaching, the thing I appreciate about the training rules is that there is no mental offence at all. It's only when you act or speak that you transgress the Vinaya – so a Buddhist monk is never placed in the position of feeling guilty about bad thoughts. You don't have to confess: 'I've been thinking bad thoughts about you.' The thoughts are given the opportunity to cease by themselves.

And that gives me a perspective on my mind that I wouldn't have if I was trying to not think evil thoughts. Whenever these thoughts used to come, I'd start feeling terribly guilty, because a bhikkhu should be loving, generous, courageous, full of *mettā* and compassion for everything ... But if one tries to live up to that ideal, one can only stay that way for a few moments and then all the repressed hatred and resentment starts arising – along with the idea, 'I'm not worthy of the robe, I'm a terrible person, they shouldn't be bowing to me because I'm so bad.'

AK: When I first came to the Dhamma, I was very relieved by the wonderful fact that hatred and greed actually can be cured – it had never occurred to me before, thoughts were just thoughts, if they were there, then that must be the norm. Then I saw that by waiting for them to die, they come to an end quite naturally.

AS: 'Getting rid of' is always a striving, contending condition. The hindrances are important teachers and keep pestering us until we understand them. They hardly give us a moment's peace until we come to grips with them and

don't let them off the hook. When you try and repress them out of consciousness, they will simply become subconscious. But when you allow them to cease, their kammic force is ended. You are not *making* them cease; you will never get *samādhi* by doing that.

So with the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination – you'll never get wise by trying to figure these out. When you see them as guides, skilful reflections then the problem of *samādhi* is no longer a problem. Most people think, 'I'm not wise, I've got no wisdom.' But Buddha- wisdom is something we already have, and have to learn to use. For education and worldly wisdom, you go to a university. But that's worldly attainment. Dhamma is almost the opposite of that; there is no attainment but the realization of the way things are. All that arises, passes and is not-self – you don't need education to do that. You may be completely illiterate and still become wise by constant reflection, until you can see, not through intellect, but direct experience.

Q: Do states of mind vary according to location?

AK: I've got a novice who wants to come to Thailand very much – he thinks there are arahants[23] under every palm tree. I said, 'When you don't want to go to Thailand, then you can go.' The East or the West, there is no real difference, here or there defilements are the same, the mind still works the same. It is true that states of mind can vary with different places and people, but there is no escaping what you have to face.

23. An arahant is an enlightened being.

When you get some equanimity in your practice, then you can handle hostility wherever you go, you can handle other people's ways of thinking, their troubles, and defilements. You develop some loving- kindness for hostile people: 'Ah, well, they are making this kind of (fruit-bearing) kamma, they'll have to pay for that!' However, in my experience you don't get much hostility. I don't know about Ajahn Sumedho.

AS: Very rare. British people are very polite; hostility is never verbal or physical, there's maybe a cold look. Also London is filled with all sorts of people wearing all kinds of clothes and people who really look freaky, so we look comparatively. I notice however that whenever you are angry or frightened you tend to attract aggression. Even as a layman I never really hated people very much, but I notice with monks who do have aggressive tendencies who in the past were fighters – they tend to attract more violence to them than I do. *Mettā* just doesn't attract violence. But if I do get angry with someone who says '*Hare Krishna*' or insults me, then that anger ignites the fire in the people around and then the conflicts begin. But I never mind insults because they don't mean anything to me, people are insulting something they don't understand. You realize, 'It's their problem, not mine.'

What I was referring to earlier was the way the Buddhists in Thailand worried about taking the Dhamma to England and how things would work out in that country: 'What will you do about the robes and the weather and the people? How will you be able not to carry money? How can you keep the

Vinaya when it's not a Buddhist country? You will have to adapt to the English ways, you can't just go round and take Asian rituals and make English people into Asians and Thais. You've got to make it suitable for their country.' Everybody was giving advice but it became very clear before I left how stupid it would be for me to decide in Thailand what I should be doing in England. No use sitting here deciding what to do there. All I could do is go there and see what happens.

I'd been trained under this discipline, I felt confident enough with the training I'd had and I knew I had some skill in using the basic equipment. What happens in England I just have to watch- rather than preconceive all kinds of problems or create the British people into stereotypes. So I went there with that attitude of openness, to listen and watch rather than to convert or make Buddhism appealing or make it English.

One issue came up when I arrived: a Buddhist from Newcastle said to me, 'Never make an Englishman bow. That is really offensive to the English. And that chanting and all those things. They just want the pure Buddha's teaching and not any of that Asian ritual.'

He was a lecturer at Manchester University. Well, I was not going around forcing people to bow – but I found people liked bowing. They liked Asian ritual and they missed it when we didn't do it. They liked *Anumodanā*5[24] and they were quite keen on the whole thing. I don't find a lack of support for being too far out and too exotic.

24. *Anumodāna*: the chanting of verses on the value of generosity.

And *pindapaht* – this is really sweet. The Buddhist Society's summer school is a very British institution, and one year Venerable Ñānadharo,[25] the Lao monk, was invited there. He said he would only come if he could go on *pindapaht*. A very nice Englishman, Roy Brabant-Smith, said he would go into the kitchen every day and have food put in Venerable's bowl. So they convinced him, and Venerable Ñānadharo took his alms-bowl and spent two weeks at the Summer School receiving food each day and eating out on the lawn with everyone watching. Next year Ñānadharo didn't want to go so they invited me, with Roy Brabant-Smith agreeing to the same terms.

So I followed in that line and at the end of the two weeks there was a whole line of people waiting to give food. People would go out to the market during the day and when I left for Oxford I'd have to carry bagfuls of food back to the monastery. People really like it; it makes them feel good.

25. Venerable Ñānadharo was the abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery near Tournon in France.

GLOSSARY

Ajahn (Thai, from Pali *Ācariya*) teacher, often used as the title of the senior monk or monks at a monastery; also spelt 'achaan', 'acharn' (and several other ways)

ānāpānasati the meditative practice of focusing the mind on in- and out-breathing

dependent origination a step-by-step presentation of how suffering arises dependent on ignorance and desire, and ceases with their cessation

dhamma/ā mental qualities, skilful or unskilful, that are pertinent to the process of awakening

Dhamma the way it is, the true order of reality; often the Buddha's teachings

kamma conscious intended action

khandhā five 'heaps' or categories by which the mind automatically formulates experience. In detail: form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), 'activities' (*saṇkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇā*)

kuti a secluded and simple dwelling for a monk or nun

Observance Day (in Pali, *Uposatha*) a sacred day or 'sabbath' occurring every lunar fortnight. On this day, Buddhists reaffirm their Dhamma practice in terms of precepts and meditation. The Sangha will also recite their training rules, *Pāṭimokkha*, on this day

samaṇa renunciant, contemplative (term for ordained monks or nuns)

sotāpanna literally 'stream-enterer', one whose realization has transcended the first three 'fetters' or mental structures that block awakening. These are: identification with one's personality; attachment to customs and systems; and wavering uncertainty as to Dhamma. Having transcended these, a 'stream-enterer' is said to inevitably realize complete awakening within a maximum of seven lifetimes. The other three of the four stages of enlightenment are *sakadāgāmi, anāgāmi,* arahant (once-returner, non-returner, fully enlightened person)

Tipitaka literally 'three baskets' – the collections of the Buddhist scriptures, classified according to Sutta (Discourses), Vinaya (Discipline or Training) and Abhidhamma (Metaphysics)

tudong (Thai, from Pali *dhutaṅga*) a practice of walking for weeks or months in remote places with no guarantees of foodor lodgings

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