THE CONTEMPLATIVE'S COMPANION

Reflections on Presence

AJAHN VIRADHAMMO

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TISARANA BUDDHIST MONASTERY

This collection of teachings is dedicated with

deep gratitude to my parents and to my teachers,

Venerable Luang Por Chah

and

Venerable Luang Por Sumedho.

There is the Unborn, Unoriginated,
Uncreated and Unformed.

If there was not this Unborn,
Unoriginated, Uncreated and Unformed,

Freedom from the world of the born,
the originated, the created,
the formed would not be possible.

But since there is an Unborn,
Unoriginated, Uncreated and Unformed,

Therefore, is freedom possible
from the world of the born, the originated,
the created and the formed.

NIBBĀNA SUTTA: PARINIBBĀNA (UDĀNA 8.3)
KHUDDAKA NIKĀYA

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FOREWORD

A RUG FOR THE RAFT

I have a rug in my kuti that Ajahn Viradhammo wove and gave to me before he left Britain in the 1990s. It's a treasured possession – which says something, as my renunciant and itinerant lifestyle means I can't have many possessions. So, I'm glad to notice that lately Ajahn Viradhammo has taken up weaving again at Tisarana Buddhist Monastery. This was after years of serving the Sangha, building monasteries, offering teachings – and as a craftsperson's touch, creating furniture for the monastery.

There's something about weaving that is analogous to the process of Dhamma transmission. It's about taking threads of experience carefully and weaving them together into a solid and unified whole, according to certain guiding principles. In each craftsperson's hands, the threads and the weave have a personal and authentic style, and unique forms and patterns may arise – but they are all harmonious, carefully knitted, and form a Dhamma vehicle that inspires and carries us.

Of course, words are the obvious stuff of those threads, but words don't stand alone: the wise ones arise from the heart, are fashioned by the mind, and delivered at the right time. Being drawn from the heart, true threads of Dhamma go directly to the heart of those who listen. And when they land, they open, not more words, but a felt clear silence. So, a true teacher is not dazzled by words or fascinated with patterns of logic and rhetoric. Nor do they seek to dazzle others. They use what is needed to encourage those they

are addressing, to settle, take in what's being presented, and see for themselves what is revealed.

In the early days of our ongoing friendship, Ajahn Viradhammo and I lived, worked, and meditated together at Cittaviveka Monastery in West Sussex, UK, the first overseas branch monastery of Wat Pah Pong. Along with the rest of the community, we'd gather after puja each morning for breakfast in the one room that had a solid floor and a fire. Luang Por Sumedho would preside over the meeting. After the tea and porridge had been passed around and consumed, and the day's duties allocated, Luang Por would normally offer a Dhamma reflection. There'd be a pause and then the work meeting would begin.

The meetings, and the day itself, were saturated in the uncertainties of a fledgling community dealing with its own emotional lurches, as well as with the limitations and needs of the physical situation. We had limited skills, and minimal financial support to do the rebuilding of this nearly derelict house in the unpredictable English weather – so there was a lot of discussion, views, and speculations around everything: if we did this ... or maybe we could do that ... or maybe it wasn't possible to do this. Meanwhile, time was passing. Ajahn Viradhammo didn't have a lot of opinions. He would listen, always listen. He was good at that. And at avoiding proliferation. I think that's what people respected about him, and still do. But after a while he'd stop the discussion with a few well-placed words. One of his conversation-stoppers that I remember was: 'If my granny had wheels, she'd be a bus.' After a comment like that, people would pause, pick up the hammers and shovels, put on the work boots, and just get on with it.

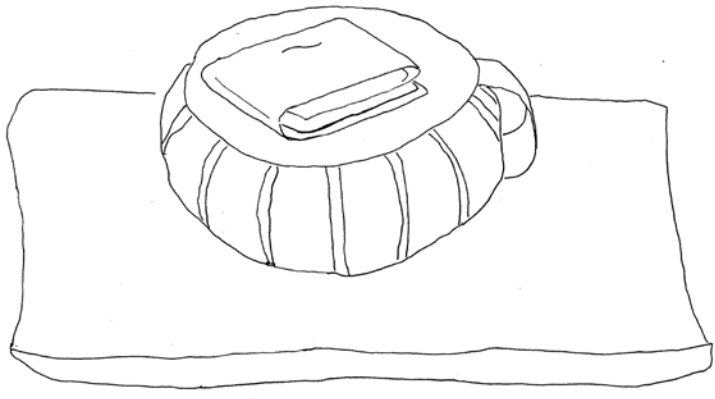
Maybe realisation is like this; it's elusive because it's so immediate and personally experienced that it's beyond words, strategies, and theories. Yet, it relies on such guides to steer this fickle heart towards its own understanding. In this respect, the Buddha likened

his Dhamma to a raft – a simple, yet sturdy vehicle to cross the floods of greed, hatred, and delusion. And yet, not to be hung on to. Well, here's another piece to make the journey more comfortable – a book that carries a retreat, in which the threads of kindness, integrity, mindfulness, and discernment are woven to guide the heart through days of introspection. Woven lightly, with love.

The weaver is well-practised and generous. Other willing people have taken his spoken words, and snipped and combed them into a text. *Sādhu!*

May this offering of pointers and encouragements carry you to your own realisation.

Ajahn Sucitto



INTRODUCTION*

Ajahn Viradhammo has traditionally led a week-long residential retreat each fall at the Galilee Centre in Arnprior, a small town near Ottawa, Canada's capital, upon the invitation of the Ottawa Buddhist Society in Canada. It is a perfect place, in normal times, for meditation. The view of the Ottawa River from the century-old manor in a surround of maple trees naturally invites quiet reflection.

In September 2020, this favourite gathering of nearby Buddhists had to be cancelled and moved to the virtual world. People in Ottawa and all around the world were living through the anguish of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic. Vaccines were not available then. Governments resorted to lockdowns, and barred gatherings to control the spread of infection, as no way through the deadly disease had yet been discovered. Families were separated for months, jobs were lost, and fear of sickness and death was palpable in societies globally.

Therefore, the gravity and import of the Buddha's teachings were squarely in front of all the participants during this seven-day virtual meditation retreat. Gathered together from around the world on Zoom, meditators, isolated in their own homes, turned their attention to Ajahn Viradhammo's words of insight, empathy, and wisdom.

The Contemplative's Companion is both a record and a guide of this virtual meditation retreat held during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, Ajahn Viradhammo and the organisers from the Ottawa Buddhist Society aimed to create a

* This introduction is from the Ottawa Buddhist Society in Canada.

new virtual retreat community with solitary practitioners living everywhere in pandemic isolation.

Participants in the retreat returned, day after day, to Ajahn Viradhammo's teachings 'broadcast' from his residence, the Tisarana Buddhist Monastery in Perth, Ontario, Canada. There was continuity in the teacher's mind about what was being taught. For example, the ideas and suggestions for practice from one talk built on those expressed in a previous session. Guidance was offered and a reflective process in noble silence was encouraged. Ajahn Viradhammo's invitation to spacious awareness permeated the retreat, and does so in this book too. In his guided meditations, Ajahn Viradhammo often uses single words to encourage the mind to tune into silence. We've kept those one-word themes, as they were spoken, to offer spacious opportunities for reflection.

The book's editors decided to hold onto Ajahn's comments such as, 'As I said yesterday'. They remind us of how rich the process of questioning and reflecting can be over time. Readers are also invited to check their understanding of words in the Glossary (p258).

In a formal retreat, there is a gathering of stillness that steadily deepens. To begin, a chanting and meditation format is set. The Triple Gem of Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha is honoured. Participants align their principles while requesting teaching from the Elder (senior monk). Everyone listens and turns inward, in silence. The Elder's own experience and guiding instructions inspire their efforts. Participants take up the instruction and move through the rhythm of multiple meditation periods. Eating, bathing, and sleeping are all open to awareness, as the silence deepens.

In the seclusion of a silent meditation retreat, specific instructions and experiences offered by a teacher are explored with spaciousness. They are sensed more clearly. Ajahn Viradhammo refers to this place for the testing out of the Buddha's teachings as 'our laboratory'.

He encourages us to learn to reflect for ourselves, to 'stand under' the instructions given, and to try comprehending the point of the teachings by contemplating them as best as possible throughout the day. This teaching style mirrors the Buddha's instructions to the Kālāmas in the town of Kesaputta (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:65, as translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi):

> Come, Kālāmas, do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think: 'The ascetic is our guru.' But when you know for yourselves: 'These things are wholesome; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if accepted and undertaken, lead to welfare and happiness,' then you should live in accordance with them.

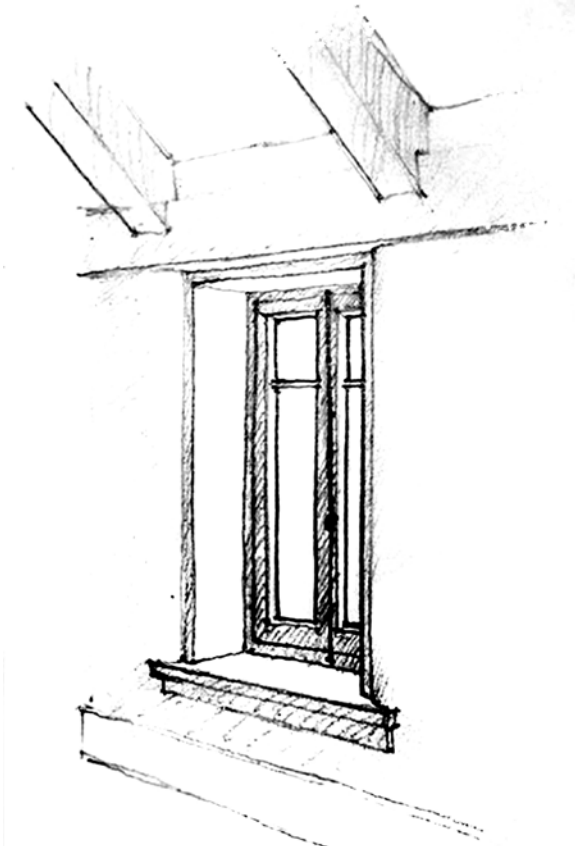
Another thing to keep in mind as you go through this book, or the audio recordings that are available as a playlist on Tisarana Buddhist Monastery's YouTube channel, is that the teachings offered by the Forest Sangha teachers, such as Ajahn Viradhammo, are spoken contemporaneously without notes. In that way, the talks are a response to the needs of the time and listeners. But, as you'll discover, the themes are universal because the very nature of Dhamma is *akāliko* (timeless).

Let us begin *The Contemplative's Companion* (or your retreat, if you're intending on doing one while reading this book) as was done at the retreat, and as would be done at any Theravada Buddhist gathering, by requesting a Dhamma talk from Ajahn Viradhammo with these traditional words of respect and devotion:

Brahmā ca lokādhipatī sahampati
Katañjalī anadhivaraṃ ayācatha
Santīdha sattāpparajakkha-jātikā
Desetu dhammaṃ anukampimaṃ pajaṃ

The Brahmā god Sahampati,
Lord of the world,
With palms joined in reverence, requested a favour:
'Beings are here with but little dust in their eyes,
Pray, teach the Dhamma out of compassion for them.'

RATANACAṄKAMANAKAṆḌA SUTTA, BUDDHAVAṁSA, KHUDDAKA NIKĀYA



SAMPLE RETREAT AGENDA

6 AM– 7 AM	Morning puja and meditation
7 AM– 8:30 AM	Breakfast and informal practice
8:30 AM – 11 AM	Meditation (Alternate between standing, walking, sitting, and lying down practice)
11 AM – 2 PM	Lunch and informal practice
2 PM – 3 PM	Meditation
3 PM – 5 PM	Meditation (Alternate between standing, walking, sitting, and lying down practice)
5 PM – 6 PM	Mindful movement: yoga/walk/exercise
6 PM – 7 PM	Nutritious snack, rest, informal practice
7 PM – 9 PM	Evening puja and meditation

A NOTE ON CHANTS

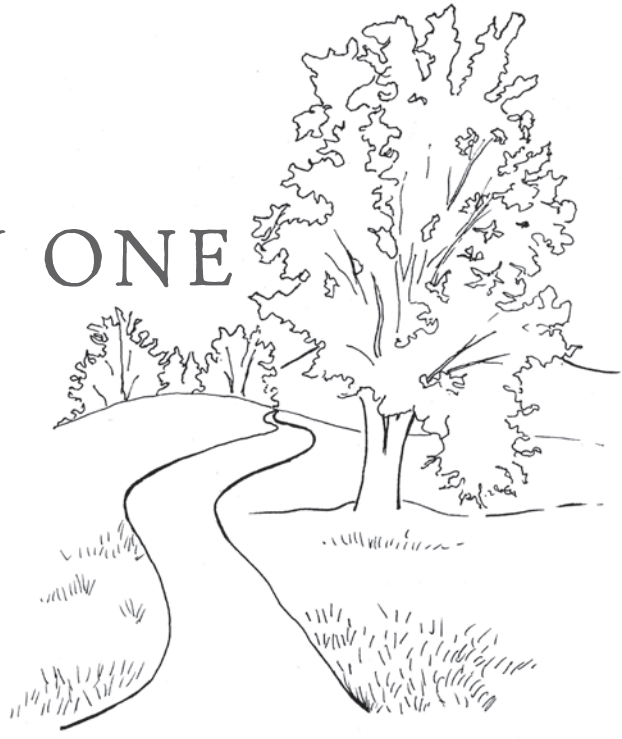
Chanting is a wholesome way to compose the mind for meditation. There's a tradition where practitioners use recitations to ground themselves and sharpen their focus. Typically, chants are recited before a formal session of meditation. You're free to recite your favourite set of chants.

During the 2020 retreat, participants recited the *Buddha Dhamma Saṅgha Gunā* (p116) chant three times before meditation. This chant is a reflection on the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha and is a way to pay respect to the Triple Gem. A devotional practice in many Theravada settings, it can often be heard near pilgrimage sites and shrines. It solemnly marks a reverential beginning to meditations and other spiritual endeavours in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Some monks chant it 108 times before their meditation each day, which takes about two-and-a-half hours.

At the end of the evening session, the participants chanted *The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness* (p193).

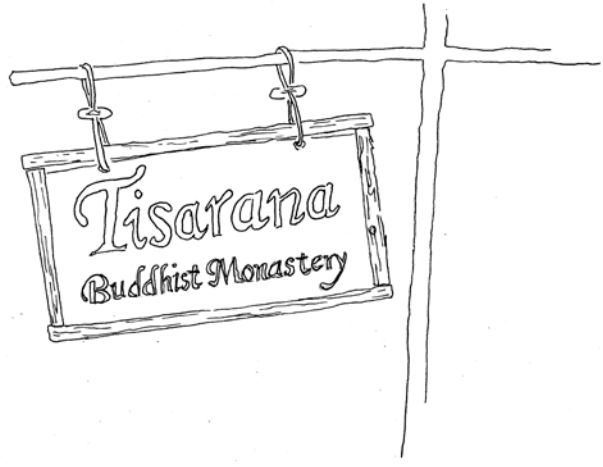
The chants in this book are from the *Chanting Book* published by Amaravati Publications. This book is the official chanting book for all monasteries in the Luang Por Chah lineage. You can download the two-volume PDF as well as listen to the audio versions at https://amaravati.org/teachings/chanting.

DAY ONE



A WHOLESOME START

In Theravada Buddhism, certain formalities have been ritualised. A meditation retreat traditionally begins with laypeople requesting the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from the teaching Elder. These seeming formalities are in fact important reminders to all participants of the shared truth and reciprocity in their spiritual path. It also reminds us that there is true happiness and peacefulness in leading ethical and virtuous lives.



THE THREE REFUGES

In Buddhism, the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha are collectively considered as the Triple Gem that protects and guides us on a wholesome path. It is a convention to take refuge in these pillars of faith before observing the precepts. So, we take refuge in the historical Gautama Buddha, his teachings (Dhamma), and his disciples (Sangha) who are leading wholesome, virtuous lives. But this is not a mere act of sentimentality. Reciting the chant together is a beautiful exercise in recollecting wholesome qualities and the teachings. Taking refuge in the Buddha can be seen as remembering the potential in all of us to awaken to how things are, just like the Buddha. Similarly, taking refuge in the Dhamma can be considered as a skilful reminder of the truth that awareness is apparent here and now and is timeless. Taking refuge in the Sangha indicates our commitment to lead virtuous, harmless lives.

Following the refuges, a layperson, on behalf of the group, requests the monastic to offer the precepts, a set of five or eight moral principles. These principles remind us, in a formal way, of the lifestyle and spiritual work we have taken on.

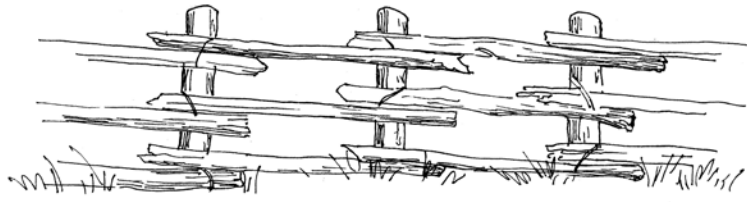
The five training principles, in brief, are to refrain from: harming living creatures, taking that which is not given or stealing, sensual indulgence, unkind or false speech, and intoxication that leads to heedlessness.

The traditional interpretation of the third precept – *Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi* – is, 'I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct.' I prefer to use the term, 'sensual indulgence,' to broaden the scope of this

precept, making it applicable to all aspects of the sensual world. Linguistically, *kāma* refers to any kind of pleasure, enjoyment, and desire. It is usually accompanied by an emotional longing. In Theravada cultures, *kāma* has, over time, become restricted to sexual desire.

I trained in Thailand and have many Sri Lankan and Asian friends who are deeply connected to Buddhist culture. They relate earnestly and beautifully to the ritual of taking precepts, especially when it is done in a communal setting. The moral principles are lovely to recite together. However, if you are from a Western secular background and unfamiliar with these practices, do not worry, as they are not necessary. There is an inherent beauty in rituals when they are offered with a sincere heart, rather than being a forceful recitation of a cultural artefact. While you do not need my permission to observe precepts, the heartfelt requesting and taking of them is a beautiful custom for moral beings to share. It gladdens the mind.

There is, in this group ritual, a recognition and a formal sense of determination that all of us who are participating in this retreat, are going to undertake to live in a way that is respectful of each other, kind to each other, and honest to each other, as well as live with a sense of restraint.



THE EIGHT PRECEPTS

Typically, when we attend a retreat or visit a monastery, we undertake the Eight Precepts. In that instance, the third precept focuses on celibacy instead of fidelity:

Abrahmacariyā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

I undertake the precept to refrain from any intentional sexual activity.

The sixth precept is about abstaining from eating at inappropriate times.

Vikālabhojanā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

I undertake the precept to refrain from eating at inappropriate times.

Both celibacy and limiting food consumption to certain periods of the day are not concerned with morality. These precepts stimulate awareness of renunciation and 'non-distraction'.

The idea behind the sixth precept is to refrain from using food to distract yourself from boredom or disinterest with the way things are. We train ourselves to use food as a nutriment to take care of the body rather than as a distraction. In that way, the sixth precept is designed to simplify our lives.

Calmness in restraint

Due to current health advisories, you are attending this retreat virtually from your own homes. You all must individually balance your responsibilities towards your family and participating in this retreat. It's easy to attend if you are on your own. However,

if you are living with other family members, remember they are important too. You don't want to 'weird them out' by only eating dark chocolate or cheese in the evenings. In that case, restraint would be to set boundaries. For instance, you can determine to follow a retreat schedule and eat only at specific times or within a certain period. When you're outside this suggested schedule, watch the desire to distract yourself with food. While it won't be morally wrong to eat after midday, the Eight Precepts are designed to help calm and settle the mind. You are training yourself to refrain from reacting to impulses of restlessness.

The same idea applies to entertainment, which is discussed in the seventh precept:

> Nacca-gīta-vādita-visūkadassanā
> mālā-gandha-vilepana-dhāraṇa-maṇḍana-vibhūsanaṭṭhānā
> veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
>
> *I undertake the precept to refrain from entertainment, beautification, and adornment.*

Today, you have access to a lot of media. Some of them are good, while some are unwholesome and horrible. During this retreat, try to not let the world of media stimulate your mind. Notice that whatever grabs your attention on those screens are compelling, but nonetheless distracting. Again, watching TV or YouTube is not a moral issue, but at some point, especially on a retreat, you want to look at the desire to distract yourself.

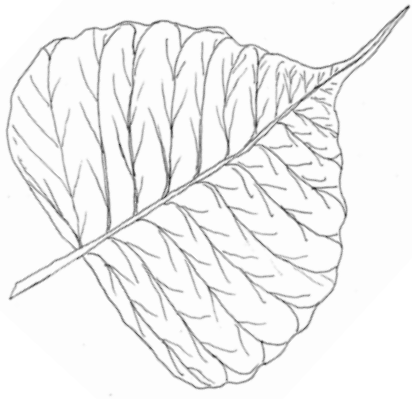
There's nothing right or wrong about distractions – but notice this type of energy that keeps you pulled into the world of experience. When you notice the desire to step outside the precept or boundary, you can be fully conscious of that pull of sense experience without trying to get rid of it. In a witnessing posture, you can see the distraction as a desire. Your mind will start to calm down as the noticing deepens.

Let me add a note of realism. You may not be in a position to avoid all forms of media during this virtual retreat. For example, if you are a doctor, you'll need to answer emails from patients. Just consider how you can reduce distractions on this retreat.

Sense experience is neither right nor wrong. When you're in nature, the tall trees, the clear skies, or the movement of squirrels can be calming and uplifting. These types of sense experiences neither agitate the mind nor leave a lot of residues.

Skilful engagement with sense experiences can lead to calm. Unskilful engagements can cause agitation. When I hear people talk about politics, their stress is apparent. Why discuss it? What is the point of the discussion? I guess you must be informed, but do you really need to be so politically informed?

A lot of toxic stuff can come into the mind from all kinds of sources, so protect it. Fill your mind with wholesome thoughts. For this seven-day retreat, adopt a monastic lifestyle in your home, if you can.



REQUESTING THE THREE REFUGES & THE FIVE/ EIGHT PRECEPTS

[After bowing three times, with hands joined in añjali, recite the below]

Mayaṃ Bhante tisaraṇena saha pañca/aṭṭha sīlāni yācāma
Dutiyampi mayaṃ Bhante tisaraṇena saha pañca/aṭṭha sīlāni yācāma
Tatiyampi mayaṃ Bhante tisaraṇena saha pañca/aṭṭha sīlāni yācāma

We/I, Venerable Sir,
request the Three Refuges and the Five/Eight Precepts.
For the second time,
We/I, Venerable Sir,
request the Three Refuges and the Five/Eight Precepts.
For the third time,
We/I, Venerable Sir,
request the Three Refuges and the Five/Eight Precepts.

TAKING THE THREE REFUGES

[Repeat, after the leader has chanted the first three lines]

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Homage to the Blessed, Noble, and Perfectly Enlightened One.
Homage to the Blessed, Noble, and Perfectly Enlightened One.
Homage to the Blessed, Noble, and Perfectly Enlightened One.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

To the Buddha I go for refuge.
To the Dhamma I go for refuge.
To the Saṅgha I go for refuge.

Dutiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

For the second time, to the Buddha I go for refuge.
For the second time, to the Dhamma I go for refuge.
For the second time, to the Saṅgha I go for refuge.

Tatiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

For the third time, to the Buddha I go for refuge.
For the third time, to the Dhamma I go for refuge.
For the third time, to the Saṅgha I go for refuge.

[LEADER]

Tisaraṇa-gamanaṃ niṭṭhitaṃ

This completes the going to the Three Refuges.

[RESPONSE]

Āma bhante

Yes, Venerable Sir.

TAKING THE FIVE PRECEPTS

[Repeat each precept after the leader]

1 Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
I undertake the precept to refrain from taking the life of any living creature.

2 Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given.

3 Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct.

4 Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
I undertake the precept to refrain from lying.

5 Surāmeraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
I undertake the precept to refrain from consuming intoxicating drink and drugs which lead to carelessness.

[LEADER]

Imāni pañca sikkhāpadāni
Sīlena sugatiṃ yanti
Sīlena bhogasampadā
Sīlena nibbutiṃ yanti
Tasmā sīlaṃ visodhaye

These are the Five Precepts;
virtue is the source of happiness,
virtue is the source of true wealth,
virtue is the source of peacefulness –
Therefore let virtue be purified.

[RESPONSE]

Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu

[Bow three times]

TAKING THE EIGHT PRECEPTS

[Repeat each precept after the leader]

1 Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
I undertake the precept to refrain from taking the life of any living creature.

2 Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given.

3 Abrahmacariyā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
I undertake the precept to refrain from any intentional sexual activity.

4 Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
I undertake the precept to refrain from lying.

5 Surāmeraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
I undertake the precept to refrain from consuming intoxicating drink and drugs which lead to carelessness.

6 Vikālabhojanā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
I undertake the precept to refrain from eating at inappropriate times.

7 Nacca-gīta-vādita-visūkadassanā mālā-gandha-vilepana dhāraṇa-maṇḍana-vibhūsanaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
I undertake the precept to refrain from entertainment, beautification, and adornment.

8 Uccāsayana-mahāsayanā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
I undertake the precept to refrain from lying on a high or luxurious sleeping place.

[LEADER]

Imāni aṭṭha sikkhāpadāni

[RESPONSE]

Imāni aṭṭha sikkhāpadāni
Imāni aṭṭha sikkhāpadāni
Imāni aṭṭha sikkhāpadāni

I undertake these Eight Precepts.
I undertake these Eight Precepts.
I undertake these Eight Precepts.

[LEADER]

Imāni aṭṭha sikkhāpadāni
Sīlena sugatiṃ yanti
Sīlena bhogasampadā
Sīlena nibbutiṃ yanti
Tasmā sīlaṃ visodhaye

These are the Eight Precepts;
virtue is the source of happiness,
virtue is the source of true wealth,
virtue is the source of peacefulness –
Therefore let virtue be purified.

[RESPONSE]

Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu

[Bow three times]

THE LANGUAGE OF REFLECTION

The Buddha's teaching is a reflective one. It is not a doctrine to blindly believe. While blind belief is fine, it isn't liberating. So, how can one reflect on the teachings?

Imagine two people arguing about the meaning of the word, '*dukkha*'. One person translates it as 'suffering' while the other understands *dukkha* as 'stress'. These terms are merely conditioned definitions.

Language is tricky. Sometimes spiritual or doctrinal language can result in people taking seemingly opposing positions. Take the above example, *dukkha* is 'suffering' to person A but means 'stress' to person B.

Arguing about historical or linguistic accuracy can be a red herring. It can take us away from contemplating and understanding the *dukkha* in our lives.

When teachers offer words for reflection, listeners may know the word and even its meaning, but they sometimes stop there. You can better understand the word's value by pausing and reflecting inwardly.

Here's an example of how we tend to use language. Just before this meeting Venerable Amarasiri (a resident monk at Tisarana) and I were thinking about the word, 'virtual'. It seems virtual comes from the term, 'virtue'. Isn't that strange? Then we tried to find the connection between virtual and virtue. We did find a definition for virtue and the connection

between the two terms. The whole exercise was very clever, but it wasn't really Dhamma because it was not reflective.

Listening with the heart

The reflective capacity we are developing takes the words of the teacher and consciously brings them into our personal experiences. My words may have a different connotation to you. For instance, I may use the word, 'virtue,' to describe morality, but to you, 'virtue,' may mean something else. Hence the finer points of tone and spirit of the language are worth noting for reflection. Contemplate: 'What are they talking about, really?' Focus on the tone, the spirit of the talk and, of course, the meaning of the word(s).

Luang Por Chah would describe this process as listening with your heart. Don't listen with your head. When listening to Dhamma, the head sometimes goes into a critical, judging, or analytical state. Whereas when listening with the heart, you are open and freely allowing the ideas to come in. It is a receptive experience. With a receptive heart you can contemplate: 'Where does that idea fit into my understanding of my spiritual practice?'

Attunement

I was listening to a podcast this morning on the rebooting of the education system in South Carolina, USA, during this pandemic. The podcast host highlighted that everyone – teachers, government agencies, children, and parents – were finding it difficult to go back to school after a long closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It's indeed a complex problem. When the host had to take a break, he said, 'Stay tuned, I'll be back after the break.'

The phrase, 'stay tuned,' caught my attention. That is a good way to look at meditation.

Meditation can be like *tuning into something* or *staying attuned to something*. I find this language more helpful than terms suggesting concentration on an object.

Tuned into what, though? I would suggest something wholesome and good that brings happiness and pleasure into the heart. So, tuning in and staying that way for long periods of time would be *sammā samādhi* (sustained attention on suffering and its end).

In my own practice, I typically tune in with a word. I have a lexicon of reflective words that help me attune to that which is wholesome in the heart.

For instance, I've been tuning into 'affection'. It is a beautiful word and rich in meaning – not intellectually, but in sensitivity.

One of the ways I attune to affection is by looking at the photos and statues in my room. I have pictures of Luang Por Sumedho, Luang Por Chah, my first teacher, Luang Por Liem, pictures of the Sangha, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Jean Klein and many others. They're all very meaningful to me. When I look at a photo of someone dear to me – be it my mom or teacher – feelings of gratitude and affection arise in the heart. In that moment, I'm not thinking. Instead, I'm tuning into the wholesome feelings in the heart.

I can sustain these wholesome qualities of affection and gratitude both by looking at the photos and abiding with the heartfelt qualities they evoke. When I'm bored, I'll look at Sri Ramana's or Luang Por Chah's photos or light a candle for my mom. This exercise always helps me tune into affection, which is a wholesome feeling.

Tuning into affection

Affection is different from sentimentality, which can become exaggerated and nostalgic. When I'm gazing at a photo of Luang Por Sumedho, I'm neither wishing he was here nor missing his physical presence. Affection is not a thought. It is rather felt in the body. It

is a wholesome form of energy or vibration. We could describe this as a note to tune into.

I tune into that note a lot during meditations as well as when observing nature. There is a lot of beauty around me, which can evoke that same sense of wholesome affection. Unpleasant feelings or emotions, such as fear, aversion, or self-disparagement, are also strongly noticed as they arise within this familiar energy field of wholesome affection. At that moment, if I can return to tuning into affection, then the aversive thought or negativity, by contrast, is known and loses its power.

As the practice deepens over time, you will appreciate abiding in the still, loving, caring note of affection. Also, this contrast between negative and wholesome feelings will become sharper. You will be able to give negative thoughts and feelings space to fully manifest as well as attend to them without any distractions.

We can offer something in return

Most of us are guided by and can suffer from a high sense of idealism, as we're all good people, and want peace and happiness. We wouldn't be participating in a retreat if that wasn't the case. Having said that, as soon as negativities come into consciousness, we quickly judge them as not being 'ideal' and try to get rid of them. We get caught up in a tussle with them. This is unhelpful.

Therefore, tuning into affection is essentially *mettā bhāvanā* (cultivating loving-kindness). These days, *mettā bhāvanā* is seen as a meditation technique where loving-kindness is extended either in four directions to all sentient beings or to different types of people. There is a sense of a self 'doing' *mettā* instead of abiding in it.

I'm trying to use a different word for *mettā* in the hope that it might prompt a more reflective response in you. So, consider affection. How does it manifest in your lives? Is it dependent on external

factors? For instance, is your life only affectionate when you're struck by some image or person who is kind or brings that out in you? Can you bring affection back into the world? I would say this is what meditation is trying to do for us. It is bringing wholesomeness and goodness into our lives – not only for ourselves, but also to give back to the world.

Sometimes, our actions are like ocean waves that roll into the shore and pull back sand when receding. Is that all we are? Are we just reactive?

When things are wholesome and beautiful, we are affectionate. When they are not, we can become grumpy. Fortunately, there is another way to live. We don't have to be victims to the wave that is coming in. We can offer something wholesome in return.

Meditation brings goodness into our lives and hearts. Practice enhances and strengthens goodness. Our outward response to the world can then come from that wholesome place.

There is joy in being able to respond to negativity with the attitude of: 'No, I'm not going to take up that tune. I don't want to play that tune right now. Thank you.'

This is not a rejection, aversion, or a desire to get rid of negativities. It is more like: 'Well, that's a different tune. I'm choosing to go back and pick up the wholesome tune of affection.'

So, what note can you attune to that would take you to wholesomeness? You might call it 'calm,' 'composure,' 'collectedness,' or something else. Use language that is meaningful to you. This contemplative approach to meditation is different from trying to get something. You're in trouble if you are trying to get some object or have an objective experience during meditation because you're not in tune with the way things are.

Being in tune with the way things are is the capacity to awaken to this moment in all its complexities, whether good, bad, or

indifferent. That is the basic work of the human choir as well as an individual singer. You come into and know the moment. As we say, '*Awaken to the way things are*.'

The instruction to *awaken to the way things are* is not facile or easy. It's profound. The language is very elegant. As Luang Por Sumedho says, 'It's like *this*.' This is an incredibly elegant statement. If you reflect in this way, then you are in tune with the way things are. This is the first and primary consideration of any contemplative life – be it meditative or a life of service.

In your meditations, how do you remember this moment? How does it work for you? Do you use language or imagery, or do you just do it?

From that awakening to the moment, you can begin to know the tune, vibration, and energy that is moving through you. This energy is different from the narrative you're caught in. The storyline or the past and future kind of self that we always get involved in is not very skilled. For example, if I'm angry or irritated, or trying to achieve an ideal state of 'non-aversion' in my practice, then I'm preoccupied, unavailable, and not in tune with what is going on now.

Awakening to the way things are is quite difficult. It's very different from the habitual pull of self-narrative, which is simply the thinking of 'me' and 'mine' projected onto the way things are. Being with the way things are is deeper because it is pre-thought. It helps to 'stand under' the present moment. It is not coloured by views and perceptions. Take anger, for instance. There's an important difference between feeling anger and having angry thoughts about someone else.

Luang Por Chah would advise, '*Sop arom,*' which means, 'Know the mood of the mind.' Is it aversion, fear, or some other feeling? Now, knowing the moods of the mind is not a judgement, rather an observation that they can persist as feelings. I'm not saying you shouldn't feel aversion or fear. There will be times

when a negative thought or mood persists because persistence is one of its characteristics.

Emotional signs of liberation

Teachers are going to be stressing on the awakened mind until you die. You must be curious forever. It's amazing how easily we can forget the awakened mind. We know it, and yet, we tend to forget ourselves in thoughts about the past and future.

I suggest you use your meditation as a platform to tune into presence. You can then refine that tuning by cultivating a sense of composure and collectedness. How would you do that? Would blindly concentrating on something work?

We are heart beings. Our human condition brings with it emotions that are very important in a positive sense. The Buddha often spoke of abiding with the heart, which he called the *brahmavihāras* (loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and peace). We have a capacity for compassion, caring, and peace. These are the emotional signs of liberation as well as of a successful and fruitful contemplative life. I find the combination of awakening to the way things are and abiding with the heart very good. We can know what the heart is experiencing.

Mettā: How do you understand it?

What word would you choose to describe *mettā bhāvanā*? What about affection? How would that word become an important part of your meditative life?

Ask yourself, 'How could I sustain affection? How might that work for me?' Then take that into whatever object of meditation you use. Obviously, I'll teach certain objects of meditation. But more than technique, what attitude are you bringing to your meditation? Is it striving? Is it one of falling asleep? Does it have affection in it? Is affection unimportant?

Affection is pleasurable. When you're going to meditate for seven days like we're doing in this retreat, it would be helpful if it was pleasant. Now, eating a tub of ice cream could be pleasurable, but would it be a welcome experience if you ate it for seven days?

The pleasure I'm talking about is different because *mettā* allows things to be as they are, which is beautiful. This way, we allow beauty and pleasure to abide in the heart. Sometimes we assume that we're supposed to just grind it out to enlightenment. However, an enlightened heart is a happy one. Remember all the great teachers you've met. Do they look miserable? They are usually jolly people because *mettā bhāvanā* is the foundation of their practice.

The Buddha's teaching talks about suffering and the end of suffering. It is important to remember that the teaching talks about the *end* of suffering, not just *dukkha*. Remember that there is an end to suffering. When we abide in the *brahmavihāras* – the wholesome states of the heart and consciousness that are based on affection, goodwill, and goodness – then we have pleasure in the heart. A happy heart has the energy to investigate and contemplate for long periods of time. So, what is pleasurable in your meditation? Of course, the body sometimes is not pleasurable. It hurts. Is there something pleasant in your attitude? Or is it one of just striving? How would you cultivate an affectionate attitude? Try looking at the photo of a loved one and reflect on the feeling that arose. Did that feel nice? Was it a great feeling? Then challenge yourself by sustaining that pleasantness for, maybe, a breath. The experiment would be to combine an attitude of goodness and wholesomeness with an affectionate regard for one in-breath and an affectionate regard for one out-breath – which isn't sentimental. It's hard to do. But if you could do that for a few breaths, you're collecting and composing the mind, while your heart stays open. You won't be controlling the mind in a wilful way. Try this experiment and see how it unfolds.

MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH OBJECTS

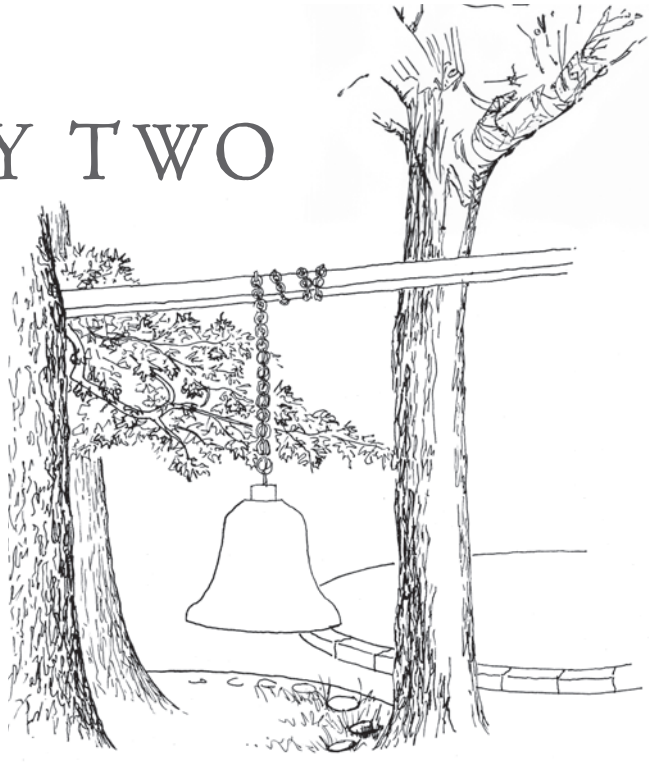
Awakening, listen to the sounds around you so that you're in tune with what's going on now. The type or quality of sound doesn't matter. Just be in tune with it. You're here with it. You know that you know. Just savour the silence of knowing.

Then feel your body. Bring into consciousness the bodily sensations you're experiencing. Consider the body that's sitting here with affection and kindness – and stay with the silence of knowing.

You could now localise your attention. Go to the centre of your chest. Feel the rise and fall of the chest with the breath. Abide with a sense of care for this experience.

Then, introduce a picture of someone dear to you. Name or visualise the person for whom affection and gratitude arises (e.g. your teacher). On the in-breath, let that image come into your heart. A sense of affection will naturally arise. Now, just be with the breath with an affectionate attitude.

DAY TWO



MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH SOUND

We'll sit, lie, walk, or stand for about 45 minutes. Get yourself into a good posture.

Last night, I was talking about tuning into the present moment. I like to use sound. So, listen to sound. Tune into it. Oddly enough, you also tune into silence because, in the sound, there is also the silence of knowing. Savour or appreciate the silence of knowing by just listening to sound.

Then try to evoke the feelings of kindness or affection. One way to do that is to bring attention to the centre of your chest. Feel the breath rising and falling at the chest. Keep savouring the silence of knowing.

On the in-breath, think of someone dear to you. Name them on the in-breath. On the out-breath, wish them, 'May you be well.' Let their image and name trigger affection in you. Tune into that sensibility and empower it by saying, 'May you be well.'

When that attunement with affection or kindness becomes strong and steady, let it be the tone of your awareness.

Continue to be aware of the breath with that attitude of kindness until the end of the session.

It's interesting to practise for an hour, two hours, or longer than that. It's not a matter of wilfully sitting for long periods of time. Young monks do that; they try to clock in as many hours of formal practice as possible. It's not a matter of clocking in the hours.

Luang Por Chah would say, 'Water buffalos can stay still for eight hours.'

What is important is the quality of curiosity, of investigating what's happening during long periods of non-distraction. So, see if you can bring that quality of curiosity into your meditation.

RECEPTIVE KNOWING

On the ridge of a mountain, you naturally have a visceral sense of space. That experience will help you tune into a feeling of spaciousness. A centre like Galilee, which is dedicated to holding retreats and designed to encourage contemplation, is also helpful for tuning into that sense of space. If you are in New Delhi, New York, Toronto, or another busy city, you might not have the ideal conditions to tune into spaciousness. What do you do then? What do you do the rest of the time, when you are not in retreat, which is much longer really? Is there a way to tune into this feeling of spaciousness without a supportive physical environment?

We are where we are. Our theme or the project is 'knowing' and developing acceptance in the midst of where we are and tuning into something wholesome and good.

Meditation is difficult. Although we call this a virtual retreat, our experience is very real. It is in real time, with a real body, mind, and conditions. One of the problems the Buddha points out, which I think is important, is resistance or *vibhava-taṇhā* in Pali. It is a kind of craving. This desire to not have, to get rid of, to repress, to deny, or to disassociate is a direct cause of suffering. It is the 'not wanting' part of our minds. It is different from hatred and aversion. It is deeper than that.

This sense of resistance is often strong in good-hearted people because of our pursuit of ideals. We want to live a good life without harming others. When seemingly harmful impulses or negative, 'not-ideal' thoughts arise, we quite often resist realising them.

Instead, we feel discomfort and indulge in self-disparagement, self-criticism, or self-judgement. The whole situation becomes complex.

Spacious, awake

Last night, I was suggesting the word, 'affection,' which I really like. In some way, we are all trying to tune into goodness, spaciousness, and this sense of affection or *mettā bhāvanā*. If we can tune into affection even when we're not meditating – as a way of considering and being with life – then we can approach the negativities that arise in consciousness with the same sense of openness and affection, rather than resistance.

There is nothing wrong with aversion or negative thoughts. This is what the mind does. The habit is conditioned. At the same time, there can be resistance to having the aversion, a fear of aversion could overtake you, or you simply do not want those habitual aversive thoughts. It is skilful to understand that the arising of aversion in the mind is not wrong. It is just an old habit that is coming into consciousness. Use awareness to cultivate a larger perspective on it. Contemplate a sense of spaciousness and openness. Use Luang Por Sumedho's insights of, 'it all belongs,' and 'it's like this.' This awareness practice allows thought to be as it is – without making it into a problem. Thoughts arise and cease, as is their nature.

There will be a sense of unease and resistance if you don't cultivate a way of tuning into spaciousness. You'll experience an internal struggle between the desire to either be that which is deemed to be good or ideal and wanting to get rid of the bad or that which you don't want. This is not optimal. Buddhist meditation helps develop trust in awareness. That'll help you to tune into old, conditioned habits of resistance and break free by accepting them.

Not your nature

On a moral level, we restrain ourselves from harming others and ourselves. There can be restraint in body and speech. In terms of habit, the mind can produce negative thoughts, but it's not wrong. It is not really your essential nature; it is just the way the mind has been conditioned.

It is not wrong for a tree to get knocked down by lightning, as nature operates in that way. What is of value is the awareness, or witnessing, of this movement that takes you to something beyond the natural phenomena.

Noticing natural phenomena can bring a sense of relaxation and ease into your mind. For instance, it is deemed helpful for monks to live communally as a sangha at the edge of a village or in the forest, rather than in the middle of the town. While this practice is encouraged, it's not liberating. The helpful setting is not liberating if it is not 'seen'. The clear blue sky is spacious, uplifting, and beautiful to me. It creates in me a wholesome effect. If I'm attached to the beauty, then I will suffer when staying in a different environment. On the other hand, if I understand that the beauty and wonder of nature are things I can appreciate and know for what they truly are, then I am able to go to that knowing rather than the object. In this way, the object is bringing me to a sense of realisation that there is, in consciousness, this deep sensibility and silent knowing, which I can always access. Knowing does not depend on the blue sky because knowing is about my mind. It is about consciousness.

In meditation, tune into the sense of space, silence, *mettā*, affection, or goodness. Then try to make that attunement to goodness and spaciousness stronger.

It is a noticing and a sustaining of something wholesome and good rather than a forceful conquering of things or a wilful becoming.

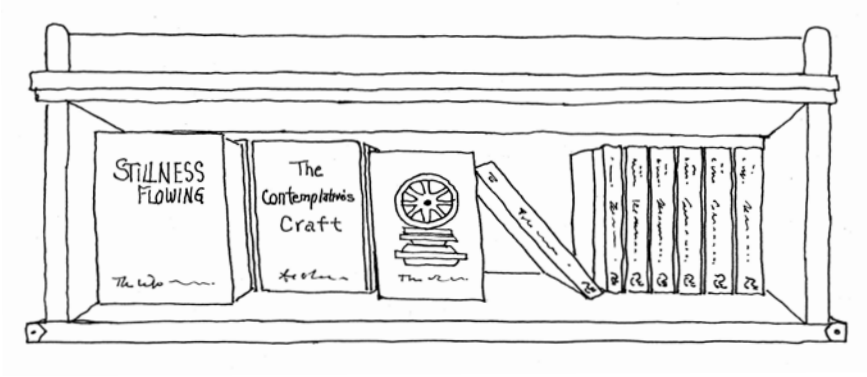
This is not an intellectual process. Rather, it is about waiting, tuning in, and bringing sensitivity to silence.

On this retreat, I suggest you do not try to figure out anything. Give yourself a break. Forget about it. See that in the trusting of awareness, and in the patience and receptivity of awareness, truth is revealed.

When I say truth is revealed, you may think, 'Oh, I'm going to get some revelation. My head's going to burst open.' Now, that is another Dhamma talk. Whatever language you use, you run into this problem of becoming, creating a future state (*bhava-taṇhā*) and getting rid of (*vibhava-taṇhā*).

The awake or aware mind is not becoming anything or trying to get rid of anything.

I am hoping to persuade all of us, including myself, to come to that important middle ground where the movement is not who we are. Rather, we are the silent knowing of that movement; the compassionate knowing, allowing that movement.



MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH EXPERIENCES

When meditating, how do you remind yourself about the way things are? I use sound. By just listening to sound, presence becomes obvious, so go ahead and listen to sound.

Notice that within the sound, there is also the silence of knowing, so tune into that.

You are not trying to become anything, and you are not resisting anything. Tune into that way of being. Also, you are not consuming anything. You are not absorbed into thought or experience per se. You know experience.

This is the awake mind; the state of non-becoming and non-resistance.

You could either spend the rest of this meditation in that simple mode of listening, or you could localise your attention. Pick something that is a bit more concrete. For example, you can localise your attention on the breath. But notice the knowing is still silent.

Your engagement with the object of meditation is not intended to attain anything, but to simply know the feeling of breathing.

If you are feeling sleepy or dull, you can sharpen the focus by breathing deeply and more energetically.

It is fruitful to start meditating with an attitude of kindness. So, bring attention to the centre of your chest. Feel the rise and fall of your breath. Then imagine and name someone dear to you on the in-breath. On the out-breath, wish them, 'May you be well.'

Now the awareness is in tune with kindness. Remember, you are not trying to become a kind person – because you already have that as a possibility.

You can refresh that kind attitude by wishing other people well until that note is clear in consciousness. Then you can let go of the names and people. Just be with the breath with an affectionate sensitivity and a kind regard. You can sustain that note for long periods with the breath. Breathing becomes a way of collecting and composing the mind: One in-breath, one out-breath, collecting and composing, and so on.

Stay with this attitude of kind regard or *mettā* for the rest of the meditation.

AN EVEN INTERCHANGE

When I initially used to teach *mettā bhāvanā,* it was with the usual lists you find in the texts. You move through a list of living beings – first, the ones you love, then those who evoke neutral feelings, and, finally, the people you might be averse to. In 1999, I was teaching a retreat in Auckland, New Zealand. At that time Belgrade, Serbia, was being bombed in the horrible Kosovo War. One day, I introduced *mettā bhāvanā*. Two of the practitioners were compassionate, loving, and caring women. I asked one of them, 'How's the sharing of *mettā* going?'

She responded, 'I can't do it. I can't cover everyone.' She had a big family with lots of children and aunties. She was trying to cover everyone. Her understanding was that she had to give equal *mettā* to all of them, and she could not fit them all into the 45-minute sitting. The other woman was imagining the people who were suffering due to the war and was trying to send *mettā* to heal them. She was crying. While these were kind thoughts, they were not the practice's intention.

Sometimes, *mettā bhāvanā* gets conflated with prayer. Sending *mettā* to whoever you want to is fine. It is a nice way of thinking. I'm not rejecting the idea of sending *mettā*. Rather, I am suggesting that once we are in tune with the open heart – filled with affection and appreciation – we abide with that attunement. When we go out of tune or are on a different note (e.g. self-disparagement, harsh judgements, or fearful prospects), we can more easily return to open-heartedness – or try to remember that attunement. This isn't prayer.

Certainly, beings have radiance. I remember a lay friend once telling me how, when she walked near Luang Por Chah, she could feel his *mettā* and love as a vibration. I am not dismissing the energetic possibility of human radiance or the idea that I am someone praying for someone else. To me, *mettā bhāvanā* is about cultivating a way of presence, an even interchange. It is not conflicted by separation or alienation, which is a result of the feelings of aversion, fear, and greed. *Mettā* is fuelled by affection, appreciation, and compassion. It is the way to go beyond boundaries of an ego and self, and all of that from which we suffer. It is not a sending out, but more a remembering of something that is not foreign to us. We all know affection. We just have to look at a picture of someone dear to us to know it.

Now, how can we return to that in meditation? We can do it quite deliberately like an exercise, as described in the previous meditation (p49). That creates a kind of vibration or knowing in consciousness. When we encounter complexities, we can pick up on the different 'note,' be it fear, criticism, or another negative feeling.

It's helpful to remember that those notes are neither right nor wrong. We go to thought a lot. Affectionate awareness helps us bypass inner arguments and come to a wholesome place by knowing the mind is the mind. This is called *citta sampajañña or cittānupassanā*, the third foundation of mindfulness. You know the mind is the mind. You also understand that you can learn what is skilful and unskilful by training and cultivating the mind. We can train to be present in complexity and to remember to return to an even interchange. In this way it becomes a constant presence in our lives. We can touch that 'knowing'.

What happens then? The tendency to move away from negativity and resistance will reduce. The openness of the heart is very effective. Again, this is not sentimental. It is hard work. It is very subtle and

interesting. It is not a wilful attempt to become enlightened, which is a disaster; take it from me. An open heart is interesting, kind, beautiful, and pleasant. How else are we going to sustain this work of inner understanding?

There is a lot of 'warrior' attitude in Buddhist circles; you're fighting pain, defilements, or Māra (the lord of death; symbol for any root or cause for a defilement or deluded mind-state). This language is quite masculine. I tried that in the early days because I was wilful, but it did not make me happy. It ruined my knees, among other things. You can be determined, but it does not have to be harsh or self-disparaging. It can be a type of careful diligence in kindness and sensitivity.

THE HINDRANCE OF TORPOR

If we had been at the Galilee Centre now, we would have had lunch, coffee, perhaps a snooze or a walk, and then sat for meditation. About half of the meditators would fall asleep. There is a real challenge to post-meal meditation. It can be soporific. One of the challenges to meditation is dullness. The best antidote is probably a change of posture. At the monastery, if dullness arises during meditation, a monk can step outside and do walking meditation. Obviously, if you are really exhausted, sleep.

As a hindrance, dullness can become insidious and a habit. If dullness is coming into consciousness, there isn't enough body awareness, and your attention is preoccupied with thought. It is a particular kind of 'oatmeal thought' – very thick and dulling. The body responds with little or no vitality. The whole posture collapses and you're nodding off.

One needs to establish enough *samādhi* or presence to get into the 'game' of knowing what your body is doing. We can do this by establishing a strong sense of the neck and spine, getting in touch with the body, and bringing attention quite deliberately down to the *hara* (the soft belly area). Awareness of posture brings you into breathing from the *hara* rather than being in your head. After establishing the posture, inquire: 'Where is the nodding taking place? How does that arise in consciousness?' If you can see the arising of dullness, then you tend not to get reborn or lost in it.

Pain is easier to deal with because it keeps you awake. Dullness just takes you to another universe, away from the present moment. If

dullness is constant, inquire into it, and do not try to get rid of it. Ask yourself: 'Why can't I be aware of the *hara*? Why can't I be aware of the chest? Why can't I be aware of the whole spine so much so that I'm not even aware I'm nodding off?'

During one retreat, I suggested meditators video themselves to see what's going on, as everyone has a camera now. It's an interesting exercise. If you are restless and shifting all the time, then you'll notice: 'Wow! Look at that! I'm shifting every five minutes.' Shifting postures during meditation is neither illegal nor a moral issue but it is *uddhacca* (restlessness or excitement). You may also notice that you're nodding off during meditation.

Stillness of the body is an interesting object of awareness, whether you do lying or sitting meditation. The body isn't held rigidly with an attitude of wilfulness. There's simply a deep sense of stillness in the body. Now, how do you do that? That becomes a way of inquiring into the posture and the energy that is being produced.

Inject optimism into meditation

I spoke earlier of approaching meditation with an attitude of affection or kindness. In the *Visuddhimagga,* a fifth century encyclopaedical commentary on Theravada Buddhism by Venerable Buddhaghosa, classical meditation is talked about in an interesting manner. The first step in the meditation process is to pay homage to the Buddha. In a *bhakti* (devotion) culture, you bow three times to the Buddha image or stupa with a sense of veneration. This act brings up a lot of optimism in me because the Buddhist teaching doesn't just talk about suffering. It also points to the end of suffering.

The Buddha's realisation is profoundly optimistic. We human beings have the possibility to end suffering. Now you can see how paying homage to the Buddha could introduce into your meditation a sense of optimism. We Westerners don't have a *bhakti* culture. Malaysians, Sri Lankans, and people from countries where

Buddhist culture is mainstream have that reverence. We tend to be more secular and cynical. So, how would you cultivate *bhakti*? Is there value in that for you? Obviously, I have been a monk for a long time, so it is easy for me to bow to a Buddha *rūpa* (form) and bring up a sense of gratitude for the Buddha's enlightenment. I also extend this sense of reverence and gratitude to my teachers.

In the book of his teachings, *No Worries*, Luang Por Liem, the abbot of Wat Nong Pah Pong, the monastery founded by Luang Por Chah in Thailand, said he would set up his meditation cushion facing his teacher (Luang Por Chah), wear his triple robes – the full monastic attire – and bow to Luang Por Chah three times before beginning his practice. I remember Luang Por Liem's kuti was nearly 200 metres away from Luang Por Chah's with a fair amount of forest in between.

There was a formality in Luang Por Liem's approach to meditation. I suppose he was bringing forth this beautiful quality, however you want to describe it, of the heart.

Then, as it says in the *Visuddhimagga,* the practitioner does *mettā bhāvanā*, which brings up the heartfelt qualities of gratitude and kindness. This preparation creates a wholesome way of observing your object of meditation because it is suffused with warmth, optimism, and beauty. The book recommends us to then pick up the object of meditation. That's why I was suggesting that you first go to the heart centre and allow kindness, appreciation, or affection to become conscious. Get that going first. Then pick up the object of meditation with that kind, affectionate attitude. This way, there is a sense of pleasure and beauty, and it's easier to meditate. You may still fall asleep. What do you do then? What would Luang Por Liem do? Well, for one thing, change the posture and recognise dullness as a hindrance. Just know that it's difficult to stay in the 'game'. Do standing or walking meditation if you're feeling dull.

Stop meditating

We can do many things to address sleepiness. I would say, the secret is around the spine. If you are sleepy, you must basically make a determination to stop meditating because it is not working. You have to look around and stop doing what you're doing. Again, just know what's going on in a very mundane way. Try to keep your eyes open, set up a posture and then make your meditation an investigation into what happens when sleepiness arises. Where does the attention go? What kind of thoughts are arising? What's happening in the spine? Sustain this inquiry until you know sleepiness.

You can also try to lift your spine. I developed a method of putting a lot of energy into the small of the spine, pushing my *hara* forward and imagining my head being pulled upward to the ceiling. That gave a good yogic stretch to the spine and brought a good flow of energy. I combined that with deep breathing. Then I settled into the meditation posture. This way, I had a platform from where I could see how I lost balance and fell into dullness.

When there was a relapse, I would tell myself, 'Okay! Get the posture established. Open the eyes. Stop meditating. Do something very coarse and obvious.' I would breathe very deeply, then go back and set up the posture until I figured out how dullness worked in my meditation. It probably took me a year to figure that out. From then on, I was much more aware of the arising of dullness in the body. I also had an antidote to the problem.

You can't just wilfully get rid of these hindrances. You have to understand how they work. It is not a matter of getting rid of sleepiness. Aversion to dullness doesn't work. You will fall asleep if you try to get rid of it. It is like taking an interest in something boring. Life is often boring, isn't it?

HOMAGE TO THE BUDDHA

[Handa mayaṃ buddhābhitthutiṃ karomase]

[Now let us chant in praise of the Buddha.]

Yo so tathāgato arahaṃ sammāsambuddho

The Tathāgata is the Pure One, the Perfectly Enlightened One.

Vijjācaraṇa-sampanno

He is impeccable in conduct and understanding,

Sugato

The Accomplished One,

Lokavidū

The Knower of the Worlds.

Anuttaro purisadamma-sārathi

He trains perfectly those who wish to be trained.

Satthā deva-manussānaṃ

He is Teacher of gods and humans.

Buddho bhagavā

He is awake and holy.

Yo imaṃ lokaṃ sadevakaṃ samārakaṃ sabrahmakaṃ
In this world with its gods, demons, and kind spirits,

Sassamaṇa-brāhmaṇiṃ pajaṃ sadeva-manussaṃ sayaṃ abhiññā sacchikatvā pavedesi

Its seekers and sages, celestial and human beings, he has by deep insight revealed the Truth.

Yo dhammaṃ desesi ādi-kalyāṇaṃ majjhe-kalyāṇaṃ pariyosāna-kalyāṇaṃ

He has pointed out the Dhamma: beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, beautiful in the end.

Sātthaṃ sabyañjanaṃ kevala-paripuṇṇaṃ parisuddhaṃ brahma-cariyaṃ pakāsesi

He has explained the Spiritual Life of complete purity in its essence and conventions.

Tam-ahaṃ bhagavantaṃ abhipūjayāmi tam-ahaṃ bhagavantaṃ sirasā namāmi

I chant my praise to the Blessed One, I bow my head to the Blessed One.

[bow]

MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH THE BODY

How do you feel now? It is very warm in this south-facing room. I'll use that as my beginning: 'This is the way warmth feels. The body feels hot.'

You are awakening. In that awakening, you will also notice the silence of knowing how you feel.

Listen to sound, and then the body. How does the body feel? How does breathing feel?

Now, let's bring up a sense of kindness. Go to the centre of the chest. Breathing in, wish yourself, 'May I be well.' Breathing out, wish, 'May all beings be well.'

Let's do something more extreme by expanding the breath. So, breathe more deeply. Take a long breath in and a long breath out. Try to make the in and out breaths an even length. Take a nice, long breath in. Make the out-breath smooth. Notice that when the mind's a bit lazy you don't want to do that. You do not want to sustain that. You want to come to a normal breath. Again, take a long breath in and a long breath out.

Now let's stretch the spine. Take a long breath in. On the out-breath, stretch the upper half of the spine up through the head to the ceiling. Take a long breath in and stretch up on the out-breath. This opens your chest. The back of your neck is also straightening. It is quite extreme, but not in a hurtful way. Try to

sustain that tall posture on the in-breath. Again, long breath in and stretch up on the out-breath. Basically, you are just feeling the upper spine rise to the ceiling. The chest is very open.

Stay with the long breath. Then do the same thing with the lower spine, so you can feel the intercostals moving and the bottom pushing into the cushion. Take a long breath in. Push and stretch down like the roots of a tree on the out-breath. Now both ways, stretch up while taking a long breath in and push down on the out-breath.

Let go of that and breathe normally.

Now, you have a sense of a straight, tall spine. If you are prone to dullness, then inquire: 'How does the spine collapse? What happens then? What kinds of thoughts are there? What happens to the chin, arms, hands, and small of the back?' So now the brightness of the mind is inquiring, and the calmness comes from noticing the end of the out-breath.

Breathe in and out. Don't rush the in-breath. Stay with the end of the out-breath.

Dullness quite often manifests at the last part of the out-breath. To address that, you can try noticing both the spine and the end of the out-breath.

If the energy level is fine, then contemplate composure and collectedness at the end of the out-breath.

Let the in-breath come by itself. You are collecting, composing, staying present, and being the knowing.

Okay, there are lots of ideas to use. See what works for you.

METHODOLOGY OF RENUNCIATION

It seems to me that the open heart responds to life appropriately. It is not about gratitude, affection, or appreciation. It is just open. If there's beauty, there's appreciation. If there's pain, there's compassion. There is no desire because the open heart is fulfilled. It is peaceful and connected to the way things are. It is not alienated by fear or aversion. The open heart is also imbued with goodwill. This state is described as the four *brahmavihāras*.

Of course, the intellect wants to chop it up: What is gratitude? Is it the same as affection? So on and so forth. I would say they all function as one piece. For me, the attitudes of goodwill, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity are the attitudes of freedom. So, moving towards them, remembering them, cultivating them, or abiding in them – whatever language you want to use – seems important to me. They are connecting us to goodness that's already present.

Earlier, I explained how I use pictures to cultivate open-heartedness. Looking at the pictures of my mom, Luang Por Chah, or the Sangha reminds me of the open heart. I just keep looking at the pictures and remembering the open heart. Over time, open-heartedness becomes normal – a way of life. When the heart closes because of the arising of an abnormal (e.g. criticism, judgement, or fear), then I can recognise it: 'Oh, wait, wait, wait. What's happening here? What's going on here?'

One and the same

I used to chop it all up, but it now seems one thing: an open heart. It is a dynamic energy form that responds in an appropriate way. It does so because it is available for response. If I am preoccupied with worry about the monastery, my latest woodworking project, or something else, then I'm not available to respond. My heart's not open.

My teaching methodology, I suppose, is: Can I help and persuade you to get to a state of open-heartedness, and let it take care of itself? I remember leading a retreat in Toronto where we were doing the classical form of *mettā bhāvanā*, which is sending goodwill to people in a sequential manner. One person said it was intellectual. I said, 'Okay, how about gratitude? Try that.'

'Alright,' they said. 'I can do gratitude.' Same thing, right?

We all have the ability to be grateful. It's not exotic and, for sure, not foreign. But how do you get there? How do you remember that? The open heart indeed becomes a platform for freedom from all kinds of 'selfing,' which happens a lot.

THE BUDDHA'S SEARCH

I'm going to combine my response to these three questions from retreat participants:

> What is the object during walking meditation? Is it bodily awareness, movement of the body, breath, a mantra, *mettā*, or awareness, or all of that?
>
> I felt more restless than usual during a meditation session. Is this normal? This is my first retreat.
>
> What does death and the dissolution of self feel like? What does enlightenment feel like?

These three questions might seem different, but to understand them, we have to go back to why the Buddha taught the way he taught or what the texts tell us about the Buddha's question.

His inquiry was very existential. He was asking himself, 'I'm subject to old age, sickness, and death, and everyone around me is subject to old age, sickness, and death. Is there a dimension in consciousness which is not subject to that?'

The Buddha's question is his search. He answers the question not intellectually or by taking a philosophical position, but through realisation. In India, this is called the attainment of *moksha* or liberation from attachment to the whole birth-death cycle. In Indian philosophy and spirituality, then and now, consciousness is not a physical phenomenon. Western science, I think, calls it a physical phenomenon, meaning when the body dies, consciousness goes kaput. Of course, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has asked people to prove it. They can't, but that is a whole other topic.

In the traditions of the Far East and India, and nowadays with Buddhist monasteries in the West, we are not buying into materiality. There is instead this possibility of *moksha*.

Buddhism and the Buddha's teachings are very optimistic for me because of the possibility of knowing the Deathless.

The Buddha was initially reluctant to talk about this dimension because it's subtle. Then the Buddha has the realisation, with assistance from various energies called *devas,* that there are beings who have but little dust in their eyes. We are those beings. Don't take it personally though. We too have this possibility and dimension because we can reflect on and witness our experiences.

The Buddha describes this dimension as the Unborn, Uncreated, Unoriginated, Unformed, Unconditioned, the Deathless, Peace, etc. This language is very hard for Westerners to pick up because it is not commonly used in Western thought. We can understand peace though. That language fits into our thought structures.

We also have the word, '*Nibbāna'* (cooling). This term has been corrupted now. Did you know there are nirvana nail salons and things like that? This is not what cooling is about. Words can become fashionable in popular culture and then seem silly. They no longer have the effect of deep reflective language.

If you prefer, call it a dimension, which is profoundly peaceful, or consciousness that is unbounded, or use whatever language that works for you.

Available to the Unconditioned

As I said earlier, the dimension described by the Buddha is a possibility for all of us. If my attention is always preoccupied with conditions that begin and end, such as good and bad; hot and cold; boredom and excitement; then that preoccupation precludes my availability to the Unconditioned.

What does preoccupation mean? For instance, when we feel bored, we seek excitement. In this way, we're preoccupied with boredom and excitement. These conditions are constantly changing. They are born and die. They rise and cease. They are subject to change. You cannot find in them the dimension of the Unconditioned because they are conditioned phenomenon. They begin and end.

Gateway to the Uncreated

Renunciation means we no longer seek the Unconditioned in the conditioned. This doesn't mean you can't have fun. It is just that you realise fun is conditioned. At some point, you will get sick of fun and turn your attention to something else.

With renunciation, the Buddha is asking us to wait. What if you didn't change the 'channel'? What could be Unconditioned and Uncreated? Let's explore this a bit. We've all experienced restlessness when meditating. If you're interested in the conditioned, you would want to do something about the restlessness. You'll probably go for a walk, read a book, or listen to a Dhamma talk. You'll surely do something to move away from the restlessness. But you'll just be moving from one condition to another when transitioning from boredom to pleasure. How about staying with the awareness of restlessness? That's the key, as witnessing consciousness or awareness itself is the gateway to this dimension.

The problem with language is that when you say it's the gateway to another dimension, it sounds like you're going from room A to B. That's not true because room A or B are just conditions. Awareness is both the method and the goal. The goal itself is very profound because awareness is caught up with self-view, greed, hatred, and delusion. It's not clear yet. So, the methodology, I would say, is abiding as a witness to change.

Non-doing doing

When using this methodology, you realise that the earlier question about walking meditation (What should be happening? What should I be doing?) is a condition of doubt. Witness the arising of doubt. Know that it's just a thought and a feeling. It arises and ceases, and you keep walking.

Regarding the question about what to do when feeling restless during meditation, you recognise, 'Oh, this is a feeling of restlessness.' That is what you should do, which is a kind of non-doing doing. What happens then? Well, it'll be very uncomfortable because it is not fulfilling your desires.

Your desires are predicated on making this whole conditioned realm comfortable. It works to a certain extent, but it is always bound up with conditions, contingencies, change, and birth and death. When it changes and your desires are not gratified, you seek another object.

This partly explains why we are down on desire. It is not because desire is evil or wrong. Buddhism is not making a moral judgement about desire. It's saying that if you follow desire, you will get certain results. For example, if you follow the desire to have sugar in your coffee, you will have a sweet coffee. If you follow a desire to kill someone, you will probably be imprisoned. So, there will be a result.

Just witness desire with curiosity; consider it as something that arises and ceases in a non-harmful manner and is not bound with self-mortification. You're not using some straitjacket of repression to deal with it.

If you are watching restlessness as an object, you see that there's the desire to not have restlessness. Next, if you witness that restlessness and the desire associated with it and you are very patient with it, then that takes you towards the Unconditioned or to the deep silence of knowing change.

It's difficult. It is not easy to just sit and witness restlessness, but all of us have experienced it. When you first start meditating, you don't want to stay for five minutes because you don't want this. This is nuts. For some crazy reason you stick it out, and then you notice, 'Oh, look at that.' There is this knowing that knows the restlessness. 'I didn't get up and have a chocolate bar or whatever. I just witnessed, witnessed, witnessed, and now I actually feel alright. I feel okay.'

This is very true in meditation. Your meditation itself might be a downer, a piece of garbage. It may not be working. But you stick with it, and don't follow the desire. You stick to the time you decided to meditate, and you witness this unpleasant experience called meditation. You witness, witness, and witness. When the meditation period ends, you'd probably walk away from it feeling very peaceful – because you let go of the attachment to desire. You felt uncomfortable but it was not hurtful. You witnessed the cessation of desire in a little way.

One of the ways we talk about *Nibbāna* or the Unconditioned is the cessation of craving – the cessation of this endless craving to perpetuate our egos, to constantly disparage ourselves, and be distracted by consumerism.

As I mentioned earlier, the project is to sustain the witnessing of change. You are walking back and forth, and you start to think about family or work. You get kidnapped by thoughts. You get to the end of the walking path, and realise, 'Oh, this is what the end of the path feels like.' Then you notice that the theme of the obsessive thinking is worry. You bring that up, and you say to yourself, 'Worry feels this way.' As you're walking to the other end, perhaps you notice that you're not getting caught up in the technique. Instead, you're observing, 'worry feels this way.' You're starting to recede away from the attachment and involvement with, in this case, the scenarios of worry.

I'm reminded of the seemingly catatonic state that arises during walking meditation. We once held a retreat in a Latvian school that was close to the Estonian border. It was so funny because many people in the neighbourhood had never seen a Buddhist monk.

We did our sitting meditation in the gymnasium and stepped onto the school grounds to do walking meditation. The school was in a small village with maybe ten houses. Some of the women living near the school used to cater food for the retreat. One woman would come out to her balcony and watch us whenever we did walking meditation. Surprisingly, on the third day, she yelled at us, 'Will you do something? Play football at least. What are you doing?'

With its simple back and forth movement, walking meditation can, at first, seem strange. The whole idea of it is that it is not interesting. The methodology of Buddhism is that you do things that are uninteresting. The breath is not interesting. Walking back and forth is not interesting. So, your energy cannot come from fascination, novelty, excitement, or fear. It must come from a place of curiosity and interest in the mind itself, which is difficult. No wonder the Latvian woman was puzzled.

The project

Now back to the question on walking meditation. I suggest you are awakening to the way things are, especially knowing the moods of the mind. All you need to do to get behind the thought storylines is question yourself: 'What's the general tone of the mind? Is it future projections, fantasies, or something else?' You just label it. This helps you to become more attentive to the mood when it comes into consciousness. You are not trying to get rid of it. You are trying to see it as an object. The more you see it as an object, the less will be the obsessive thinking. This habit will eventually fall away. If you perceive thought as a problem and try to get rid of it, you are still locked-in and preoccupied with the condition. I suggest you start witnessing consciousness.

It's the same way when you get a doubt about meditation. Just know you should be doing 'knowing,' and that you don't know what you should be doing. You witness the very sense of not knowing because that's another object and mindset. You stay with the meditation object, which might be the breath – we're using the breath because we need something to ground ourselves in, as the thinking mind can be compelling. Worry can also be compelling. Without some stability of mind, knowing can be hard to maintain. During walking meditation, your anchor can be the feeling of the feet touching the ground, but not in a super-concentrated way. Just have a general feeling of the feet touching the ground. Your mind may wander but come back to the feeling of the feet touching the ground. It is very simple. When practising breath meditation, ground yourself on something ordinary like an in-breath and out-breath, and sustain that. You witness it in consciousness. If you don't have a grounding, then you may not have the necessary stability, and the mind will spin out.

Let go by observing

In the beginning you use complex methods like counting backwards with your breath to compose the mind. I used to walk backwards and do all kinds of crazy things. When your mind becomes more settled and practice is steady, you start to question this 'doing.' You realise there is too much doing in a technique-driven meditation – it's me doing something to get somewhere.

Once you get the hang of the open-heartedness I spoke about earlier, the methodologies and techniques fall away. In fact, most meditators get tired of techniques. They get tired of always doing *a, b, c, d,* and *e* and they just let go into choiceless awareness or *shikantāza*, as it is called in Japanese. It is simply *awareness of change*. You are choosing to be awake, but not preoccupied with techniques or objects.

There is a kind of subtlety to just observing. The mind may get scattered. When that happens, you have the techniques of centring with breath or the heart and the practice of letting go with the phrases, 'it's like this,' or 'life is like this'. You get good at it with time. This is very intuitive. You have to try these things out.

Here the emphasis is on the peaceful dimension of the Unconditioned, as explained in the Four Noble Truths. This is a profound spiritual possibility for human beings. Again, how to do it? Well, look at discontent. When you are discontented, what do you do? Usually, you seek an object to alleviate the discontent, which you sometimes need to do. If you are hungry, you need to eat. If you've got a thorn in your foot, you need to take it out. If it is cold, you need to wear a jacket. There is nothing wrong with adjusting to conditions. Buddhism doesn't say it's wrong to follow pleasure. It is pleasurable to put a coat on when it's 5 C. It's pleasurable to have food when you're hungry. It is nice to get the thorn out of your foot. There's nothing wrong with that. But a lot of the discontent that we have is not biological or logical. You know that some of the thoughts, views, and perceptions, we put up with in our minds are questionable. They could be psychological feelings of self-doubt, self-disparagement, or flawed perceptions. Yesterday, I mentioned that craving or desire can manifest as resistance, *vibhava-taṇhā*. I was suggesting that opening the heart is a way of looking at resistance.

Guilt vs. remorse

I'm reminded of a statement by a Nepali lay student. She had never contemplated the difference between remorse and guilt. For me, remorse is a form of conscience, which is based on compassion. In Pali, we have the term, *hiri-ottappa* (conscience and concern). We usually feel this sense of remorse because of wrong speech. We would say something cruel to someone, put them down, or utter something along those lines. Later, we'll have the thought, 'Oh, I

wish I hadn't done that. I wish I hadn't said that. Why did I do that? I didn't have to do that.' When I wake up to remorse – which is felt in the heart centre – I remind myself to be careful in the future. Compassion is present in that moment. If I didn't have feelings of remorse, then I would be a monster or a sociopath. So, remorse is a necessary part of being a human.

Guilt is the opposite of remorse. It, to me, does not come from compassion, rather from hatred. Guilt isn't in the heart. It's in the head. It is like self-disparagement. For example, I could be self-disparaging with these statements: 'I'm a bad monk. It's been 40 years, and I'm still doing that.' This kind of mindset is not loving. It is inflated with a sense of 'I' and is based on anger and aversion. While the suffering around guilt can seem very real, it's due to cultural influences and familial relationships.

How do you notice the difference between remorse and guilt? Well, one is in thought. For example, I'm hammering away at myself – 'I shouldn't, I shouldn't' – for doing something. That thinking is an engagement with an idea. I am attached to a condition. What would disengagement from that condition feel like? It would not be more thinking. That's the problem we often have. We get into inner arguments: 'I shouldn't have said that or done that. Yeah, but I needed it. No, I shouldn't have done it.' These horrible arguments keep going on. These types of thinking are caught up in conditions.

How do you bypass that kind of arguing with yourself, commenting on the argument, and then judging the argument? How do you get past that? Go to the heart. Don't go to thought. When I'm caught in feelings of guilt, I understand these feelings have been culturally conditioned into me. I also know I am trying to practise *sīla* (moral integrity) and am a responsible person. All of us are similar in that way, and yet, the conditioning keeps coming up. What to do about that? The project is to disengage from that guilt feeling – not through thinking but through body awareness.

What if you went to the heart and identified guilt: 'That is guilt. That is thinking. That is ego thought.' Examine where it is in the body. This is why body meditation is helpful and interesting in Buddhism. When you notice these formations of self-criticism and self-disparagement in the body, you realise they're not remorse or compassion. It's different.

We all have that baggage. We usually end up distracting ourselves or thinking about it. But during a body-sweeping meditation, we process it.

It is important for that material to come into full awareness. Our intention would be to cultivate non-grasping of these materials or non-attachment to them by witnessing them as changes. Where else could you possibly witness them as change but in the body? It can be very unpleasant. It can also be mixed up with feelings of fear or lack of self-worth and result in a yucky feeling in the heart. But that's fine. We didn't sign up for pleasantness. We registered for the project, which is to realise the Unconditioned.

The guilt condition is very difficult. I could bear with it when I contemplated, 'What does it feel like as a changing condition?' Initially, my desire mind and conditioning went into thinking and self-disparagement or finding a distraction. Instead, I told myself, 'No, this is important.' I allowed the painful feelings to arise and become conscious. As Luang Por Sumedho would teach, consciousness is the escape hatch.

These arisings are uncomfortable. You bear witness to them as they change. It might seem hopeless. Then, one hour or two days later – however long it takes – you feel this incredible peace. You did not construct that peace by running away from it, but by witnessing something very difficult. That is the idea of purification, which is there in all spiritual practices.

Often a meditation session does not have that dimension of purification. It can be about staying awake or trying to stay in the

room. Most of it is like that, I think. Every now and then, though, there are powerful triggers. While remorse for me is a good feeling, it's not apparent. It's easier to think thoughts of guilt and self-hatred than to feel remorse because that would be like, 'Oh, I hurt that guy. I don't want to be there, feeling it.' When I decide otherwise – 'No, I am going to feel it' – the heart warms up and opens.

The initial response is to go to hatred. In a strange way, it's comforting to beat yourself up. Yet, it doesn't work. It doesn't clear the heart because it's hatred. Hatred begets hatred. Love begets love. It's a cliche, but it's true.

Returning to the questions, if you understand the project, then what's important is not the emotional-physiological experience but your capacity to notice change. In the difficult bits of boredom or whatever the case, if you can notice change, then you strengthen that capacity. The gateway to the Deathless becomes more and more apparent. You did not go into the 'fire.' Instead, you were able to witness it.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: Could we translate affection as attentiveness, or do you suggest that affection incorporates other qualities?

A: I think I use the word, 'affection,' because, from my own experience, attentiveness was unfortunately conjoined with control, which was linked to getting rid of. If you are getting into the subtlety of non-grasping, then attentiveness has the same sense imbibed in Luang Por Sumedho's phrases of 'it's like this,' and 'it all belongs.' I know, these phrases may sound like a condoning of things. But 'it all belongs' means, 'it's here now.' Now, how to accept it and not run with the foolishness of it?

When attentiveness is clear, it both knows and accepts. When it's unclear, it knows but tries to control or eliminate. When something comes up in that subtle state, you can get judgemental. It happens quickly. This is a subtle version of *vibhava-taṇhā,* the desire to get rid of, and not allowing things to be just as they are. The gross kind of *vibhava-taṇhā* is visibly apparent because you know you're really repressed or something like that. 'It's like this' is an awakening statement. The way to approach 'it all belongs' is to have a kind of agenda in the back of your own practice to sort out the good from the bad. This is the work of morality, right speech, and non-attachment. But when things come up, they come up. If I feel judgemental of someone and that judgement arrives in consciousness, it is *vipāka* (a result of) *kamma*. There is nothing good or bad about it. If I just know it as that – by witnessing change – then it ceases.

How to elevate or strengthen that witnessing of change? Affection might sound too strong for you. To me, if the heart's open or when there is open-heartedness, then the reaction to this rejection (e.g. a negative judgement) becomes apparent. The negativities come up and they're not threatening. It's just the way they are. So, jealousy, fears, worries, or fantasies are not a threat. They are just phenomena that come and go. So, for me, the opening of the heart and the emphasis on that can get you to the place of non-desire – which means you can be with both the negative and positive.

Contemplate these questions: What is attentiveness? What is that as an attitude? Is it an inclusive kind of thing or is it exclusive? What's going on?

When a negative state of mind arises, if you can include it, not get preoccupied with it, and see it arise and cease, then you see the logic of the Buddha's emphasis on *anicca* and change, and on Luang Por Chah's reflection on change. You can know the phenomena in its arisen state, in its enduring state, and in its cessation. You would have maintained non-grasping awareness, which is the doorway to the Unconditioned.

Some conditions are particularly sticky, and they have hooks that draw us in. Those are difficult.

The Buddhist emphasis on change isn't just about a changing world or a new economic situation. It is a deeper consideration. It is at a phenomenological level where you sustain awareness of change because that takes you to deep peace of the mind.

Everyone knows the world is changing. It doesn't take a Buddha to know that night and day change or that economies and governments change. It must be more profound than that. So, what is it? It is that witnessing consciousness, which knows the arising of self-doubt and all other conditions.

As a teacher, I often wonder, 'Did I get anything across, or did anyone understand that?' But then I realise, 'This is what not knowing is like.' Sometimes I'm tempted to ask other monks if the talk was good. I try not to do that because I know it is just coming from self-doubt.

The mind wants reassurance that the talk was good: 'Please tell me it was a good talk.' But it is so much better for me to just be aware that this is a feeling of not being sure. Then I'm in the witnessing of change. If I witness this feeling of not being sure, then self-doubt comes up and ceases, as it is just a condition. Next there will be happiness because of non-grasping. So, you need to understand the project. All methodologies like *mettā bhāvanā, asubha* (unattractive) *bhāvanā*, walking meditation, *dāna* (generosity), and *sīla* come under it. When you get that, the whole thing makes sense.

DAY THREE

MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH THOUGHTS

Get to know the mood of the mind from the time you wake up in the morning. What kinds of thoughts are being produced by the mood. Are they thoughts of the past or future? What's the mood of the mind?

Maybe there's nothing when you let go of thought. So, listen to sound. Just let go of thought and notice the silence of knowing.

Tune into the present moment.

Now tune into your body – the body sitting here, not as a concept, but as a visceral experience. Let the body and bodily feelings become conscious. The knowing, silent, conscious, silent consciousness, or knowing awareness, remains the same even if the object changes from body to feelings.

Whether you feel pain or discomfort, or the body is comfortable, the knowing doesn't change because it is not a quality. Awareness is the space within which things are known.

Qualities come and go during meditation, so be the knowing.

Bring your attention to the centre of the chest. Feel the rising and falling of the chest with the breath.

When inhaling, visualise someone or a group of people who are dear to you. Name or imagine them, but don't think about them. This isn't about thought. It's about connecting with endearment

and affection. So, on the in-breath, mentally say the name of the person who is dear to you. On the out-breath, wish them, ‘May you be well.’

Just let your attention abide in the heart centre and remind yourself of what affection feels like.

After a few breaths, you can choose another person or group. Go through a few iterations like this.

Make that feeling of affection quite clear, strong, and obvious. Then you can let go of the naming of people and be with that affectionate attention one in-breath at a time.

The mind is very open, quiet, and composed.

COMING HOME

It is difficult to speak about the heart with intellect. With the word, 'affection,' I'm trying to use a different language to explain the felt sense of opening the heart. Again, this isn't sentimental. To me, sentimentality is in the thought realm. Expressions like, 'Oh, what a cute puppy,' and 'Oh, that's nice,' are fine. But, for me, the heart is something more profound. It's not that you don't feel for the cute puppy, but I'm trying to point to something deeper. Maybe this is more of a problem for men than women. In my experience, men, through conditioning, tend to look at the things of the heart with scepticism. They'll say it seems sentimental, but let me reassure you, it is not.

Here's an example of staying with the heart. This morning, I wanted to go online but the internet was down. We have another router near the workshop that works sometimes. So, I took my iPad to the workshop and managed to get connected. Earlier, when I discovered the wi-fi wasn't working, I sensed annoyance. I was attentive to the annoyance arising in consciousness. I immediately went to and stayed with the heart – and the annoyance disappeared.

As humans, it's natural for us to analyse and comment on our experiences but, for me, there is another way of participating in this world. We can relate to the world by intuitively tuning into physical sensations, by being sensitive to the energy coursing through the body and, most importantly, through the heart area.

Conversely, I know, for myself, I can be attentive to something, but it is very much in thought – there is a 'me' attending to 'something'.

Through inner comments, that 'something' is continuing to 'live' in the realm of thought.

Bearing witness

If I live from my heart a lot, then I notice the arising of, say, annoyance – like this morning. It wasn't a difficult event for me. Annoyance arose simply because of not getting what I wanted. Usually, not getting what I want tends to produce thought. If I stay with the thought, it doesn't cease the same way as going to the heart. If you decide to analyse the annoyance, you'll remain in the thought realm. While that's still witnessing, bearing witness from the heart seems much more powerful and immediate. If I stay with the heart and contemplate the annoyance that has arisen (inquiring: 'What is that?'), then it is more like coming home. The heart is more my real home than thought.

Thought, I find, is becoming more and more an untrustworthy territory. I have stopped believing a lot of my thoughts. They're just Māra's words. I find that at the heart, there is direct contact with the way things are, rather than with all the complexities that thoughts bring forth.

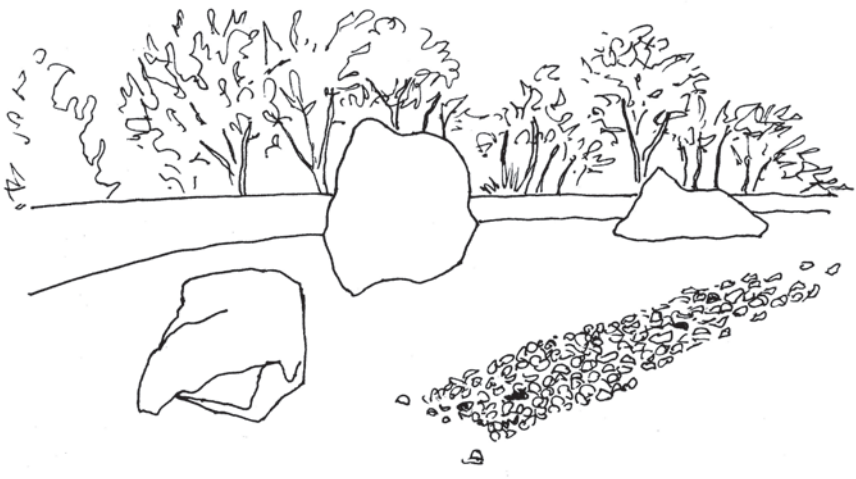
As I said yesterday, affection has the quality of equanimity (*upekkhā*), an open-hearted abiding. *Upekkhā* is not experienced as a dismissal or deadness of the heart. In the little wi-fi experience, annoyance arose in consciousness because desire was frustrated. Also, the desire to try to connect to the internet did not develop further because it wasn't given life through thought. It arose and ceased.

Now, if I've had many internet issues and invested a lot of negative energy in the preponderance and perversity of inanimate objects, then I would react angrily every time the problem arose. In this case, the annoyance would be stronger. This is called *vipāka kamma*.

Going to the heart does not mean things are going to disappear instantly. It all depends on previous conditioning and one's actions. There is an assumption that as soon as you awaken to something, it is going to go away. This is a mistake many people make. Our practice is a marathon. It takes a long, long time for most of us. Awakening to the way things are means that, at least, you know the resultant kamma or the momentum of consciousness around these issues. Then the work is to bear witness to it. If you can bear witness from the heart, then I have found that you are not going to thought, and the issue isn't given more life. It can feel messy and contracted at times. But you also know that the work is very immediate there.

Trust awareness, as it is rewarding. The kammic momentum of now has a chance to be released from consciousness.

Anyway, it is hard to explain in language. So, I recommend people get more conscious of their life experiences through different avenues, rather than just through thought, intellect, analysis, and judgement. You can perceive life through other senses too.



INSTRUCTIONS ON LYING DOWN MEDITATION

There's formal practice and then there is 24/7 mindfulness practice. Formal practice involves taking a posture of choice. When you think about sitting meditation, you are establishing a clear structure for your practice. You may sit on a zafu with your knees lower than the back, and your hips pushed forward. You open up your spine and chest, and in this way, the body's posture is well set. You can also establish this formality when sitting on a chair. After finalising the posture, you resolve to not fidget or move around. A formal posture is good because it sets up your mind for meditation. The rigour of the posture will remind you of what you are doing. You won't forget and fall asleep (which often happens).

You want to take on that same formality in lying down meditation – *yoga nidra*. Register in your mind that this is a formal posture, and that you're meditating.

Lying down meditation almost sounds like cheating: 'I'm going to go to bed and meditate. Come on, that is too easy. There's got to be pain to gain something.' Actually, it is difficult to stay awake in lying down meditation. It does not work for everyone all the time. Sometimes you have lots of energy, but your body does not. I used to maintain a good Full Lotus posture as a youngster. I loved it because the form provided a strong, energetic foundation. But I did my knees in, so the posture had to change.

To set up a good lying down meditation posture, find a comfortable surface, such as your mattress. A monk who was practising lying down meditation ended up with sore heels because he was lying on a hard surface. You can't meditate for two hours on a hard surface!

Lie down like a seal, in *Savasana* (Corpse Pose in Yoga), or pick a posture where you are really open. Make sure your knees are slightly folded in and up, as flat knees place a lot of pressure on the small of the back. Some people meditate with their knees up and feet flat on the mattress. It is hard to hold that posture for a long time. I recommend a pillow or a bolster under your knees. In this posture, you can attempt long meditations.

Just like the knees, make sure the neck is well supported. My neck was too far back in the beginning, so I had to get a proper pillow and tuck in the chin like I do in the sitting posture. It took a while, but I figured it all out eventually.

The first instruction I got, and this was years ago, was to then adjust the posture and make it ten percent better. That was helpful because I would get myself settled and then, of course, the way the body works, it doesn't like it. So, I would adjust ten percent, and then the instruction was, 'Don't move, itch, scratch, or roll.' Of course, within 30 seconds, you will sense an itch. Now, the formality of the meditation is 'not moving'. Logically, I know this itch is not life-threatening. I do not have to move. In sitting meditation, the knees would hurt. It would feel life threatening. You would feel like you must move but you know you can sit through this desire to move. Similarly, you can lie through the desire to move. When you don't follow the desire, you get a sense of the whole body in awareness as well as of the body being a mass of vibrations that keep arising, evolving, and ceasing.

When you deliberately stop moving, it's difficult to not roll onto your side because that's the posture of annihilation or sleep. There is a desire to roll onto your side. When practising lying down meditation you are going against all those signs of falling asleep because you are not planning to nap – I hope. You sustain that posture without moving.

During lying down meditation, it is common to experience energy releases. At that point, one wants to move. Sometimes I will feel

a little pinprick in my arm. If I just let that be the way it is, the arms or legs will flick, releasing energy. The body settles in even more after that, and it becomes quiet. It is interesting to be able to sustain that posture for a long time. In this posture, you can learn to be awake in 'sleep.' As you become proficient in it, you might be tired, but you are awake. You get to the point where you're awake, but you can't move your body, as it is asleep. It is an interesting investigation. During a retreat, if you can toggle between lying, sitting, and walking postures, then you can do long periods of meditation without it becoming too painful.

Finally, with lying meditation, snoring is great. You might be lying there and then, 'oink,' you hear the little piggy. This happens because your mind dips deeper into consciousness, which is profound sleep. It goes there and falls into it. The snoring alerts you to that. Obviously, if you do fall asleep, there might be some resonant snoring, which your whole family will talk about later. This is just that initial dropping of the mind into deep sleep. Then you are awakened, but you're actually not because you weren't really asleep. You're able to go into that deeper state without falling asleep. It is obviously an interesting space to explore. Also, you do not have to hold up the body. There is not a sense of me holding up the body. It is an interesting investigation of the whole sense of me meditating or doing something and the struggle with the discomforts we experience.

I sound like a salesperson for lying down meditation – but give it a go. You could end up with a posture that you can use when you have a lot of energy, but your body doesn't want to sit still. That is very true if you are waking up at two in the morning. Rather than fidgeting, you can determine to lie down and experiment with the posture. Try it out. Even if you fall asleep, you can't lose anything. It is much better than being in a negative state and annoyed at not being able to fall asleep or have your usual eight-hour snooze.

MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH BODILY SENSATIONS

Let's come to that sense of open-heartedness, and then do a whole-body sweep to get a sense of the body in awareness, which is helpful for lying down meditation. I can explain that, so take a posture of your choice.

Start with sound: listening; knowing; receptive awareness. Let the sound come to you.

Savour the stillness of knowing. There is the movement of sound, the changing nature of sound, and there's this still knowing.

Feel the rising and falling of the chest.

Tune into the sense of kindness that I've been talking about. If you want, use the image of someone dear to you on the in-breath and feel that endearment and kindness when you imagine them.

Sustain that sense of kindness from one breath to another. This isn't about you getting some kind of loving experience. It's remembered, not as a story, but as a heartfelt note.

Tune in.

With that attitude of kindness, localise your attention on the body. Begin with your face. Make conscious the feelings in your mouth. Notice the language: 'Make conscious. Let it come into full awareness.' You are not looking for sensations. Rather, you're allowing attention to dwell there, and then things just appear,

don't they? For example, what does full awareness of the mouth mean? Well, you start to let your teeth and tongue come into the stream of consciousness.

Move your attention to your ears, the outer structures, and the ear canal. Let that become conscious. Sometimes you feel obvious things, and other times, there's nothing much there. The most important thing is awareness.

The quality of the sensation doesn't really matter. Localise your attention at your nose. Let that become conscious or come into full awareness. Don't squeeze your eyes trying to see or look for something.

Receptive knowing.

Your eyes, the eye sockets, and the eyes are sensitive areas with lots of vibration and are tickling with pressure and pain. Let them be conscious.

Your temples and the top of the head. You are not looking for something but you're allowing what is to become conscious. There isn't the stress of looking for something. It's just what it is.

The back of the head. Let it become conscious.

Feel your whole head. Now, perceive the head in awareness rather than you in your head. That contributes to the perception of space and awareness, rather than the perceptions of me, my body, and my head.

So, the feelings and sensations are changing and are in awareness. It's no longer a concept but felt more like energy or changing vibration.

Feel your shoulders, upper arms, elbows, lower arms, and hands. These are in awareness.

Keep savouring the stillness of knowing.

Feel the clothing on the chest, and the movement of your chest. The back, upper spine, and ribcage. Let that all become conscious in whatever way it does.

The abdominal area, skin, lower spine, lower ribcage, and organs in the abdominal area. The bones and the organs in the pelvic area. The hips, thighs, knees, legs, and feet. Let them become conscious.

Notice that we're not trying to achieve anything with this. We're just sustaining awareness of the way things are.

Now, kind of step back, as it were. Feel the whole body. Again, not as a concept, but as changing temperatures, vibrations, pressure, and pains.

I call this whole-body awareness. This experience is in awareness.

Listen to sound and notice that sound is in awareness.

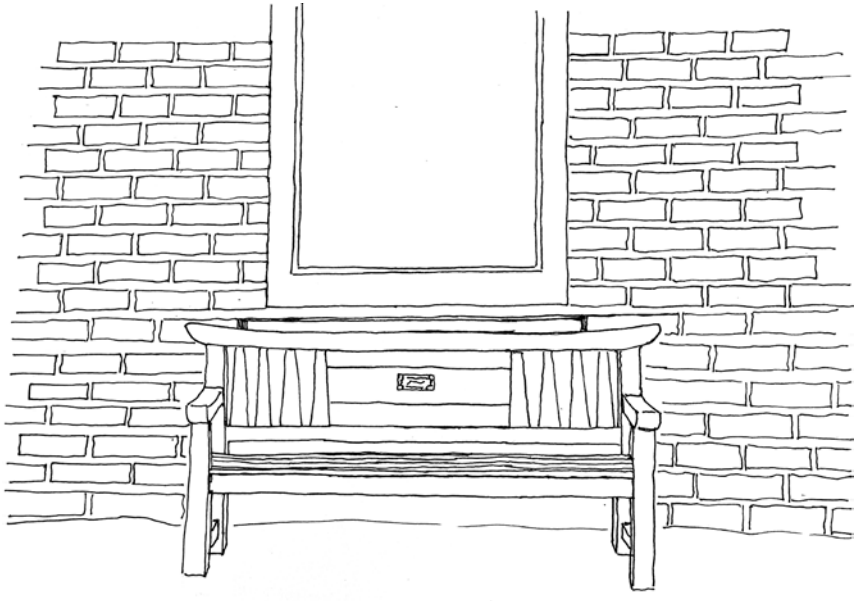
The space of awareness contains bodily feeling, sound, thought, and emotion.

Perceive awareness as spacious. You want to use this perception in lying down practice.

Now, let go of paying attention to a particular object, and be the knowing itself. It's hard to describe that. The objective world of experience is changing. You hear things. Thoughts come and go, and there's just this witnessing of change and knowing change.

The knowing is unchanging. That's why we say, 'Be the knowing.' If you get too distracted by thought and you want to ground yourself, then go back to the breath, one breath at a time. Compose and collect the mind on the breathing.

If you can, experiment with choiceless awareness where you are only choosing to be the knowing.



THE HARBOUR

In 2011, I took a trip with two friends to the Atlantic coast of Canada. My mother wanted me to scatter her ashes in the Atlantic Ocean, so that they might drift back to Latvia, her motherland. This heartfelt request was very poignant. It made me understand why refugees never get over the yearning for their homelands.

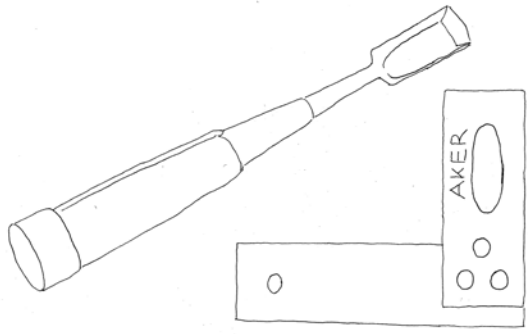
My friends and I planned to scatter the ashes kayaking off the coast of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada. Ken had his late father's shaving brush, and Adrienne, her dog's ashes. Ken's father died two years before my mom passed away in 2011. Coincidentally, we set out to sea at the base of Gampo Abbey where Bhikshuni Pema Chödrön is the principal teacher. I'd never kayaked in an ocean. I've mostly canoed in freshwater lakes and rivers. Fortunately, Adrienne had experience in coastal kayaking. She guided us throughout the trip. Altogether we spent five days camping on the rocky coast of Cape Breton.

One day, we set up our tents too close to the tideline. In the middle of the night, we had to scurry up the banks, as the tide was coming in, and we almost lost all our belongings. The next day was beautiful, sunny, and calm, so we went into the sea on our kayaks. Out on the open water, I chanted and gradually emptied my mom's ashes. I was able to scatter some more off the Baltic coast in Latvia on another occasion. Next, Adrienne scattered her husky's ashes. Finally, Ken tied a rock to his dad's shaving brush and dropped it into the ocean. It was very emotional, and we all cried.

We then paddled for some time along the coast. It was beautiful. Little pilot whales and a herd of a hundred or so seals dove off from

the shore, as if to see us. It was sweet to see curious youngsters, teenagers I guess, slip off the rocks, come up through the waves, look at us, and then dive down and disappear into the water. We noticed that one seal had stayed back on the shore. It took a while for us to realise the seal was dead. It was poignant. Mom had died, and yet, there was all this life around me, as well as death. It was very moving.

The ocean swells were getting bigger as we continued along the coast. My kayak was almost surfing along the waves' crest. Adrienne became anxious because she understood that our little sea kayaks needed to get to shore. Before casting off onto the sea that morning I had not noticed a little harbour. As the ocean swells grew, they pushed us towards what I then saw were concrete walls surrounding the harbour. Then suddenly a narrow mouth, an opening to this haven appeared, just as a breathtaking wave shoved us through it. And inside, the water was still; a beautiful, beautiful stillness. It reminded me that *Nibbāna* is sometimes referred to as the Harbour or Refuge in the texts. Language can make it hard to find the right word. That is why the language in Buddhist texts is often around imagery. So, this visceral experience of the safety of a harbour in my little kayak was insightful. I understood deeply why they chose the image of a harbour to describe *Nibbāna* – it is safe and is a refuge.



STILLNESS

I was once asked, 'What does enlightenment taste like?' I replied, 'Chocolate!' But it is like the stillness in the harbour.

Words are always dualistic. For instance, if you describe 'it' as 'it is happy, and not sad,' then you get into the dualism of experience. *Nibbāna* cannot be contingent on experience or circumstance. This is not an experience you have, but something you notice is there all the time. Otherwise, it would not be transcendent. That is why, when we talk about the Dhamma, it is always here and now. It's not a matter of time. It is timeless (*akāliko*). As explained in the *Homage to the Dhamma* chant, you do not search, but realise here and now.

I'd like to return to that contrast of the repetitive swelling of the ocean waves to the still waters of the harbour. Riding in the kayak on the surface of the increasingly frightening waves, one could feel the power of that body of water. You do not want to be out there unless you are a whale! That very image of sensory experience may suggest swells can be fun, but the danger is in forgetting that they are born and die constantly. The stillness, by contrast, is neither born nor dying: It simply *is*.

The closest approximate experience would be when I ask you to listen to sound and then savour the stillness of knowing – because knowing is still, isn't it? At least, until thoughts arise. The thoughts are usually habitual or based on trying to get something or get rid of something.

It is not a question of sense experiences being bad. It is just that you will not find stillness when continually shifting and moving from

one sensory experience to another. But, in the movement, you can notice stillness. While listening to sound, you can also notice the stillness.

I like to listen to oratory. I enjoy the speeches of Barack Obama and Dr. Martin Luther King. During those moments, I'm listening to an object, and perhaps enjoying its beauty, which is fine. But I can also listen to change and not be concerned about the quality of the object. I can notice the stillness of knowing and witness change. The emphasis then is on awareness.

You can apply this suggestion to your meditation. Remember, the quality of your meditation is not going to change. You may still feel restless, anxious, or something else when meditating. But if you are interested in the 'Harbour,' rather than in the qualities or the comings and goings, then you understand the project. There can be these 'waves' of restlessness, but what about the harbour in the waves?

The harbour is the stillness of knowing. That is why, in the previous meditation (p87), I was encouraging you to 'listen to sound and savour the stillness of knowing; feel your body and savour the stillness of knowing.' These are very good images for me, reflections of presence in my own life.

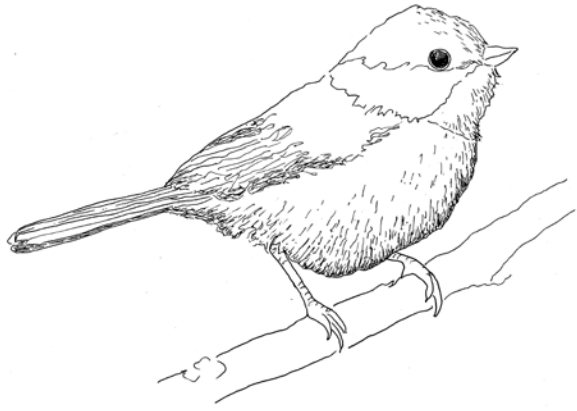
You can try to do this in family situations. I've heard that a lot of young adults are living with their parents now. The music preferences of these generations are different. Imagine a 60-year-old mom or dad living with a 25-year-old daughter who likes rap or heavy metal. The loud percussion sounds can be disturbing. Yet, you're in that situation. Can you find stillness in that loudness? If you can come to the sense of, 'it's like this,' you will start to notice stillness within the movement.

Now, difficult emotions can be more complicated and contractive. In those instances, my suggestion would be to bypass intellectual processes. We are well trained in analysing problems. When we try

to figure out a difficult emotion with thought, we are in the same thinking realm. It doesn't work. Whereas, if you can feel the strong emotion in the body and heart, then you bypass judgement and all the analyses. You are directly with the emotion. For example, anger is not a thought. It is visceral and a felt sensation in the body. The more you can be directly in contact with that difficult emotion, the more you will understand it. More importantly, you can understand it in a way that isn't analytical. You realise this emotion is something that has arisen, endured, and has been cast away. Each time you have a strong experience of something, and you witness it, you understand: 'It is like this' – and see that it is also changing. That realisation is right understanding, one of the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Awareness is quite ordinary. It's not going to blow your head off. You may think, 'Well, that can't be it. It has to be more than that.'

We often don't trust in the awareness of change because it seems unimportant. We want something but this desire mind will only find another condition, another experience, or contingent object. So, think of the stillness of knowing as the harbour, the refuge, which is awareness itself.



HOMAGE TO THE DHAMMA

[Handa mayaṃ dhammābhitthutiṃ karomase]

[Now let us chant in praise of the Dhamma.]

Yo so svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo

The Dhamma is well expounded by the Blessed One,

Sandiṭṭhiko

Apparent here and now,

Akāliko

Timeless,

Ehipassiko

Encouraging investigation,

Opanayiko

Leading inwards,

Paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi

To be experienced individually by the wise.

Tam-ahaṃ dhammaṃ abhipūjayāmi tam-ahaṃ dhammaṃ sirasā namāmi

I chant my praise to this Teaching, I bow my head to this Truth.

[bow]

MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH MOVEMENT

Things are moving in awareness. Inquire into that during this meditation. You also want to have an extremely easy way to remember the present moment. It's not that you are not here, but you'll need an object to get a sense of remembering and knowing the present moment, which I like to describe as 'know that you know'. I use sound. The idea is receptive knowing.

Observe yourself. Are you trying to notice a particular sound or just letting sound be what it is? If you are not trying to find the sound, you are not only grounding yourself in the present moment, but also noticing the stillness of knowing.

I can hear the wind blowing through the trees. It is raining now and then, which is the change. Know the stillness of knowing. Of course, it is hard to sustain that knowing because we go off into thought. So, keep returning to that still knowing.

Sometimes you're trying to control, forcefully hold the attention or get something during meditation, so bring your attention to the centre of the chest. Don't tighten your eyes or hands. You are not trying to get anything. You're just localising attention. Feel the sensations in the body, and there is that stillness of knowing.

An attitude of kindness is crucial and helpful, so bring to mind the image of someone dear to you on the in-breath. Connect to that tone of mind, which could be grateful, affectionate, or

appreciative, when you think of that person. The in-breath reminds you of them. On the out-breath, say, 'May you be well' or 'Thank you.'

In meditation there is no rush to get anywhere. There isn't an urgency to achieve anything. Feel the whole breath. We sometimes call this the breath body, breathing from the beginning to the end, and from the end to the beginning. All this time, there's the stillness of knowing for one in-breath and one out-breath. Now this could be sufficient, but you can localise your attention even more. An interesting place to observe your experiences is at the end of the out-breath. What is the end of the out-breath? What happens there? Make a note of that.

There remains the stillness of knowing and whole-body awareness. You may notice that you tense your hand or face on the in-breath, or your mind wanders at the end of the out-breath. By choosing this sort of a window to localise your attention, you heighten the capacity to sustain awareness moment by moment. You are not trying to get anything. It is just training in still knowing for spans of time.

WHEN PRACTICE FALLS APART

Q: What happens when your practice falls apart?

A: You put a lot of time and effort into the practice. You try to lead a skilful life, but sometimes it becomes complicated, difficult, or painful. People fall seriously ill, they are betrayed, or get burned out while caring for others. These are the kinds of situations we face as human beings. When they arise, it is very disheartening, and sometimes our meditation practice isn't working.

What's important for me is to come back to the basic principle of making conscious the way things are. I don't tend to use the word, 'mindful,' much. Since it is frequently spoken of in so many different ways, I'm not sure what people mean when they use it. So, I prefer to not use that word, in case it's misunderstood.

With the phrase, 'make conscious the way things are,' I'm trying to point to awakening to the moment without any desire or necessary focus in it; just recognising that life is this way now. That is easy to say, but hard to do. Often, there isn't an awakening to the way things are. Rather, there's a resistance to the way things are, or there's a wanting for things to be different from how they are. Also, the mind is very quick. The habituated instances of resistance and wanting appear quickly. Habits appear suddenly.

During guided meditations, I often suggest that practitioners make conscious the feeling in a body part like the mouth. When doing these types of body meditations, I suggest you simply recognise the different bodily sensations instead of focusing on one area. Hopefully, the sensing is free from desire. If you understand that idea in something very simple like a bodily sensation, then you

can encourage it with another sense base like sound: make sound conscious; invite sound. This way you can return to the same receptive awareness. I also found it useful to quietly repeat terms like 'non-desire,' 'non-becoming,' and 'non-resistance' to develop this quality of receptive awareness where there is an open attention to the way things are.

It is more difficult to make negative emotions conscious. With a negative emotion, you might have a whole history of trying to figure it out and getting caught up in the storyline. You may be thinking that you must fix it, or you may be blaming yourself. For instance, the arising of one negative emotion might lead to an hour of self-disparagement. It gets complicated. So, return to the simplicity of 'it's like this'; 'make conscious the feeling'; or 'let the feeling become conscious'. Even if the meditation seems to be falling apart, trust in awareness.

If you start there, then, hopefully, you'll see the resistance to the way things are. You may be telling yourself, 'My meditation is pathetic.' Instead, open to, 'this is what pathetic feels like,' or 'this is hopeless, and this is what hopeless feels like.'

The feeling of hopelessness is different from the thought, 'I am hopeless.' That is the key. The issue is self-narratives are driven by a feeling of hopelessness and an attachment to that self-identity.

However, the feeling is real. Telling someone, 'it'll be alright,' or 'it'll change,' doesn't validate their feelings. For them, it's not alright. It is hopeless. So, instead consider being more empathetic and acknowledge, 'That must be really, really difficult.' This way, you are connecting with them in their predicament. Maybe after that you can have a conversation. You will have a way of talking to them because you've validated their feelings instead of dismissing them.

A compassionate strategy for yourself and others would be to make conscious the feelings. Name the terrible feeling of

betrayal, hopelessness, the sense of losing the plot, inadequacy, nervousness, physical pain or whatever it is. All these feelings are part of the 'curriculum'.

The challenge is in trying to diagnose the issue. It is not the pleasantness or unpleasantness of any experience, but rather it's the attachment to the desire to have it otherwise. Yet, what could be more natural than not wanting unpleasantness?

Sometimes we're faced with complex life situations. Maybe someone's been betrayed in a horrible way, or they had to deal with chronic illness. The accumulation of all that stress will create huge strains on the nervous system. The result will be difficult and unpleasant. If, however, we can get to awakening to the feelings as objects in awareness, then we won't get lost in the self-narratives that run on from these situations. There is a huge difference between recognising a feeling of hopelessness as an object and running with thoughts of hopelessness. This is what non-grasping is all about. Stay alert, as non-grasping is not a magical cure. When you 'notice' something, that thing is not going to cease right away. All things have a 'life' of their own. If that 'life' has been conditioned into the mind through adverse circumstances – which is no one's fault – then it is going to take tremendous patience and endurance to constantly witness the condition until it ceases.

I'm quite happy now. But there have been times when I've been blindsided by difficulties and my psyche has gotten out of whack. It felt like there was no grounding in those moments, nothing seemed to work except running around trees or something like that. Or just walking, walking, walking, and walking, until somehow, balance was restored.

At all times, there can be this constant reference to awakening within the framework of moral virtue and social responsibility. With this, you can somehow get through tough situations.

In painful situations, if you can internalise, 'stress feels this way' – without trying to fix it – then you are able to create some space around it. But the attitude might be, very quickly, to try and fix things by going to the object of meditation with the hope it will rectify the situation. The problem with the trying-to-fix method is that you are pushing away issues that can't be brushed aside. They need to come into consciousness to no longer be a threat.

The way of non-grasping is the way of just knowing without all the narratives of thought.

In Buddhism, the ideas of grasping and attachment are always around self-thinking. It's not about the experience itself. The experience itself is conditioned by previous events that are triggered into consciousness. They could also be constantly retriggered by circumstances. The experiences are natural phenomena and neither good nor bad, but nonetheless painful. Self-thinking then picks them up in whatever patterns it does (e.g. 'This is hopeless' or 'I'm terrible'). It remembers. You have to work with self-thinking as an object and try to see, 'Yeah, that's what self-thinking is doing.'

Then ask yourself, 'What is it really like, this feeling of, say, hopelessness?' With this question, you're coming back to the grounding of the awakened mind. You have to do that again and again until its power dissipates.

Notice that the sense of personality is sustained by compulsive habits of the thinking mind.

If self-doubt comes up, then know it as a mood, a type of mindset. It only creates a personality when believed as through thought.

If you can see the mood and have the awareness that this is self-doubt, then there's no fuel to keep it going. It still has the feel of history though. If you were a strong self-doubter for many years and have finally managed to create some space around it, then it can still come up a lot. The only problem there is the I-thinking, me-thinking, and my-thinking mind. That's what we mean by attachment.

The way through is the experience of right understanding: all conditioned thoughts and mindsets are empty of self. There is suffering, but no one is suffering.

We are not saying there's no self. We're just saying that this experience, in whatever way it might be, is not who you are. It is a painful natural phenomenon. Running with it by thinking about it makes it worse. It's a wrong perspective, wrong view, and wrong understanding because that's not who you are. There is no personal entity in it. But it is personal in the sense that you are experiencing it. This is what we try to differentiate. There is individuality as well as individual formations of mind-body, and they're all natural. While its natural functions are coming through consciousness, none of that can be your real home. Awareness knows 'that,' and you begin to see awareness is what you can trust.

It's important to understand the Buddha's teaching of *anattā* (not-self, impersonal, without individual essence).

Here's a Zen joke about *anattā*. A man says, 'There's no self.' The *rōshi* (an experienced teacher) kicks him in the shins. The man asks, 'Why did you kick me?' The *rōshi* responds, 'There's no self. What's the problem?'

The question is not, 'How can I perfect personality?' Rather, 'How can I know personality as an object that comes and goes through self-thinking?' Once you start to not believe in self-thinking, then these worldly ideas are not problematic. It may take a lot of endurance.

Once you have trust and faith in awareness, of knowing change in this way, then you have a way of being with phenomena. This is what we mean by emptiness in Theravada Buddhism.

Emptiness doesn't imply empty of content or emotional vacuity. It means, 'The sense of self that I'm identifying with is actually just a phenomenon in nature.' You may ask, 'Who am I?' Well, that is

the ultimate question, which cannot be answered through thought because it's more than that. Abide in trusting awareness. Things will become obvious.

Dhamma of frustration

Trusting in awareness of change opens the heart to what Luang Por Chah would say is our real home. Luang Por Chah was very good at creating situations that frustrated desire. When asked whether his teaching method was *mettā bhāvanā*, *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness of breathing), or body sweeping, he said, '*Toraman*' (frustration). I misunderstood it as torture. Twenty years later, I realised my translation of the Thai word was wrong. When I asked Ajahn Jayasaro, he clarified that *toraman* means frustration.

Luang Por Chah would, quite deliberately, set up situations, which were not harmful, but frustrating. The classics were, as you know, long talks. Some talks would be four hours long. You knew he was playing with you. He would ask, 'So, why are you suffering?' The mind would respond, 'Because you won't shut up.'

I tried looking at the cause of suffering. Is it Luang Por Chah talking for long periods of time, knees hurting, etc., or is it that I wanted something else? Yes, I wanted to go and meditate somewhere else when it was perfectly possible to meditate where I was situated.

Luang Por Chah would keep pounding at the Four Noble Truths: 'Okay, there is suffering right now. What's the cause?'

He was fearless. There would be around 50 monks, all internally whining, 'Oh, please stop.' But he would just go on and on. It had an interesting effect. I was in a situation where it was hard to meditate. I was sitting on a concrete floor. Mosquitoes were biting me. It was too hot. I didn't understand the language, as Luang Por Chah spoke in Thai. I just kept bringing up the mantra, 'Why am I suffering?' I realised it was because of attachment to

desire – the desire to not be there, not to be in pain, and to instead be doing *yoga nidra*.

I was basically whining to myself. Sometimes, there would be a breakthrough. I was able to eventually accept: 'Oh, this is the way it is now. It's just pain;' 'It's boring;' 'It's just mosquitoes biting. And hey, it's alright. I'm not going to die.' That was actually pretty easy because I wasn't stressed out with anything except my own mind. That kind of lesson was incredibly valuable. It taught me to always go back to the basic question of, 'Well, what's the problem?'

The idea in the Four Noble Truths is of discontent. There is suffering; there is a cause, which is attachment to desire; the end of suffering is the cessation or letting go of desire; and the method is the awakening to all of that by following the Noble Eightfold Path. It's very much a medical diagnosis. You have a disease; the cause of the disease is known; the prognosis is good; and there is good health at the end of the tunnel with the letting go of attachment to desire.

In a contemplative life, you have to see the situation is 'like this.' Then you must diagnose it. Ask, 'What do I want that I don't have? And what do I have that I don't want? What is the problem here?'

The experience is not the problem. That concept is hard to wrap our heads around. So, let's revisit my experience of sitting and listening to Luang Por Chah for hours.

One would think Luang Por Chah's talks were always inspiring. Not really. It doesn't work that way. If they were, then I probably wouldn't have gotten any wisdom out of them. So, what was the problem with Luang Por Chah's long talks? Was it boredom, painful knees, mosquitoes, the lack of understanding, or loneliness? Or was the problem that I didn't want any of those things? Once I understood that, I could apply the same diagnostic method to more serious issues like social anxiety, fear, and self-disparagement:

What's the problem? Is it fear?
Yes, that's the problem.
No, that's not it.
The fear has risen. I can't do anything about it.
So, what's the problem?
Ah, it's the desire not to have the fear.

That realisation took a few years. Once I understood that fear was horrible, it was okay because now, I could sense, 'Fear feels this way.' Getting to the point of accepting, 'it's like this,' is a huge step, isn't it? It feels like this because quite often the desire not to have it arises quickly. This desire then kick-starts the mental proliferation. So, worrying about something is typically driven by fear. If you don't see that and your thinking mind takes over, then you can feel hopeless or get depressed.

This 'awakening to the way things are' is very profound. It's kind of the beginning and end of the Path. As you take refuge in awakened consciousness, you begin to see it as your home ground. It liberates you from entanglements. You gain confidence. When the entanglements or attachments to greed, hatred, delusion, and fear come up, you see it as a chance to not only purify the mind, but also to make that refuge solid. The thing that plagued, crushed, or defeated you in the past ironically opens like a gateway. Not that one likes it. It's still unpleasant, but you can consider entanglements as good opportunities for spiritual growth. With sincere, insightful understanding you see the problem is desire and an attachment to this changing realm. The liberation from that attachment is the cessation of desire.

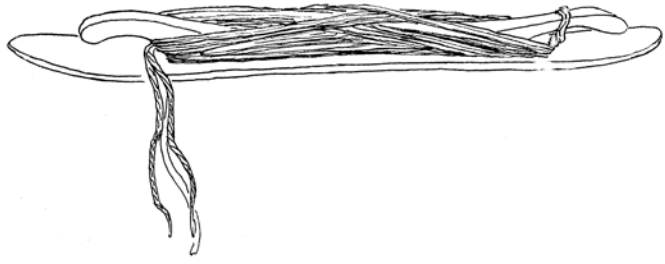
When I began to see my fearful responses to life as conditions, I could see the desire not to stay with it: 'I don't want this.' I was able to stay with it and the desire eventually ceased. When desire ceases, the heart is open and receptive. The mind is equanimous and quiet too.

Those were some of my travails and traumas. Obviously, I don't experience them now. But when I got blindsided by complex events, my meditation did fall apart. There was something deeper though. Awareness was there. I kept being a monk and doing 'monkish' things in a confused manner. People were concerned about me. I was perturbed too, but somehow, I just kept going.

Taking care of my mother helped me a lot. I was really floundering, and suddenly, my mom needed me. I had to stay focused on the job, which was all about service. That was helpful, as I loved my mom.

If you have a whole grounding in this understanding, then it is functioning subconsciously. We describe this as 'the practice clicking in.' If one's never done this kind of work, then it can be confusing because you don't have the psyche and viewpoint to be with these things.

So, my advice to the questioner is to go back, especially when everything fails, to the instructions that are the Four Noble Truths in the moment, not intellectually, but experientially and existentially: 'So, what is it now? What's the desire?' Then be with the confusion. Be with the horribleness as an object in awareness. Again, it's easy for me to say, but I encourage that grounding.



QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: When you do *mettā* meditation, the benefits are almost instantaneous. I was wondering about the object or the person you are sending *mettā* to. Do the benefits spill over onto them?

A: Well, if you send an e-mail notifying them that you are sending *mettā*, they'll feel good. But if you don't, I do not know. So do both. Send *mettā* and an e-mail. You've got it covered.

I don't find that way of talking about *mettā bhavana* in the texts. The thing is, you're assuming that there is a 'you' and a 'them'. In Buddhist philosophy, that's problematic. I'm sorry. I don't want to destroy your relationships. On one level, you feel good sending *mettā*. Other than that, I don't know.

Now, is your consciousness different than my consciousness? Is the knowing different? I don't know. Certainly, my knees and haircut are different from yours. Those are objects. But what about consciousness itself? This is where thought, for me, gets mysterious. So, I don't go there. When I started meditating, I never picked up *mettā bhavana* as a practice of sending out energy. I did not learn it that way. I was taught that the mind can be imbued with loving-kindness by thinking of others. When the mind is filled with loving-kindness, it becomes a powerful antidote to all forms of judgement, criticism, and negativity. Also, the individual can participate in society with an attitude of loving-kindness.

I never learned to send out *mettā* and I don't want to be a spoilsport with this. Go for it if the method works for you.

Sending out *mettā* always seemed to me to be an idea from the Christian tradition. My understanding of it is that the whole

sense of individuality (I'm here and you're out there) needs to be challenged if we're going to take the teachings on *anattā* seriously. You can use it as a verbal strategy. For example, 'Milena, may you be well. Bernard, may you be well.' That can work. But at a deeper level, you have to question, 'Who is this person? Is it the body, emotions, or personal history?' For example, I live in Tisarana Buddhist Monastery in Perth, Canada. That's not untrue. But is there a real 'I' there or a 'me' in this experience? That's what we look into. Each time we investigate, the sense of self vanishes and there's the emptiness of knowing. But it's not vacuity. The emptiness of knowing is vibrant. It's alive. It isn't self-identified with this mind and body.

Q: What is ignorance?

A: In Buddhism, ignorance is viewed around the three characteristics of impermanence, not-self, and dissatisfaction: Ignorance is when, in that which is impermanent, you see permanence; when, in that which is not a self-entity, you see self; and when, in that which is unsatisfactory, you see satisfactoriness.

Let's say you have a meditation, which is really neat. You have been waiting for years, and finally, your mind is blissed out, as described in the books. You feel like you've achieved a goal. The next day your mind is absolute twaddle during meditation. You lose it then. Why did that happen? You took the impermanent experience as being permanent. That is ignorance. As a result, you suffered. You took the whole experience of attaining bliss and losing it the next day personally. This view caused suffering. Plus, you invested a sense of satisfaction in the experience that was very short-lived, and hence it was unsatisfactory.

So, all experiences that arise and cease are unsatisfactory. It's not bad or ugly. It's just not the Unconditioned. It is important to

understand that a beautiful experience is unsatisfactory because it's bound to change. So, don't make it more than it is. Enjoy it for what it is and be grateful. When it changes, accepting it as the way it's supposed to be is wisdom. So, when that sense of attainment ceases and you start to feel self-doubt, tell yourself, 'Oh, it's supposed to change. Happiness is supposed to change to unhappiness.' That's wisdom.

Luang Por Sumedho's book, *Don't Take Your Life Personally*, would be a good one to read. Also, observe how much you're suffering because of taking things personally.

As I mentioned earlier, there is individuality and individual responsibility. In Buddhism, that is what you have to get right. If you determine to not take it personally, but are socially irresponsible, you don't understand the teachings. Buddhism has both. It espouses social responsibilities, strong ethics, a powerful sense of social norms and commitments, and social justice. Through the teachings about not taking it personally, we're trying to find that deep peace and silence behind all experiences.

The three characteristics of *saṁsāra* are one way to define ignorance. Another definition would be not understanding the Four Noble Truths and that the cause of suffering is attachment to desire. For instance, with the fears I faced, I thought the cause of my suffering was fear. So, I ran away from it. I did not see that the problem was the attachment to fear through the desire of not wanting it.

You could talk about ignorance in various ways – such as being caught up in the conditioned realm and not noticing the Unconditioned.

Q: Please expand on how becoming is a form of desire and how to work with the compulsion of becoming.

A: The Pali word for becoming is *bhava*, as in *bhava-taṇhā* (desire for a future state). The English word, 'desire,' has a broad context. It

can be good or stupid. There's also biological desire. *Taṇhā* (thirst, craving) is desire conjoined with ignorance, as opposed to the desire to be free from suffering, which is a wholesome one. According to the teachings, not all desires are wrong.

Bhava-taṇhā (desire for a future state), *vibhava-taṇhā* (desire to get rid of) and *kāma-taṇhā* (sensual desire) are the three forms of desire the Buddha asked us to contemplate. I see *kāma-taṇhā* as the constant consuming of experience be it mental, visual, food-related, or sexual. If you're always indulging in sensory experiences, then you're not available to the Unconditioned.

Bhava-taṇhā is the sense of going somewhere or becoming something. The third is *vibhava-taṇhā,* a pushing away or rejection, where there is a sense of resistance. The way *bhava* or becoming might arise, specifically in meditation, is around reading too much about attainments. This is a kind of trouble we get into in Theravada Buddhism. We read about masters who worked diligently and had a fantastic experience. You also want that. You read about levels of concentration, and wish, 'I'd like just a bit of that.' In addition to this, every now and then you get a taste of something. Your meditation works and it's not just about painful knees. You're really in trouble if you've programmed yourself to get what the masters got; get what the texts say you should get; or get that experience you just had or the person next to you had.

I sometimes do interviews with small groups of people during retreats. In those interviews, people talk about the struggles they have in meditation. Every now and then, one person will look radiant, lit up with insight. Everyone else would naturally wish for a similar experience. That want would be *bhava-taṇhā*. It's very insidious when you sit down with an agenda to either repeat the performance you had two years ago or get a certain level of attainment or concentration. That attitude is conjoined with ignorance, not awareness. Quite often, this cannot be noticed.

It's easy to joke about it in this facetious way because I think we've all been there. We can relate to this *bhava*. We've also seen that you can be really, really trying and not actually noticing that you're trying to get something.

That's why the kind of language I'm trying to use is the language of, 'What's it really like now.' Simple words. For example, 'Listen to sound', or, 'Feel the wind on your face'. Just very ordinary experiences to get to that sense of non-becoming. In terms of contemplative language, I find the Noble Eightfold Path very helpful. We have right understanding, right thought, and right intention. This kind of thinking, for me, is not analytical. It is just popping in words that remind me of right understanding.

The project of enlightenment cannot be in time because anything in time must be born, and if it's born, it will die. Your relationship to time becomes fundamental to your philosophical attitude towards this whole business. Freedom or the Unconditioned cannot be tomorrow or in the future. It does not make sense. It's not possible. It can only be *akālika dhamma,* here and now; not a matter of time. This understanding begins to underpin your attitudes and the efforts you're making. If you notice you're trying to get something, then you're beginning to undercut the whole sense of 'me in time becoming something'. That insight, which is a part of right understanding, will serve your analytical process. Your thinking processes are now impelled, assisted, directed, or intended by those right understandings. You naturally start to use language (e.g. non-becoming and non-resistance) that enunciates or makes conscious your right understanding. All that conscious use of language can bring you into *akālika dhamma*.

Indeed, there are worldly forms of becoming. People have ambitions and want to achieve certain goals. Is achievement wrong? Are you going to live under a rock for the rest of your life and watch turtles? Take the case of building a monastery in central Ontario

without enough funds. That's a crazy, ambitious idea, isn't it? Can the ambition be from goodness or from a sense of responsibility of wanting to put food on the table for the children and earn enough so that they can go to university? Those can be good ambitions. We have jobs, skills, and ambitions, but they don't have to be egotistical. Your job becomes your monastery. Your family is your monastery. That's where you learn.

Ambitions can be good. You'd like to improve your skills be it gardening, teaching, or woodworking. The whole becoming thing at a worldly level isn't a recipe for being an uninteresting and boring person. There is beauty, culture, and art, which can all be uplifting. But worldly skills are 'in time.' If I want to improve my woodworking skills, then I need to study, work, and make mistakes. So, the development of skill is in time. The development of meditation, you could say, is also in time. You get better at it. But spiritual realisation is here and now; not a matter of time. So, the meditation skills you are developing are not for you to get something later, but to be better at knowing now. This is *akālika dhamma*.

Q: How do you discern whether to leave a situation or to stay with it and just accept the suffering?

A: Yes, it's life, isn't it? When do you retreat? There's no easy answer but one considers the situation. If it is abusive, then get out of there, if you can. Also, if the situation is so overwhelming that you cannot be aware and mindful, then you're heading for trouble because the stress you are experiencing is going to compound.

The other considerations are social responsibilities like children and finances. They are complex. There are no easy answers. I suppose you could be looking at things like: 'I should be doing something' or 'I should be a certain way'. Be careful of those. Maybe there are cultural norms that are putting pressure on you to do something or

a feeling of fear or insecurity. Get in contact with the underlying resistance to the situation. Ask yourself, 'Why is it like that?'

I spoke earlier about a situation where I got burnt out. I got so overwhelmed by it that I didn't see what was happening to me. The idea of strategic retreat must be considered in difficult situations. The idea that you should face and work through all the stresses you face is an absolute one that you should not hold on to, as it might crush you. That's an absolutist, heroic mindset, which is just another sense of self and personality. This mindset could have been inculcated into you culturally. There is so much conditioning in that attitude. Try to look at the underlying self-view. If you're exhausted and crying all the time, then you need space and help. That's very important. But again, how do you know? I'm not sure. Seek the help of *kalyāṇamittas* (spiritual friends). They're not going to preach to you. You can bounce off ideas with them. They can give you an external perspective, which is important. You don't want to be alone during tough times. *Kalyāṇamittas* can provide you with information and protection when making tough decisions.

The monastic life is based on spiritual friendship. The Vinaya is not designed for solitude. Monks like solitude, but the Vinaya is designed for community living with *kalyāṇamittas*, so that we can help each other.

Q: Please explain the phrase, 'Four pairs of persons, the eight kinds of noble beings,' in the *Buddha-dhamma-saṅgha-guṇā* chant?

A: It refers to the four levels of attainment – stream-entry, once-returning, non-returner, and arahant. The commentary literature mentions two phases – *magga* (path) and *phala* (fruit) – for each level. It's complex. But it's talking about Aryans, which is a Sanskrit word for 'noble'. This word is used in Theravada Buddhism, and these four levels refer to the Aryans or the noble disciples of the Buddha.

The phrase describes the path to the Deathless. There's also a lessening of greed and hatred at each of these levels. The arahant is a fully awakened person. I would recommend reading *No Worries* to get a sense of the four levels of attainment. I think Luang Por Liem is fully attained from what he's recorded as saying in that book.

The first level (stream-entry) happens when the first three fetters of *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* (personality view), *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* (attachment to rites and rituals), and *vicikicchā* (doubt about the Path) are broken. Personality view is taking things personally. For instance, rabbiting away with angry thoughts induced by self-view, such as: 'That was idiotic' or 'I'm never going to forgive him.' When I see anger as anger, I'm in the stream of Dhamma.

Doubt is when you don't have faith in awareness. You keep doubting and trying to figure it all out. A lack of faith in the awareness of change blocks the deepening of wisdom. At that time, you're in the stream of thought.

If I think my spiritual practice is a time-bound exercise which will get me enlightened later on, that's a ritual to which one can get attached. For instance, I pray to a deity with the hope that the deity will look out for me in the future. This is a superstitious ritual. All rituals and superstitions are about time – whereas Dhamma is timeless, here and now, and not a matter of time.

BUDDHA DHAMMA SANGHA GUNĀ

(Qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma & Sangha)

Iti pi so bhagavā arahaṁ sammā-sambuddho

He, the Blessed One, is indeed the Pure One, the Perfectly Enlightened One.

Vijjā-caraṇa-sampanno sugato loka-vidū

He is impeccable in conduct and understanding, the Accomplished One, the Knower of the Worlds.

Anuttaro purisa-damma-sārathī

He trains perfectly those who wish to be trained;

Satthā devamanussānaṁ buddho bhagavāti

He is Teacher of gods and humans; he is Awake and Holy.

Svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo, sandiṭṭhiko, akāliko, ehi-passiko

The Dhamma is well-expounded by the Blessed One, apparent here and now, timeless, encouraging investigation,

Opanayiko, paccattaṁ veditabbo viññūhīti

Leading inwards, to be experienced individually by the wise.

Supaṭipanno bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho

They are the Blessed One's disciples, who have practised well,

Uju-paṭipanno bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho

Who have practised directly,

Ñāya-paṭipanno bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho

Who have practised insightfully,

Sāmīci-paṭipanno bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho

Those who practise with integrity —

Yad-idaṁ cattāri purisa-yugāni aṭṭha purisa-puggalā

That is the four pairs of persons, the eight kinds of noble beings —

Esa bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho

These are the Blessed One's disciples,

Āhuneyyo, pāhuneyyo, dakkhiṇeyyo, añjali-karanīyo

Such ones are worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of respect.

Anuttaraṁ puññakkhettaṁ lokassāti

They give occasion for incomparable goodness to arise in the world.

DAY FOUR

YOU CAN'T PUT AN END TO THINKING BY THINKING

Sometimes we feel our aversion towards a person or situations is justified. While we don't condone things that we strongly and morally disagree with, we unwittingly create, in the mind, the tendencies towards aversion or righteous hatred by entertaining them as justified causes.

So, how does one live without endorsing things that feel wrong while avoiding the worldly dhammas of hatred?

In our culture, this aversion or righteous indignation is justified. But it's still your mind that is getting angry, so be careful. When someone was righteously indignant, Luang Por Chah said, '*Tuk dae mai jing, jing dae mai tuk,*' which in Thai means, 'It's right but it's not true. It's true but it's not right.' I might feel indignant about something, and everyone might agree that I'm right in feeling that way. But my heart may be full of aversion or delusion, so it's not right.

If anger or indignation comes from a strong sense of self and other, then that will create more anger or indignation in your mind, which will manifest in other areas of your life. To keep the heart open within the stupidity and cruelty of the world requires equanimity.

The world is sometimes a Mary Oliver poem. More often than not, it is a crazy place. You really want to protect the mind because it is a delicate space that easily picks up material, toxic or otherwise. You can be affected negatively by offensive, toxic experiences, so safeguard the inner space. That's the idea of *indriya saṃvara*

(sense restraint), which is an important part of our monastic life. *Indriya saṃvara* doesn't mean you can't have fun or do things that bring joy. It's just that there is a sense of: 'What kind of information am I putting into my mind? How skilful is that going to be for my future?'

If you find yourself involved in information that is upsetting, and it consequently keeps rebounding in your mind for hours, then see how you can lessen exposure to that kind of messages. Sometimes you can't. Someone in your family may thrive on expressing righteous anger. In those instances, use a mantra to ground yourself. The mantra can be, 'May I be well. May you be well.'

It concerns me that we can take in toxic material easily. A lot of young men watch pornography, which is easily available these days. It is very destructive for the spiritual life as well as for relationships. We need to be wise in how we choose to participate in society.

Cultivating a wholesome go-to

I talk a lot about the open heart as it seems to me a straightforward pathway to freedom because it bypasses the whole proliferation of thought we get caught up in. We can be arguing about something, saying we shouldn't be like this or trying to resolve things through thought. Too much is invested in thought, and it increasingly seems to be a go-to place for people. While thought is useful for functional purposes, it can be an impediment to liberating the heart.

In my spiritual life, I've cultivated an alternative go-to. When I started meditating, I tried solving everything, all the time, through thought. Then as a layperson in Amsterdam, I had the insight that you can't put an end to thinking by thinking. It was a profound realisation for me. Of course, you can't resolve inner conflicts through thought. So, over the years, a part of my training was to cultivate alternate points of reference. The openness of the heart became a useful, pragmatic tool and a joyous place to abide. This cultivation

took a long time due to the habits of analysis and self-disparagement. For example, I used to think that if I can do something well, then everyone else can do it better. I've gotten into trouble with that because there are some things that I can do better than others.

I would argue with myself:

No, I'm not;
Yes, I am;
No, I'm not;
Yes, I am.

This sort of thinking was just a habit. Yet, these habits that we have are very believable, aren't they? They kind of whisper in our ears, and as I had discovered in Amsterdam, you can't 'think' yourself out of these habits.

When I first started practising, I would try to go to my object of mindfulness, the breath. That didn't work. It made me think more. I didn't realise then I was averse to thought and was hanging on to the breath to get rid of thinking. But then I noticed thought. I saw it as mental proliferation. I learned to shift my attention mindfully and dwell on another part of experience, which is the heart. Now, that to me is awareness.

Awakening to thought and then shifting attention is different than trying to get rid of thinking.

When you have the awakened sensibility of 'thoughts are like this,' then you can shift to another sense door like the heart. This shift is done in full awareness, rather than as a reactive response to a horrible thought.

It's easy to talk about this but distinguishing 'what is' without unconsciously slipping into trying to get rid of negativities can be insidious in meditation. So, that's why I mentioned the idea of non-resistance. 'It's like this' even though the thoughts may be horrible or boring. Reflect, 'Oh, boring thoughts feel like this.' Even that

label is kind of negative, isn't it? So, cultivate a wholesome go-to, focus on the language, and simply contemplate, 'Thoughts are like this.'

Awareness as conscious space

With the instructions around 'this is in awareness,' I'm trying to indicate awareness as space, conscious space, You've all heard me say, 'There is sound and there is bodily sensation. Sound is changing.' As soon as I perceive sound as changing, witnessing becomes stronger. If I'm pursuing the quality of sound, then concentration sharpens. But what about awareness?

Concentrating on an object is fine but I found it constricting. The language of space was much more freeing.

The first time I visited Canada after becoming a monk, I heard the Bob Dylan song, *The Times They Are A Changin'*, at a store. I just fell in love with that song. I hadn't heard Bob Dylan in a decade, so that was very attractive. On the other hand, the sound of someone scratching their fingers on a chalkboard would be unattractive.

Awareness is the capacity to not be drawn to the quality of the experience, but simply knowing it as movement or change.

You can see how important that is in liberation. The realisation of transcendent peace is not a function of beauty, ugliness, attraction, repulsion, or a song you love. It's something deeper.

Witnessing, again and again

In 1977, I was living at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara in London, UK. The vihara's shrine room was on a busy street and right across from a pub. A rock band used to practise in the pub. The vihara was an old Edwardian building with 11-ft tall windows that didn't have double glazing, so it was cold and noisy. One day, Luang Por Chah led us in meditation. He said, 'You think that noise is bothering you. Stop going out there and bothering

that noise.' It was such a good teaching because the noise was just doing what it does. But the desire mind was saying, 'Oh, be quiet. We want to meditate.'

Quite often we're bothering the sense experience that's coming into consciousness. So, keep coming back to this simple witnessing, again and again.

Do you have a go-to, such as spaciousness or an object, that reminds you of witnessing? If so, then you're not holding onto an experience. Rather you're able to come back to witnessing.

Sound of silence

I use the heart a lot. One of Luang Por Sumedho's recommendations is to use the sound of silence. When the mind gets very spacious and open, you notice a kind of electronic buzz in the background. It's called the *nāda*-sound (of mental silence) in yoga and it's there all the time. Noticing this sound of silence is a good way to relax the mind into a spacious, empty (though not empty of vitality), silent, and open state. If you notice that *nāda*-sound, then see if you can abide with it. The language of space or sound of silence indicates that awareness is not just concentrating on an object. Abiding in that is a sign of non-grasping.

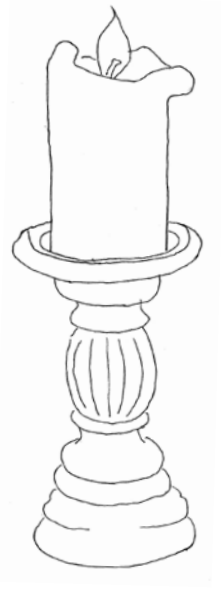
Awareness has the capacity to accept all things and let go of all things.

The Tibetans are very good at teaching space or *ākāsa* meditation. They live high up on the ridge of mountains with unobstructed, clear, and expansive views of the sky. I think the spacious aspect of our meditation practice is more enigmatic than, say, focusing on the out-breath, which is a concrete thing. Experiment with this suggestion, 'What would space mean here?' Now, don't try to figure it out, as it's intuitive.

With space, openness, and the witnessing of change, you have a lovely abiding for your practice.

A GARLAND OF MARIGOLDS

This morning, a lay friend brought a handmade garland of marigolds for the shrine. This way of expressing devotion is uplifting and common in Asia, but not practised a lot here by Westerners. *Bhakti* is a beautiful way of bringing up a sense of devotion, aspiration, and gratitude for the Triple Gem and humankind's opportunity to awaken. At home, you can have a shrine and decorate it with flowers and candles. The shrine can be in the room where you meditate. You wipe dust off the Buddha images regularly and keep the place clean. This way, it becomes a place of reverence. While we may aspire to have reverence for everything all the time, today, this garland of flowers is a simple expression of deep devotion.



THE PAGE RATHER THAN THE PRINT

We're almost midway through the retreat. I'm reminded of Luang Por Chah's *ovāda* (exhortation), 'If you want to meditate, meditate. If you don't want to meditate, meditate. If your meditation makes you peaceful, accept it. And if your meditation doesn't make you peaceful, then accept that too.'

Remember a meditation retreat is not about interesting experiences. If this was a symposium, then the organisers would be busy organising entertaining speakers and lectures on, say, bio-feedback and *mettā bhāvanā*. There may be panel discussions on social justice issues and the 'Buddhist escapism called monasticism'. We might also have a fireside chat where someone is making me justify my existence. That would be exciting and interesting.

However, the schedule in a retreat is the same every day. We do try to create a good environment, though, which is important.

The whole point of a retreat is not to create interesting experiences. Your meditative experience may be fantastic, but the focus of a retreat is more on the blank, white spaces of a page rather than the printed words.

What is Luang Por Chah's admonition pointing to? Engagement with the world of interest and boredom is one of seeking something. In a retreat, we're not seeking any kind of experience.

We're just noticing that in the awareness of change, irrespective of the quality of the experience, there's peace. Whereas in situations where you are trying to attract interest, you're not looking for peace, rather stimulation (which is fine too, but quite different).

In monasteries, we don't change the language of the chants or the chanter. We don't try to have more interesting events. It is the same thing, day in and day out. This would be boring for people who seek fascinating experiences. But if you're a contemplative, then you just begin to watch like and dislike. It's no longer about the seeking of likable or dislikeable experiences or getting rid of them. It's rather the abiding with this whole movement of experience. That's the kind of thing we do in a retreat.

It is important to bring into full awareness thoughts like, 'Well, that's enough. Let's do something interesting;' 'I'm not getting anywhere;' or 'I could be doing something useful.'

Going beyond experiences

The idea of a retreat is to trust in the structure of the retreat rather than in the structure of your thoughts and what the mind is creating around the retreat. Obviously, if something's going on in the family, you must take care of it. You're not passive in a foolish way. In monasteries, you give up personal preferences for the routine. You have pujas in the mornings and evenings, work periods and private time. You do the same thing every day. There's no way you're going to like it all the time.

So, if you want to meditate, mediate. If you don't want to meditate, meditate. Then your meditation goes beyond, 'Oh, I feel like meditating today. That'd be nice;' or 'I don't think I'll meditate today.' That kind of attitude to practice doesn't give you strength because it's based on comfort and desire. You may feel like you don't have energy in the morning, but you resolve to attend the morning meditation. You use the time to look at boredom. Going beyond the experience gives you strength.

Most monks get fed up with Pali chanting. They'd rather hear *The Grateful Dead* or some other music. But then the chanting inspires them. When 100 monks are chanting, you end up in tears because

it's uplifting and beautiful. What could also happen is that you live in a monastery with four tone-deaf monks, and you hate it. These are the kind of experiences one has, but 'it's like this'. Hating the chanting 'feels like this,' and inspiration 'feels like this'. The mind is not at peace because of inspiration or disappointment.

A peaceful mind is that which can abide in the movement of experience.

It's the white of the page rather than the quality of the print. That's why a long retreat is helpful. If you're starting to negotiate with yourself about why you should be doing something else, I suggest you stick to the program, and see what happens. You won't know until you persevere.

The feelings of not wanting to meditate, thinking you're not getting anywhere, or that your meditation is not very good are not extreme emotions like anger or fear; they're just haunting doubts. Try to make them conscious. Then you're in the witnessing mode. You're on the page rather than the print. Keep coming back to that. The results aren't apparent immediately. You will slowly begin to intuit that silence is the witness, stillness is the witness. The Unconditioned is somehow in the witnessing rather than in the experience. You intuit that and become naturally interested in it. But if you move on any impulsive interest, or with boredom, away from the suggested structure, then you lose the opportunity to witness.

Having said that, you don't want to wilfully push yourself. So, if you're feeling like you must stay on the retreat and must do this, then that's not really the awakened mind. It's again the ego mind, which is well motivated, but not awakened to the feeling of 'I have to do this'. It won't give you insight. It won't give you peace. You might make it through this retreat, but you may never want to do another one for the rest of your life. That's the downfall of wilfulness, which isn't conjoined with wisdom. We're using will

power to do this retreat but it's not blind or unhappy; the idea is more around curiosity. In each meditation try to make conscious, 'What's going on now? How do I feel about this moment? How is it?' You then work from there, from the way things are.

Choiceless awareness

In the last few talks, I've been suggesting various perspectives you might use. Too many approaches can be confusing and you may not know which one to follow. To review, experiment with an object like the breath or the heart to know how to localise your attention, ground yourself, and compose the mind. This is important. It's also necessary to develop the capacity to let go of the object and be in choiceless awareness – just being with the flow of life, coming and going.

In my experience, some people don't like breath meditation because of control issues. It doesn't work for them. If that's the case, my suggestion would be to open the mind. Try choiceless awareness. Experiment with the sound of silence.

Others find that they get too lost in thought. So, they need to compose and collect their minds on something.

Many know how to do both. I don't know what works for you, but if you understand these two perspectives, then you can experiment with them.

Enriching the practice with faith and energy

The sound of silence was Luang Por Sumedho's go-to reference point for letting go. He heard that sound as a sāmanera but dismissed it. In 1977, when he was walking on the busy Haverstock Hill Street in the UK, the sound of silence suddenly came very strongly into his consciousness. He started to use it like a touchstone consistently, as a reminder to non-grasping, space, and awareness. He did that for

many years before teaching it. If you notice that spaciousness, then you can develop it. You're still engaged with the world, though, doing what you must do.

Luang Por would train himself to return to that sound in the middle of activities, such as when he was riding the Tube (underground rail system) in London or during a committee meeting. People thought he was zoning out. He was just aware of the sound of silence. He would use it all the time while being a diligent abbot, good friend, and a great teacher. He was always working on his own 'project'.

Space is another touchstone that can bring you back to remembering what you already know. Is there something else that would remind you of the awakened mind? The page rather than the print? That would be very helpful, wouldn't it?

Sometimes people use mantras. I used 'infinite patience, boundless compassion' for two years. It was helpful – although those two years weren't filled with infinite patience and boundless compassion! However, the idea is that through recollecting a mantra, the practice becomes enriched with more faith and energy. So this was a good phrase for me to keep making conscious. It wasn't parroting. It was a recollected phrase, arising from insight. It helped my mind avoid getting caught up in the text and abiding in spaciousness.

MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH THE WAY THINGS ARE

The text and print on the page are sound, bodily feelings, thought, emotion, smell, and taste. The awareness, witnessing, or the knowing is the blank space on the page.

Be the knowing.

Use a sense object to remind you of the knowing. So, if you listen to sound, then that reminds you of the page.

The page has no real qualities; it's not big or small. It's just knowing. The project is to sustain that knowing of the way things are for long periods of time.

How might you do that?

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: Do you teach suttas? How does one formally study them?

A: I don't teach suttas. I don't have the gifts of scholarship or language and I'm not very good at that. I'm sure you'll find the structures online. Luang Por Sumedho always recommended to us *The Word of the Buddha* by Nyanatiloka Mahathera. It is a compilation of references to the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. It has little Pali stanzas describing the Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path as well as some commentary. My first teacher warned me to be careful of the commentaries, so I just looked at translations of the original text.

In terms of study, I've been trained to use the Four Noble Truths as the backbone, and then contemplate the Noble Eightfold Path. For instance, you can look at the various aspects of right understanding and really get your head around them. That's very helpful.

I've found that some people who are interested in Buddhism but haven't done a formal study practice can get confused between psychology, mystical Christianity, Rumi, and Tibetan Buddhism. That is because they have a whole overlay of good ideas but lack a consistent intellectual framework or a coherent use of language. Sometimes they fall into doubt because they're using different paradigms from various streams of philosophies and teachings. For example, the word, 'emptiness,' I think, is used differently in Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. One reads a text and can take emptiness to mean the same thing across the board. All teachers are wonderful and while there is value in figuring out the Theravada

terminologies and meanings, it is by no means setting out a fundamentalist position.

The point of knowing the model is for you to have intellectual clarity.

For me, that occurred in India in 1971-72. It was a transformative year for me. I came across J. Krishnamurti's teachings, which opened my mind to experiences I'd had as a child. A month later, I met Venerable Bhikkhu Ñanasuci. He was a smart person and a good friend with a strong memory of the suttas. He walked me through some of them, such as the teachings on dependent origination. Due to his instructions and inspiration, I eventually determined to become a monk. He was rigorous about language and the use of terminologies in Theravada Buddhism.

If you want to learn suttas, please do so, but don't consider it as an encyclopaedic exercise. Studying suttas is not about an endless accumulation of knowledge, as it can lead to doubt. That was my experience, at least.

The Buddhist 'project' is to understand why the Buddha talks about this and that, and how these ideas lead to the unshakeable deliverance of the heart. Study may help to reduce intellectual doubt. You will still experience self-doubt as an emotional quality but getting your head around the Buddhist project is helpful.

The Buddha was an excellent teacher. It took me a long time to assimilate the teachings because I don't have the memory of an academician.

I had an interesting incident with Luang Por Sumedho once. During a Dhamma meeting, an audience member asked him the meaning of a commonly used Pali word. Neither of us knew the meaning! When you're a young monk, you diligently study the teachings. In time you begin to understand the project, and

the analysis falls away. There's still a lot of work to do, but you understand the project.

My early years were filled with lots of study. Then, I had the good fortune of living very close to Luang Por Sumedho for five or six years, taking care of him and listening to his teachings all the time. My education was primarily through the oral tradition rather than by reading scriptures. But I did have that basis of the Four Noble Truths and the intellectual structure around them. Most monks are speaking with those teachings in mind although they might not explain them intellectually. Usually, a Theravada monastic's reference points are those structures. They could be trying to pitch it in contemporary language and therefore refraining from using Pali words. But if you have an intellectual understanding of those structures, you can grasp the intention of the teaching. I try to use different phrases because words tend to lose their contemplative aspects when people hear them repeatedly. The Buddhist teachings are reflective. They are like a mirror that help you see what you're doing in terms of your spiritual practice vis-a-vis what the Buddha is suggesting.

Buddhism, or any spiritual tradition for that matter, fails when it turns into a fundamental belief system of, 'only this is right; nothing else is true.' This is a type of superstition. A lot of pain and craziness arise in the world due to such rigid beliefs. That's why people get turned off by religion.

Fundamentalism is the wrong way to go. That is attachment. If you have no intellectual structure, you can be confused by the use of language in different traditions. Once you have understood a structure – Theravada for me – you can use it to reflect on other spiritual teachings. For example, I have reflected on Tibetan Buddhism, Rumi, Advaita Vedanta, and Thomas Merton (a Roman Catholic monk). Sometimes, I do not understand what they are explaining or what they're pointing to. But I enjoy my own

Buddhist understanding being challenged by the writings of other spiritual teachers whom I respect. My own intellectual structures give me a way of considering what those teachers are offering. It's not that I believe or disbelieve what the other traditions are saying, but I try to use them as a way of enriching and strengthening my own capacity for reflection and contemplation.

Q: While doing sitting meditation, I experience a lot of tension in my face, shoulders, and upper back. How can I release that tension?

A: This is very common. One of the ways, of course, would be to do *yoga nidra* because you don't have to hold the body up in that sitting posture. Do it when you've got lots of energy, as it's not an aid to falling asleep. That is not what you are trying to do. Check, 'Is there tension in the body? What's going on?' Then do the sitting meditation. Contrast is good, as it helps you perceive the situation more clearly. You can also compare your experiences. Be curious and try to find the difference.

Quite often, the desire to fix arises in meditation. You can get caught up with trying to fix the posture and bodily tensions. Just see how that whole fixing part is itself a type of desire.

Somehow you must leave it alone. One way of doing so is by engaging in whole-body awareness – seeing the body and different body parts in awareness. As I suggested in an earlier meditation (p60), notice the mouth, eyes, etc., are in awareness. Sense that the body is in awareness rather than awareness being in the body. This exercise can be helpful.

You could also go for a walk or have a biscuit. Just change the whole program. It's similar to craft. When I'm working in the wood shop, if things are not going well, then I step out, go for a walk, watch the deers, etc. The principle is the same. So, do something different. Then come back and see what's happening. Walking away from

things can be skilful. This allows you to compare experiences. You get a sense of the desire to fix things. This is again a skill in the contemplative's craft. Ask yourself, 'What's the desire here? Where is the desire? What does the desire feel like?' You are then in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths.

It's a kind of inquiring into, rather than trying to let go of pain: 'What do I want here? Where's the wanting here?' Then wait and see if you can observe the desire. That inquiry process will guide you to understand the real suffering in this situation. Is it the pain, tension, or constriction? Is it not wanting the pain and instead wanting something else?

If you apply the teaching of dependent origination, then you can see the pain dependently originated from attachment to desire. You then look at that. You're always going back to the Four Noble Truths as your contemplative tool. This basic inquiry is fruitful. It will give you some insight into the experience. Of course, if it's too tough, walk away and try later.

Q: As a young child, the seeds of who I should be (doctor, more like my brother, etc.) were baked into my consciousness by my parents. When meditating, I can see the ocean's waves from the shore and observe doubt as doubt. Yet, off the cushion, it is my nagging-in-the-shadows companion. How do you work with doubt outside of formal practice?

A: Doubt is not uncommon. My problem was fear, so I would ask, 'Is there an underlying fear?' Just inquire, 'What's the underlying energy?' Quite often, these things are grounded in fear, which is a huge part of our psyche. Then there are the overlays of personality to deal with the fear as well as living in society in the way we've been conditioned.

First of all, whenever you feel fear, anytime at all, get to know it bodily: 'Where is it in the body?' In time, you will get good at recognising fear as a bodily function.

When these self-narratives of 'I should' come up, see if there's a bodily component to them. Are they familiar? Have you sensed them before?

If you get good at recognising this in situations that aren't too demanding, then you can slowly begin to understand these bodily experiences in more constricted and complex times. You develop awareness in the non-complex parts of your life, and then bring it in naturally into the challenging issues.

In my experience, though, it's quite often not a problem of doubt, which, for me, is more intellectual. For example, what is emptiness in Theravada Buddhism? So, the thinking, analysing, as well as the trying to always get the right answer and never getting a response that's good enough, creates more doubt. Perhaps your experience is more like fear that's been conditioned societally and by family, and which is now manifesting. You work through that by getting really good at awareness of the body and the heart *chakra*. You want to develop a certain level of awareness about the bodily sensations in your guts, heart, etc., so that you can multitask in terms of awareness. You want to get this second-level awareness of bodily feelings, so that when you face complexities, you've always got that going. All constrictions will become obvious and you can stay with it, even in social situations. You're staying there with it and getting to know it. This breaks the attachment because you're not believing in the thought pattern.

If thought patterns come up about a perceived inadequacy, just say to yourself, 'Oh, this is what inadequacy feels like.' Keep coming back to that statement and holding it in your body. But don't expect the feelings to disappear. It doesn't work that way. It's about

entering into the feeling of inadequacy or self-doubt. Over time, you get good at recognising the thought patterns.

This is the work, because you're taking responsibility and not mentally proliferating about the doubtful thoughts. If these thought patterns got conditioned over 20 formative years of your life, it's going to take a long time to liberate it from consciousness. Be very kind and acknowledge, 'This is not easy but it's good work.' It takes a lot of compassion and patience, so be gentle. Good luck.

Q: How do you prepare for death and the last stages of life? What Buddhist practices, chants, and Theravada rituals are helpful?

A: If you think consciousness dies with the body, then dwell on the good work you've done and the loving relationships you've had.

In the last few years, several friends of the monastery with terminal cancer have asked me, 'I'm on palliative care now. How do I do dying?'

My response has been, 'What do you think consciousness is? Do you think it gets snuffed out with the death of the body? Do you perceive it as a material element or not?'

All these women have said, 'No, I don't think consciousness is a physical phenomenon.'

Then, I ask them to reflect, 'What do you think happens to consciousness at the death of the body?'

'I don't know' would be an honest answer, but what would be the best way to explore that question when you're dying?

It would be through mindfulness and awareness of the present moment.

When you're talking to someone about death and dying, you must use the language and religious philosophy they follow. Understand

their philosophical or religious backgrounds. Do not argue about it. Rather, think how you can use that model of consciousness and concepts about birth and death to make that person happy and contented. Don't try to convert them, because that would be oppressive. Engage in this with the attitude of not knowing the person – even if you think you know them. Maybe you don't know where they stand on these issues. Get a dialogue going and earn their trust first. Your own intuitions will then kick in and, usually, guide you well.

When my mom died, I asked my brother to delay the mortician's arrival because I really wanted to be with her body. I washed her body, got her dressed up nicely and laid her out beautifully on the bed. I just wanted to be a part of the process as much as possible. Some of my lay friends came. We chanted, which was powerful. Then I turned off all the heat. My mom died in March when the average temperature in Ottawa (Canada) is around –5 C. I opened the windows in her room and sometimes slept on the floor. After 36 hours I became tired, as I was organising the funeral. My brother asked the mortician to take her body away. So, as a monk, obviously, I knew the chants and rituals. I had reflections that I could do, which was lovely. I also had an association of friends who could join me.

I've been to hospice to visit friends a few times. I typically chant when I'm there, which is calming for my friends. If you have a history of chanting, and have fond memories about it, then it's going to be helpful to hear the chants when you're dying. It is peaceful, and the patients relax.

In Asia, families have recordings of protective chants, which are played to people who are on their deathbeds. It is said to be soothing.

During hospice visits, I've found that even if a person doesn't have that background, they like hearing the chants because it feels wholesome and good.

There are no must-do rituals in Buddhism when a person dies. We think the momentum of a person's life creates the next possibility. The rituals are more for the living. Superstitions can creep into cultures and people think a ritual must be done in a certain manner. It is usually a function of fear.

I've seen interesting funerals in quasi-Buddhist settings. I remember the funeral of an Asian woman in New Zealand. She was part of an Indonesian music band and an Italian renaissance dancer. She loved poetry too. Her funeral was fascinating. Lovely music was played as we entered the chapel. Her ex-partner and son read poems. Then, two people performed an Italian renaissance dance routine up and down the aisles. I spoke and we did some chanting. We ran over time by an hour, but all the attendees were happy. A funeral doesn't have to be traditional. It can have different elements. The most important part of a funeral for me is the reflective portions of the service. These days, people don't want to talk about death. They only want to celebrate a person's life. A funeral is an opportunity for us to reflect on death and consciousness, which is very important.

Q: In these times, there's a lot of disruption, fear, and pain. I believe that belonging to a sangha is important, but we cannot meet in person. So, what are the qualities of a good, beneficial virtual sangha?

A: A good friend is one who raises your spiritual game. If a friend allows you to whine and complain as well as starts complaining, then they're not a spiritual friend. Instead, they're an ally of stupidity.

A *kalyāṇamitta* would make friends more aware of their moaning, complaining minds. A sangha's attitude should be: 'How can we take this to the liberation from suffering rather than moaning about the world?'

It is good to have in the sangha people who aren't afraid to bring Dhamma into the discussion and take personal responsibility, but not in a sermonising manner. It would be offensive to dismiss members' concerns. Encourage people who are like-minded and can really listen to others.

Now, how do you determine what you need in a *kalyāṇamitta* and how do you go about getting that? Monks need *samaṇa saññā*, which is the perception of a renunciant. That's very powerful. I'm inspired by monks living diligently. A sloppy monk, who is indulgent in speech, etc., won't be a *kalyāṇamitta*. Hopefully, we raise his game in some way.

Morality, diligence, social responsibility, right speech, etc., are the signs of spiritual life. This ensures encouraging and inspiring social interactions. What's the point of a group of people indulging in a moaning session about the death of the planet or something ominous? The sangha's goal would be to keep Dhamma as the focus of conversations. Study groups are good, too, as well as spaces to discuss issues like financial security, parenting, and education from a Dhamma perspective. Look at helping people out with pragmatic stuff because we really need friends in difficult times in whatever ways that might be.

Q: The Buddha taught us to be compassionate and offer *mettā* to all beings. Can we offer compassion for beings, such as public figures who may be immoral or cruel, while simultaneously disliking them or their behaviours? What are the implications if we withhold *mettā* or *karunā* (compassion) because of a dislike?

A: I don't perceive the teaching around *mettā* in that way. I sense it more as an energy system within me. When the heart is whole and functioning without the interruptions of egotism, it's always open

and available. If it closes with hatred, it would be to the detriment of those who are close to me and myself.

Now, the critical commentary about foolish and dangerous people is the socio-political part of my life. In that realm, I can strongly say what's wrong. But is *mettā bhāvanā* something you offer to one person, and withhold from another? That doesn't compute for me. The heart is either open or closed. I don't want to occupy my bandwidth with hatred. This doesn't mean I approve or condone the foolishness in the world. If I have some power, I must act to resolve that problem.

Protecting our minds from following hatred seems like a logical thing to do. At the minimum, the practice of *mettā* is not dwelling in aversion. It doesn't mean you like or even love a person. It's simply not dwelling in aversion. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, and Dr. Martin Luther King rose to the occasion; they refused to hate. Nelson Mandela refused to hate the people who imprisoned him. His Holiness the Dalai Lama refuses to hate the Chinese. He's not naïve. He's very active politically.

It's also not about others. It's about our hearts. If we're perpetuating aversion towards others, then somehow, it's going to come back into our lives. At some point, it would get triggered. There's always a price to pay.

We're not doormats, though. To call evil, evil, is correct. We have to be able to say, 'No, that's wrong. You cannot do that.'

In Buddhism, there's the conventional reality of evil in the world and the transcendent heart. Both are important.

Q: May I use my tinnitus as a *nāda* practice?

A: As far as I know, tinnitus can be of varying degrees of intensity, so be careful. If you've got a way of being at ease with the tinnitus, then leave it as is. It is important to be at peace with it.

Q: Fear, panic, and body pain have been arising in my practice. They arose after months of tranquility. I have been allowing it and sensing the peace around it. What else will be helpful?

A: Firstly, get a good physical check-up. Make sure the system is okay. Then make it a challenge of getting to know fear and panic and the desire around them. With these emotions, the problem is the desire to not be afraid and panic. It might seem counterintuitive to welcome fear and panic but do so without putting yourself in dangerous situations. It's a very hard thing to do, but this way, you'll see the desire to not have these emotions. Abide as a witness and see what the underlying desire is. Just look at fear; not the energy or the desire not to have the fear. Once you get a handle on that, you realise, 'Yes!! It's about welcoming.' That's where *mettā bhāvanā* comes in.

Mettā bhāvanā or compassion is the allowing of fear to be an object in awareness.

Thought will spin you out. Your goal can then be to not go to thought.

Go to the body and look at the craving to get rid of thoughts. Tell yourself, 'It's okay. You [thoughts] can come and stay all day.' It's hard to navigate that. But, when people have extreme situations, that changes them. Check it out on all levels because who knows how these things work.

DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

Avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā.

With ignorance as condition formations come to be.

Saṅkhārā paccayā viññāṇaṃ.

With formations as condition sense consciousness comes to be.

Viññāṇa paccayā nāma-rūpaṃ.

With sense consciousness as condition mentality-materiality comes to be.

Nāma-rūpa paccayā saḷāyatanaṃ.

With mentality-materiality as condition the six sense-spheres come to be.

Saḷāyatana paccayā phasso.

With the six sense-spheres as condition contact comes to be.

Phassa paccayā vedanā.

With contact as condition feeling comes to be.

Vedanā paccayā taṇhā.

With feeling as condition craving comes to be.

Taṇhā paccayā upādānaṃ.

With craving as condition clinging comes to be.

Upādāna paccayā bhavo.

With clinging as condition becoming comes to be.

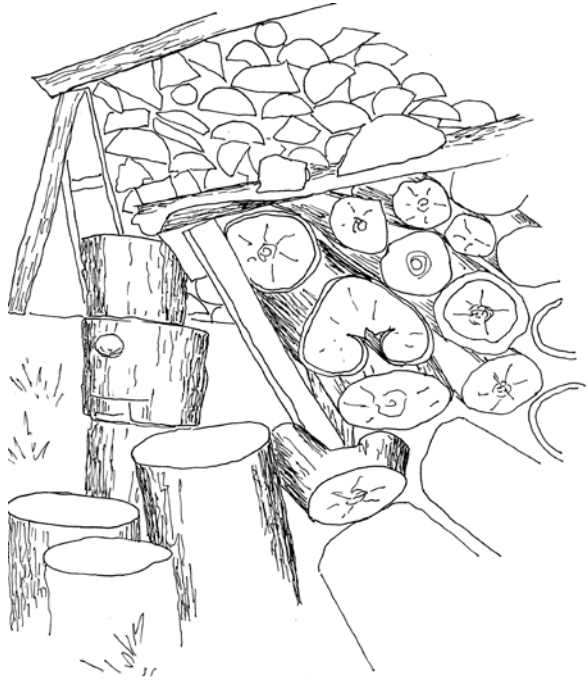
Bhava paccayā jāti.

With becoming as condition birth comes to be.

Jāti paccayā jarā maraṇaṃ soka parideva *dukkha* domanass'upāyāsā sambhavanti. Evametassa kevalassa *dukkha*kkhandhassa samudayo hoti.

With birth as condition, then old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair all come into being. Such is the origination of this entire mass of suffering.

MAJJHIMA NIKĀYA 115.11, SAṂYUTTA NIKĀYA 12.41, AṄGUTTARA NIKĀYA 10.92.



CAUSE AND EFFECT

Dependent origination is one of the first teachings Venerable Bhikkhu Ñanasuci helped me understand because it is complicated. I'll try to keep it simple. Dependent origination is about conditionality; cause and effect. It comes from *idapaccayatā*, which is a simple formula of causality. It means, 'with this, there's that; when there's not this, there's not that.' When the light switch is on, there's light. When it is turned off, there's no light. This is an example of simple causality. You could extend that causality. I can read the text in front of me because the light is on, thanks to a working light bulb and an active power grid. Dependent origination is just the way nature is functioning. It's around us all the time.

The most important question in the teaching of dependent origination is, 'What's the causality of suffering? How does it arise and cease?'

Dependent origination is a complex formulation with 12 parts. It begins, '*Avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā*' (With ignorance as a condition, there are formations). *Avijjā* doesn't mean lack of knowledge. Luang Por Sumedho's phrase, 'taking it personally,' would be the best way to look at *avijjā*.

Let's say I'm an 85-year-old grandfather with two children and four grandchildren. It's my birthday, and I'm away from my family. I'm hoping they'll wish me a happy birthday, but they forget to call. I feel terribly disappointed. So, my disappointment is dependently originating on all that came before it. If I attach to the disappointment, then the mind starts to spin self-thoughts around it: 'They don't love me anymore. They had an accident. It's not fair. I sent them so many presents last year. They're old enough

to write to me.' These self-narratives would be examples of *bhava* (becoming) and *jāti* (birth) in the dependent origination cycle.

In this scenario, I'm a sensitive person expecting something, and I feel disappointment. The craving is not to have that feeling of disappointment, which has been conditioned by my expectations. If I don't see the cause of my disappointment – the craving – then I'll jump into the situation with self-view and run with it. Thus, there is rebirth. That's one way to think of rebirth. There's rebirth of a person in thought and in emotions that run for the next day or three. To stretch this further, imagine that the family finally calls with the terrible news that their house had burned down. Chances are that since I've hated them for two days, I will start to feel guilty. So, with disappointment as a condition, there is hatred and with hatred as a condition, there's guilt.

The call would be an example of contact (*phassa*) in the wheel of dependent origination. This contact conditions the feelings of guilt and hate as well as the thought, 'I'm a terrible grandfather.' Clearly, I'm suffering with guilt and self-hatred.

What's the way out? First and foremost, do not take it personally. See disappointment as a natural phenomenon, which has arisen because of expectation. It's a chain of causality in nature. That's very hard to do. If possible, see this birth of a sense of a person as an object. Watch that in meditation. For example, you can see the regret you have about having done something last week, the resentment over what someone did to you, or your worries about the future as being just regrets, resentments, and worries. If the sense of self gets wrapped up in these emotions and you run with I/me/mine thoughts, then those thoughts condition rebirth. That's the cause of suffering.

The first step in breaking the cycle of birth and death is to see feeling as feeling, contact as contact, craving as craving, and not go to the attachment. This is difficult in the midst of it all. Let's say a

child said, 'I hate you.' That would hurt, but you're mature enough to not believe the statement. It breezes through you, and it doesn't lodge there as any kind of self. It could go the other way too. The hurt gets lodged in the body, and thoughts come up: 'It's a terrible child. I'm never going to talk to them again.'

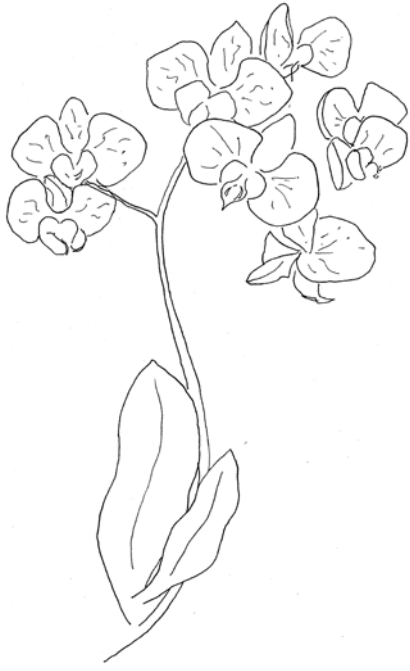
Feelings (*vedanā*) arise from contact. They can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. The Buddha's teachings have made it clear that you're in trouble if you're just looking for pleasant feelings – because it does not work that way. You can start to move away from riding the waves of pleasant and unpleasant feelings and move towards equanimity and peace. The birth-death cycle is broken by doing that.

The Buddha realised there is something that's not part of that birth-death paradigm; something which is Unborn. As soon as you put it into words, it sounds like a thing you must find. The language is very difficult here. His realisation of the Unconditioned, Uncreated, Unoriginated, Unborn, the Deathless, Peace, the Harbour, or the Island – all those words are like the trick question I keep asking, 'Does everything change?' No, because *Nibbāna* is not about change. Dependent origination is key to understanding this spiritual dimension.

Another way to approach dependent origination is by understanding *saṅkhata* and *asaṅkhata*. *Saṅkhata* means conditioned. Venerable Thanissaro Bhikkhu describes it as fabricated, built, and made up of things. On the other hand, there's the Unfabricated, Uncreated, or Unconditioned. It's not built of things. It's not dependent on things. Now, this is very mysterious. It's a challenging thing to talk about. The aim of the Buddha's realisation is not a trivial example of conditionality, but to realise the Unconditioned. That's the project. The logic is that if you're trying to find peace in that which is conditioned, you'll always be disappointed. While conditionality is important to understand,

we're trying to discover *asaṅkhata* (the negation of conditionality). If you understand the nature of relative and conventional truths, and societal responsibility through the lens of conditionality, then you'll create the conditions most suitable for your well-being as well as for the well-being of others.

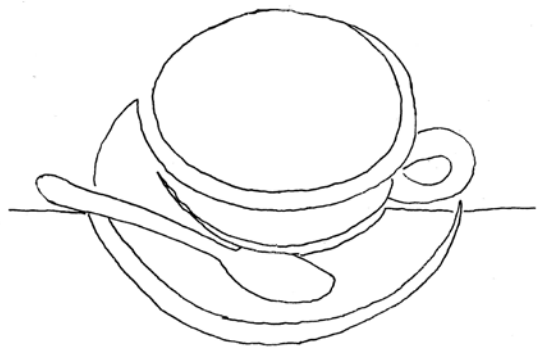
You use conditionality at the worldly level. But your spiritual practice is at the level of non-grasping. How? Let's use the earlier grandfather example. He feels disappointment and realises it's painful. But there is a way to not get reborn as a disappointed grandfather. He bears witness to the changing nature of the unpleasant feeling as well as to the unfulfilled desire to not have disappointment. He welcomes the painful feelings – 'it's like this' – and begins to see the cessation of wanting and craving.



That's one of the ways to talk about the Unconditioned. It's realised through the cessation of the mind going out into objects and the objective world.

Dependent origination is not a very complex teaching, but it can be formulated in a challenging way. The nub, for me, has always been, 'Why did the Buddha teach?' He taught because he had this realisation. Now, what does that mean in my own search for freedom and social life? I live in dependently originated circumstances. It can't be any other way. But then my curiosity is about the Unconditioned. So, I can see that my desire to have sense experiences in a certain way is the problem. I remain as witness, while the object of desire arises and ceases. I begin to realise the Third Noble Truth: The cessation of craving is the realisation of *Nibbāna*, the peace of the mind that isn't contingent and dependent on a conditioned phenomenon. So, you have both operating. How could it be otherwise? This body is dependently originated, and it will die.

Here's a Buddhist joke for you: 'Why am I sick?' 'Well, because you were born.' Jokes aside, that's the ultimate medical condition, and it's true. It's also true that I can do something about my sickness before I die. That's where dependent origination comes into the picture.



SPECIFIC CONDITIONALITY OR IDAPACCAYATĀ

Iti imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti,
imassuppādā idaṃ uppajjati.
Imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti,
imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati.

with the arising of this, that arises.
When this does not exist,
that does not come to be;
with the cessation of this, that ceases.

MAJJHIMA NIKĀYA 115.11, SAṂYUTTA NIKĀYA 12.41,
AṄGUTTARA NIKĀYA 10.92.

DAY FIVE

MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH THE MOOD OF THE MIND

What is the mood of the mind this morning? Are you tired? Are you troubled by family or health issues? Do you feel inspired? Do you want to meditate or not? What is the mood of the mind? It doesn't really matter. The knowing accepts all things and let's go of all things.

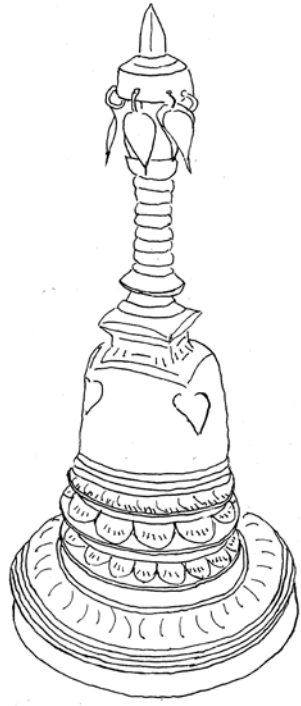
The mood of the mind might not be anything special. It can be neutral and ordinary. You could also be grumpy about feeling tired and not having a good night's sleep. But you don't have to be that way. You can just know, 'tiredness is like this' – and be patient. Then tiredness is known; it is not a problem. You don't have to create a self around it through thought, which causes unnecessary suffering.

Establish clarity of presence; that's the first thing to do. Right now, how is it? How are you? Let that become conscious. You're not having an internal discussion about your likes and dislikes. You're allowing whatever is – the good, bad, and indifferent – to become fully conscious. The mind is open, attentive, and awake. It also has the heartfelt quality of allowing life to be as it is.

After establishing clarity of presence, you enter the practice you'd like to do. I like to go to the heart and bring up the feeling of gratitude in each in- and out-breath. It's a lovely way to start

the day. On the in-breath, I bring up thoughts of gratitude. On the out-breath, I mentally wish, ‘May all beings be well.’

If you feel sleepy or dull, then increase the volume of breath. Breathe more deeply, enjoy the breath, open the chest, straighten the back, and sit taller so that you’re active in attention as well as in posture. Know the mood of the mind, rather than being it.



THE MORNING RITUAL

This morning, I felt tired. I'm 73, so I'm going to feel tired more often. But tiredness is tiredness. What to add to that? I can also be unaware, grumble to myself while brushing my teeth, and sort of be awake but not really awake. The other option is to set the intention even before sleeping to always know the mood of the mind.

Train yourself to know the mood of the mind from the moment you wake up. Right away, you're into awareness. There's freedom in that.

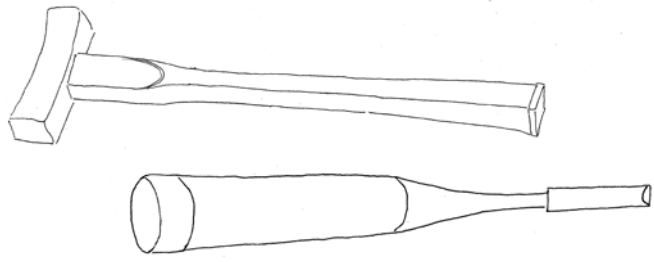
The mood is still the mood, but you don't have to create a sense of self around it. It's just life. Our practice is about not becoming, such as not becoming a grumpy person.

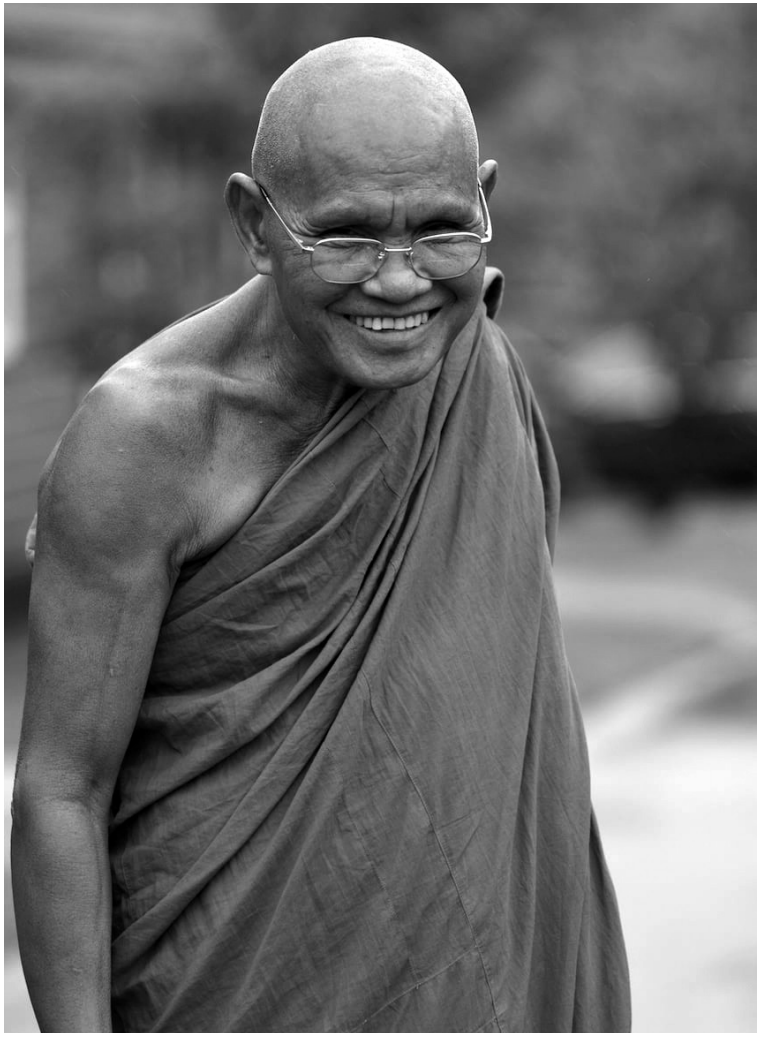
His Holiness the Dalai Lama once said, 'Compassion is the method.' I found that insightful as I thought compassion was the goal. Before I became a bhikkhu, my understanding had been that, in Theravada Buddhism, the method is strong concentration, and you attain different levels of meditative refinement. I didn't know anything about them. I just took it on trust. But then none of my teachers talked about concentration. Luang Por Chah and Luang Por Liem focused on non-grasping, non-attachment, compassion, and kindness. They encouraged us to be sensitive, generous, and responsible as well as to cultivate harmony and friendliness. That was the language used in my training. When His Holiness said, 'compassion is the method,' I understood that it's not the goal; it's what one does. Now, I can't always be compassionate. I can also feel tired. But then I can open the heart and tell myself, 'Oh, with compassion, I can know tiredness.'

I realised that awareness needs to have this heart component of acceptance and openness.

These insights are very important. That's how insights work sometimes. Someone says something, which makes sense and then becomes the path for years. For instance, what's the mood of the mind? What does the heart feel like? The mood can be tired, which is unpleasant, but then with the heart you are aware, 'Unpleasant feels this way.' It's not a problem, then. It's alright.

Waking up to the mood of the mind as soon as you get up in the morning is part of the contemplative's craft. It prepares you well for breakfast with family and whatever else comes along that day. But if you wake up and don't know the mood, then you just make the next hour or so more difficult. It is quite practical that way as is starting the day with a chant like *The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness* (p193).





Luang Por Liem

LUANG POR LIEM

LUANG POR VIRADHAMMO

Luang Por Liem is now 80 years old. He has been a monk for more than 60 years. He comes from an agricultural family with little formal education, and yet he is the abbot of Wat Nong Pah Pong in Northeast Thailand, the monastery started by Luang Por Chah. It is our main monastery. All the others are emanations from it. As you may know, Luang Por Chah was paralysed for ten years before his death; he couldn't move his body. Before he became ill in 1982, Luang Por Chah appointed Luang Por Liem as Wat Nong Pah Pong's abbot. Luang Por Liem managed the monastery's affairs and ensured Luang Por Chah was looked after well. Luang Por Liem, a highly attained monk, is very much beloved by all of us. He is engaged with work in the monastery and has even been mistaken as a labourer at times. He is a very interesting monk.

I will share a few interesting bits from the book, *No Worries,* which contains some of Luang Por Liem's teachings as well as a short biography.

The incident quoted below happened in 1969 when Luang Por Liem had been a monk for around eight to nine years and was very much in the study realm of Thai Buddhism. He must have been in his 30s then. Luang Por Liem found it unsatisfactory and was fed up with studying. He met Luang Por Chah and felt he could trust him. Luang Por Liem believed Luang Por Chah would guide him properly. He had great faith in Luang Por Chah.

LUANG POR LIEM

I came to Wat Pah Pong with a mind that was interested in the training, practice, and development of myself. I undertook some special practices all for myself. For example, after the group meditation meetings in the evening I took the opportunity to put forth some more effort in the practice, trying to develop diligence as a habit. I didn't socialize. I didn't relate to other monks. I didn't speak with anybody. In that rainy season we were almost 50 altogether, if I remember correctly, 47. I didn't get into contact with anybody, living like somebody who really takes his chance. And the opportunities for practice were fantastic. I was trying to train myself in understanding all the feelings that arise when one is completely left to nature. If we are given a chance like this, we need to try hard and be resolute to use it. But it wasn't always the case that I was very diligent. Sometimes, I also felt lazy. Laziness comes up when egotistic feelings take hold of us. What I did to face this was to ask myself constantly: 'What have I come here to do?'

BOOK'S TRANSLATORS

The rains' retreat is a time when the monks of a monastery usually intensify their efforts in practice. Luang Por's high aspirations and motivation led to a powerful experience at the beginning of the rainy season, of which he tells:

LUANG POR LIEM

I experienced something stranger than anything I had ever experienced before. From the beginning of the rains retreat on up to the second month I felt great *saddhā* (faith) in the practice. There was no decline, no thoughts of discouragement at all in my practice.

The practice went well the whole time, although there were a few experiences of the mind getting involved with desires or defilements. But they weren't very strong.

LUANG POR VIRADHAMMO

Obviously, Luang Por had a lot of *pāramis* (perfections) that he had developed by working very hard and constantly practicing mindfulness, awareness.

Again, the translators of the book write:

BOOK'S TRANSLATORS

Around the middle of the rainy season of the year 2512 (1969) Luang Por Chah encouraged the monks to practise with special intensity. They weren't supposed to speak to each other and the communal morning and evening meetings for chanting and meditation were cancelled. Luang Por Chah saw that it was the time to give the monks more opportunity to do this practice on their own. So Luang Por Liem increased his efforts and as he did so, results became evident. On the 9th of September around 10:00 p.m. he experienced an immense transformation in his mind. He had a feeling of extraordinary brightness and happiness, of which he reports:

LUANG POR LIEM

It is impossible to describe this kind of happiness to someone else. It is impossible to make someone else know and understand it. It isn't the happiness of getting things according to one's wishes and not the happiness because things are agreeable; it's the kind of happiness that goes beyond these two. Walking is happiness, sitting is happiness, standing is happiness, and lying down is happiness. There is the experience of delight, and joy all the time. Furthermore, one is able to uphold the knowledge in one's mind that this

happiness arises completely by itself and eventually will vanish by itself. Both *sukha* [happiness] and *dukkha* in an experience like this are still entirely impermanent states. I was able to maintain the knowledge of this fact all the time. In every posture – standing, walking, sitting, and lying down – there was a continuous and equal experience of happiness. The state was the same whether I was doing sitting or walking meditation.

If one were to try to describe the mind in this state one could say there is brightness, but the word 'bright' actually doesn't describe correctly what the experience is like. It is as if there is nothing that can make the mind get involved with anything. This experience lasted for a day and then changed again. Then the mind became utterly peaceful, not at all exhausted, tired, or sleepy, but filled with clarity, radiance, and coolness, imbued with various kinds of delight and rapture. This experience lasted completely without reference to time. It was truly *akāliko*, timeless. The same feeling continued on through all the four postures. Eventually I asked myself: 'What is this?' The answer was: 'A mode of the mind.' It is like this in itself. When there is happiness, we simply take it as happiness ... it is simply a matter of happiness. When there is peace, we simply take it as a matter of peace ... and we just look at our happiness on and on and we just look at our peace on and on ... unremittingly.

LUANG POR VIRADHAMMO

What I take from this account is not just the bliss of the experience, but also his capacity for sustained awareness. Such an extraordinary experience can excite you. You can easily lose awareness. You wonder, 'What have I got? What attainment is that?' You then try to recreate that experience in a future meditation and feel frustrated when it doesn't happen. Here,

Luang Por Liem is practising awareness unremittingly, but it's not in a concentrated, absorbed manner. It is very much with life. There's unremitting awareness of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. To me, that is a better way to understand *sammā samādhi* than 'right concentration'. There's composure and focus, but it's not separate from life.

BOOK'S TRANSLATORS

Eventually on the evening of the 10th of September a change to something new that Luang Por hadn't experienced before took place. A feeling of weariness, frustration and fatigue took over. Whenever he sat or walked, he felt sleepy. Even after he got up after having rested the tiredness remained. In each posture he felt completely exhausted. It got to the point where he fell asleep while he was doing walking meditation and ran into some thorns. His whole face became scratched and sore. 'At least the sleepiness will disappear now,' he thought, but the fatigue continued to remain as strong as before. Still, he endured, telling himself that it is natural to face obstacles in the practice, which to some extent everybody needs to pass. With these reflections in mind, he understood that he needed to look at this tiredness that previously hadn't been present. After all, this fatigue just arose, so it was impermanent too. Using this insight, he attempted to maintain awareness of the sleepiness.

On the 11th, Luang Por experienced another change, namely, a great peace and happiness returned to his mind. In all four postures there was clarity and gladness. Simply being by himself was very pleasant. Nothing could intrude and stir up his mind. External objects impinging on the mind just couldn't reach it. When working together with the monks and novices during chores, although he was together with others, he felt the same as if alone. He wasn't interested in

what they were talking or chatting about. He couldn't be bothered to think much about what was happening at all, and when the chores were finished, he simply went back to his hut. The next day passed with the ongoing happiness and peace continuing as if it was a normal and ordinary experience. With unceasing attention, Luang Por continued to look at both his mind and the objects of his mind.

LUANG POR VIRADHAMMO

Before reading this description, your vision of Theravada Buddhist meditation was perhaps one of strong concentration and absorption. But in this book Luang Por Liem talks about hauling water and working alongside other monks. We can see that he's living the normal life of a monk; he's not absorbed into a refined mental state and living in some kind of meditative trance. He's with the situation, but there's unremitting mindfulness. That might be an interesting way to think of *sammā samādhi,* rather than to use the ideas of absorption. I'm not saying they're wrong, but I do wonder if they're misleading.

Luang Por Liem is very focused, but it is not on an object. It's about presence. It's about awareness. It's about knowing the way things are. At least, that's how I interpret it.

BOOK'S TRANSLATORS

When the evening of the 12th approached, he started to question himself: 'Why do we actually practise ...? What's all this practice for?' And the answer arose:

LUANG POR LIEM

We don't practise for anything; we practise for the sake of practice. Whatever it will lead to doesn't matter at all. Our duty is to practise, so we practise and try to maintain

mindfulness and awareness with it. In each moment we keep teaching ourselves. Whatever we are doing, we try to have mindfulness and awareness. Whether we are walking to or fro, we keep everything in a state of perfect balance.

LUANG POR VIRADHAMMO

Even when doubt arose, Luang Por Liem didn't go into analysis or look for answers in a book. He is just there:

LUANG POR LIEM

Why do we practise? We practise for the sake of practice.

LUANG POR VIRADHAMMO

He doesn't get caught in the intellect, trying to figure something out because he knew it as a condition. Instead, he continued practising. Now, the understatement of this paragraph:

LUANG POR LIEM

Finally, I felt I had done enough walking meditation for that day, because I became quite tired, and my feet already hurt very much. The bones of my feet felt like they were piercing through the skin, as I had been walking the whole day and night without rest. It is normal to experience painful feelings in the body if we overuse a single posture. But it is also normal that feelings change again, so I thought, it's really enough walking meditation for today. I went up to my hut, put on my robe with the right shoulder open and the outer robe folded over the left shoulder, sat down facing east (the same direction as Luang Por Chah's hut), thought of my teacher and started meditating.

LUANG POR VIRADHAMMO

Who can do that? He has resilience and determination to have unremitting mindfulness all the time.

BOOK'S TRANSLATORS

The meditation was very peaceful and the same reflection as before came up in Luang Por Liem's mind: 'We don't practise for anything; we practise for the sake of practice.'

LUANG POR LIEM

Keeping this teaching in my mind, I kept on meditating. Normally I would sit in meditation until about 10 or 11 p.m. and then stop to have a rest, but on this day, I continued sitting for about eight hours without moving or making the slightest change in posture.

LUANG POR VIRADHAMMO

Again, who can do that? You might think, 'Oh, that's not for me. I am going to do the seal posture; I'm finished after half-an-hour.'

Luang Por Liem has incredible *pāramī*. Obviously, he's bringing a lot into this lifetime. He is an amazing person. Set that aside for a moment and think about what he is actually doing – unremitting mindfulness and awareness. We can take this from his biography. He's also putting in a fair bit of effort into doing that – he sat without moving for eight hours. Certainly, when people read such accounts, they try to sit, without moving, for hours and end up injuring their bodies. This cannot be done with wilfulness. Not moving with wilfulness is still down to ego. It has to be done with mindfulness and with kind regard for yourself. As Luang Por

Liem showed us, it requires an understanding of continued, unremitting mindfulness and awareness.

LUANG POR LIEM

With this experience of peace, the mind changed. The feeling of peacefulness shot up and pervaded throughout the whole body, as if something were taking hold over it. It felt cool, a coolness that suffused the whole body ... so very cool ... an experience of the whole body becoming completely light and at ease. The head felt so cool the whole day and night, as if there was a fan blowing over it. Cool, peaceful, quiet, and still. No experience of thoughts at all, and no clue at all where they had disappeared. Everything silent, completely. It felt totally quiet. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness. The body felt tranquil, cool, and light.

This experience continued on throughout the whole year, not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued on unchanging for many years, all from that one go.

LUANG POR VIRADHAMMO

Here you have someone who has realised the Unchanging, the Unconditioned, Peace, the Harbour. I love Luang Por Liem's description. It has no technical terms or jargon. His language is ordinary, but he is a very extraordinary person.

LUANG POR LIEM

There is the state of coolness, as if in the brain, whether sitting or lying down, coolness in every position. All worries, concerns, or similar thoughts from the thinking mind are totally gone. Thinking in this or that direction ceased. All quiet, just like a forest where there isn't the slightest sound of any bird singing. Truly quiet. No wind blowing at all. Just ongoing tranquillity and peace.

It feels like there are no *saṅkhārās*, no proliferations of the mind. All the suffering that arises with *kilesas* [defilements] that had bothered me before, the *kilesas* concerning the other sex or all kinds of ambitions that I had before, I don't know where they all disappeared. Seeing somebody, I just had the feeling of seeing it as absolutely normal. To see a person as simply a person: just that much. No beautiful persons, no ugly persons – people simply would be specifically the way they were. This is the kind of peace and tranquillity that arose. I don't know what it was, but I also didn't care what it was, always knowing it is like this by itself in just this way.

It is like this through peacefulness and tranquillity. There isn't anything to be concerned about, as far as how various things exist. As concerns *dukkha*, I don't know what *dukkha* is like. As concerns laziness, I don't know what laziness is like. Questioning myself about laziness, there wasn't any. Questioning myself about *dukkha*, there wasn't any. The feeling inside my heart was exactly like this.

I tried to recall and pin down that which is called *dukkha*. What is it? I really don't know. I only know how they discern the meaning in terms of conventional language because *dukkha* is just something created by common conventions. When the mind has no *dukkha*, all conventions whatsoever don't exist in the mind. And the experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then; there has been no change all the way up to the present day. This same state still lasts on, and it has been stable, continuous and without changes.

LUANG POR VIRADHAMMO

Sādhu, sādhu,sādhu!

For a bit of context, Luang Por Liem is the abbot of our biggest monastery, which was established in 1954 by Luang Por

Chah. Around 60 monks live there. Every year, on January 16th, there is a large gathering to commemorate the death anniversary of Luang Por Chah. Over four days, more than 20,000 people come to the monastery to circumambulate Luang Por Chah's stupa and pay their respects. I was there one year. At that time, there were 1,200 monks, 700 nuns and around 10,000 laypeople. The place was packed.

I asked Luang Por Liem, 'How was the gathering?'

He said, 'It was just about the right size.'

He is not at all disengaged from life. He is simply not bothered by it and brilliant at what he does. He climbs scaffolding, does cement work, and sweeps the monastery grounds. People have mistaken him for a janitor. When visitors ask him about the abbot, he'll direct people to his kuti without revealing his identity. He is a very interesting, quiet man.

Luang Por Liem used to contemplate the fragility of life by using an actual human skeleton that was housed in Wat Nong Pah Pong's fairly small *sala* (meditation hall). He would bring up the skeleton's image in his consciousness during meditations. This became the mainstay, his go-to practice.

Monks do this type of practice. They develop it as an image that they can visualise when meditating. This is called a *nimitta* (sign).

This practice allowed Luang Por Liem to deepen his understanding of the fragility of life. It brought forth considerations of urgency, and the aspiration to the Unconditioned.

What does this life story do for your mind? Certainly, it inspires awe of this being called the Buddha because you have a real-life example of this possibility. Hopefully, when one recites *Namo tassa* ... (Preliminary Homage chant), one

gets the sense of this amazing being, and we have the good fortune of still hearing his echoes, as it were. That possibility to me is an optimistic teaching even though we're not as gifted as Luang Por Liem.

How do you manifest that possibility? Luang Por Chah would tell us, Western monks, 'You want to get enlightened overnight, but you're not the Buddha. You have to build *pārami* and the reserves of patience, kindness, conviviality, focus, and composure. You have to work.' It was always couched in that reasonable way.

When you see people like Luang Por Liem, you realise he's really that. He has so many gifts that we don't have, but what's he showing us? He's displaying unremitting mindfulness and awareness. We can do that. He's not asking us to get all the states of mind that he's experiencing. We can work with that. He can inspire us in that way.

The possibilities that these beings realise are very profound. Yet, Luang Por Liem questions himself, 'Why do we practise?'

His response: 'We practise for the sake of practice.'

We can do that. It's not esoteric at all. It's very relevant. I find Luang Por Liem's account of his realisation very inspiring and uplifting.

Hopefully, all of us can become conversant with at least one type of meditation technique that has the capacity to settle us into the present moment.

Once the mind is settled, you can start to emulate Luang Por Liem and practise unremitting awareness, witnessing change: 'Ah, it's like this.'

Unremitting mindfulness

Luang Por Sumedho's constant refrain of 'it's like this' is not a dismissive statement of life. Rather, it's enlivening, alive with the way things are. 'It's like this, it's like this, it's like this ....' is unremitting awareness. Do you see what I mean?

'It's like this' is just a phrase. But it could be a practice too; your go-to phrase. The mind would be open and attentive like it is when you're listening to sound. You just keep doing that unremittingly.

The power of 'it's like this' is that it's not such a huge thing that we can't do it. While it's not esoteric, it's challenging to do it constantly because we get distracted by our thoughts and habits and our love of distraction. Then desire comes up to do something else. Doubt comes up: 'This doesn't work. It doesn't seem like much of a practice.'

In life, there's nothing that you can't really notice.

For me, Luang Por Sumedho's model doesn't create a sense of, 'I have to get something that I don't even know about,' which is a risky strategy. Someone tells you about an altered state of consciousness. You don't even know what it is, but you start looking for it. Worse, you don't even know what they know. I never liked that.

I always preferred the idea of reflection. With Luang Por Sumedho's phrase, I can reflect. It helps me understand my own entanglement with sense experience, how disentangling works for me, and how to sustain that aware mind in the present moment. In that sense, this teaching is a personal preference.

Different teachers talk about different things and offer different techniques. Develop your own confidence around that. If I suggest something, try it out. If it doesn't work, it's not my fault or yours; it just doesn't work for you. It's not a matter of getting each technique to work for you. It's really a matter of getting one that settles you into the present moment and then sustaining the practice.

ME, MINE AND THAT

Q: What does *bhava* mean?

A: *Bhava* is the sense of becoming or being, which creates a sense of self. Let's say an aunt, who I'm close to, dies. I feel grief for her passing, even though her death was timely. I feel it because I was close to her. The arising of that grief is natural. It dependently originated as a result of her death. *Bhava* or this sense of becoming or being would be when I create self-thoughts around that loss. So, there's the arising of the emotion and then the addition of thoughts like, 'Oh, I should have been near her,' or 'My aunty was a lovely person.' All the thinking that creates a kind of a person or personality would be considered *bhava*.

This morning when I woke up, I felt tired. Tiredness is a natural condition. If I wasn't aware of it as a natural condition and I was heedless, then this natural condition would grow into a sense of a person through ignorance and my own misunderstanding.

For example, the mind could start complaining and worrying, 'Oh gosh, I should have another ten hours of sleep and four cups of coffee, and I don't want to get up.' I would then be caught in suffering. These mental proliferations could go on and on. That's the whole sense of a person coming into the present moment. It's a creation. It is one of the ways we talk about *avijjā,* which is different from personal responsibility.

Personal responsibility is the social functions we have. *Bhava* is in thought, first and foremost. You could call it egoistic thought, but it is definitely in thought.

I think we can all see that as soon as I know tiredness as simply tiredness, the thinking drops away. There isn't that 'person' anymore. There's awareness. There's presence – and that personal being, self, or 'me' falls away. This is what we mean by emptiness in Theravada Buddhism. Emptiness doesn't mean nothing is happening, rather that this phenomenon is empty of that seeming sense of a personality. That extra bit of thinking, personality view, is called *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*. *Bhava* is about the coming into being of this personhood. It can be known in awareness.

The Thais use the phrase, '*prung daeng*'. *Prung* means to season and *daeng* means to dress up. For example, you dress up to go into town. So, if there's a feeling of tiredness, ignorance grasps that, and *prung daengs* it. We, Westerners, created the English phrase, '*prung daenging*,' to refer to instances of *papañca* (mental proliferation), *ahaṃkāra* (I-making), and *mamakāra* (my-making).

Bhava, *ahaṃkāra,* and *mamakāra* tendencies can be discerned in awareness. We can see how we do that. Something happens, and it's natural for disappointment, frustration, or other feelings to arise in consciousness. But then we're accustomed, through habit, to lapse into *ahaṃkāra* and *mamakāra* or *prung daenging*. There's this whole ignorance and lack of understanding of 'selfing'. It's no longer about nature and change. It's a me and a mine and that.

You don't need to do that. As soon as you witness *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, you realise it's just pain, grief, fear, etc. You can see it and choose not to go with it. You develop the skill around this kind of understanding through small instances of *ahaṃkāra* and *mamakāra*. For instance, if you're grumpy when you wake up, then you can choose to not go to the grumpiness and simply know, 'Oh, it's just tiredness.' Once you get good at that, you will find that insight and skill useful to deal with the more complex emotions that you experience around your children, your own health, political issues, etc. This becomes your go-to place to resolve stressful situations. It's neither repressive

nor are you getting rid of something. In time, you realise this place of becoming, which is rooted in ignorance, has a way of being known either in the body, in the *hara,* or the heart *chakra*.

So, my question to you is do you have some confidence in a go-to practice that you can do all the time? That would be important to consider on this retreat. Then, what's its relationship to unremitting awareness? How does that fit into your own idea of spiritual life? You noticed in the reading that Luang Por Liem had exalted states of mind, but he didn't take it personally. There was no *ahaṃkāra, mamakāra,* or *prung daenging*. His awareness is so powerful that even fabulous states of mind don't overwhelm him. Most of us would love 'fabulous' states of mind, but he doesn't go there. There is no trace of egotism.

If you understand the project, it all makes sense because there's no entanglement with anything that's changing. So, the possibility of realising the Unchanging is manifest. If there's any entanglement with the changing, then you're not available for the Unchanging.

MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH CONDITIONS

Settle into your posture, be it sitting, lying down, standing, or walking. Use sound to establish presence and know what's going on. You're not listening for something but allowing sound to come to you. Then you get the sense of still knowing.

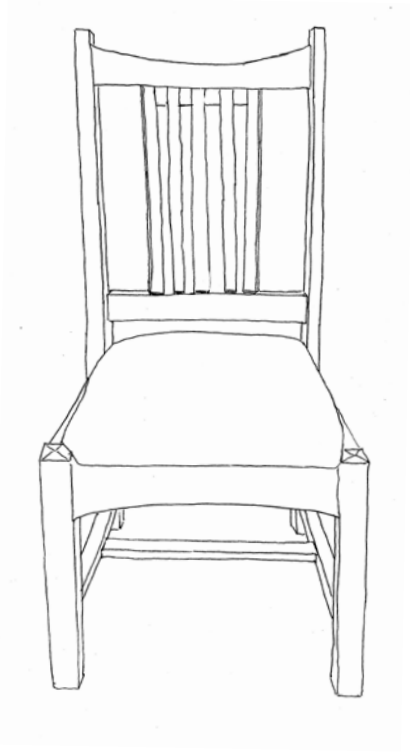
We have a tendency to control things all the time. To help with that, create a sense of affection or kindness. Go to your heart centre. Welcome in an image or name someone who is dear to you and feel the opening of the heart. It's nothing extraordinary, but quite beautiful.

Let that sense of kindness imbue your awareness practice. As you know, I use Luang Por Sumedho's image. On the in-breath, I'd quietly say, 'Luang Por, may you be well.' That quickly takes me to gratitude and affection. It's not about him. It's about the heart being open. The memory is merely the avenue.

This way, you establish still knowing and an open-hearted affection. It's a relaxed and happy state. It's not controlled or forced. You're not overly focused. Then, if you want, ground yourself in the breath. The end of the out-breath is a lovely place to hang out. Balance still knowing and kindness right through to the end of the out-breath.

If the mind feels settled and not too busy, and you're at ease, then you can open it to space. Use choiceless awareness. This is your time to explore. Use what works for you.

When conditions arise, remember the beautiful phrase Luang Por Sumedho has given us: 'It's like this.'



DEATH IS NATURAL

In 1973, I ended up in Luang Por Chah's monastery in Northeast Thailand after three months in the country. At that time, Northeast Thailand was one of the country's poorest regions. The monastery was well supported, but there was nothing in excess. It was so isolated that it was rare to spot a car there. The society was agrarian. Rice farming was the mainstay. People lived off the land and ate frogs and insects for protein. They led a simple, minimalistic life. Yet, many great Dhamma teachers like Ajahn Mun, Luang Por Chah, and Luang Por Maha Boowa were from Northeast Thailand. This was completely opposite to what I found in the West, especially in my culture and society, which was affluent; I didn't find any Dhamma there, although I'm sure it was somewhere.

Every lunar quarter, on *wan phra* (lunar observance days), lay people, mostly women, would take the Eight Precepts and stay in the monastery all day. Everyone in the monastery including the lay people would meditate all night long. Some of the strongest meditators were the village women. Their dedication was impressive. The following day, they'd help with the offering of food before returning to the village. The lay people were always trying to give their very best to the monks. They really loved the monks and the monasteries, which weren't busy places. The monastery was their spiritual home, and the monks were their boys. So, we were well loved and cared for as monks and yet, we were separate from that society.

One of the things that struck me about Northeastern Thais was the naturalness of their reflections on death and the naturalness of the ceremonies they had around dying. The monks would go

to the neighbouring village, which would usually be within a few kilometres, to do the *mātikā* (matrices or lists) chanting. This chant comes from the *Abhidhamma* and is traditionally chanted during funerals in Buddhist cultures. The chanting is intellectual. It's not emotional. It's a spreadsheet or taxonomy of different types of mindsets. It describes all the different forms of experiences a human being might encounter in a lifetime. It's chanted in a monotone. It's not emotive or about a soul going to heaven because, in Buddhism, we think that whatever kamma the dead person was engaged in, the energy of that would condition consciousness in the future. So, it's not up to us, monks, to somehow make that worse or better. The teaching is: 'All beings are born of their kamma; heir to their kamma; and whatever kamma they shall do for good or for ill, of that they'll be the heirs.'

Venerable Amarasiri was telling me a story of the Buddha that S.N. Goenkaji (a teacher of vipassana meditation) would share with his students. A person once asked the Buddha to pray for his father's soul. The Buddha replied, 'Get me a clay earthen jar and fill half of it with stone and the rest with ghee.' The man did as instructed. The Buddha then asked him to take the jar to the river and break it. The man did that.

The Buddha asked, 'What happened?'

He said, 'The stones fell, and the ghee rose to the surface.'

The Buddha said, 'That's what happened to your dad. It's not my business. The beautiful things he did and the wholesome kamma rose to the surface. The heavy stones fell to the bottom.'

The Buddha was teaching that we're responsible for what happens to us.

Our chanting is a reflection on the naturalness that with birth there is death, and then the realisation that there is peace. This is a natural phenomenon. Dying is natural. Birth is natural. In Thai villages, people hear the *mātikā* chant again and again because quite a few

people die annually, and everyone is a part of the funeral ceremony. In such cultures, this chant has a soothing quality because it evokes a sense that everything is being done correctly and rightly – death is natural and with birth there is death.

The villagers would bring out the dead body to the charnel ground. The body would be cremated, and we would repeat the chanting. At no time would there be eulogizing. The monks wouldn't sing the praises of the dead person. That was the duty of relatives and would be done at home. For the monks, it was always a reflection on Dhamma – with birth there is death; that which begins ends all the time; it's like this. Everyone, young and old, would be there and participate in a natural and respectful way. They would wear clean, ordinary working clothes. I don't think they had any fancy clothes. Sometimes they would honour the monks and give them something special like a case of Pepsi.

In Thailand, funerals and death aren't hidden; there's nothing to hide really. Everyone constantly sees death, as there might be several cremations in the monastery in any given year. To see a body burning for the first time is a powerful experience. One of the meditations the Buddha recommended was the contemplations on *asubha*. These meditations are not a rejection of the beautiful, but they have a sobering effect on it.

Asubha practice

Monks are also invited by doctors in Bangkok, Thailand, to watch autopsies. I've never done that in the West, but in Thailand it is a respectful act for monks to contemplate on corpses. This is a powerful experience. In the beginning, the smells and visual forms are repulsive. As one gets past the repulsiveness and contemplates on, 'this is the way it is; with birth there is ageing and death,' the mind becomes peaceful. During one of the first autopsies I saw in Bangkok, the doctor used a scalpel to cut the face off the body. Apparently, the dead person was a 40-year-old monk. The doctor then used a hacksaw

to open the skull. They took the brain out to look at it. I didn't have medical training, so the whole exercise was far from normal for me. But it helped to get past the repulsiveness and understand a body is like that.

In Western culture, we don't get to do these kinds of contemplations. On account of make-up, the corpse looks more beautiful than when the person was alive. This may be a way of trying to help a family grieve but does it really help? I don't know. I once attended a burial where the morticians added a bed of artificial grass to alleviate the shock of the bare earth. These attempts to sanitise death and burials, to me, are missed opportunities for reflection. Death is normal and ordinary. Contemplations on death aren't meant to make you depressed. If they make you depressed, then don't do them. These contemplations are intended to ground you.

I remember that the Bangkok hospital where I saw the autopsy was close to a marketplace. The area was busy with lots of sensory inputs. The market had a fair share of young Thai women. Since I had just contemplated on a corpse, the mind had a lot of coolness because it had seen the unattractive side of the body. This was quite interesting for me to experience as a young monk at that time.

I personally have not done a lot of *asubha* meditations because I tended to be negative, cynical, and depressed. So, it was dangerous for me to take that route. Luang Por Liem contemplated death as an antidote to all the excitement in his own mind. He used a skeleton. These meditations are not leading you to reject the body. The body is quite amazing because of how well it functions. The *asubha* meditations make you look at the mind that is looking for satisfaction in that which is unsatisfactory as well as at the conditioned tendency to overemphasise beauty. These meditations try to cool the mind. They're not an aesthetic rejection of life.

FIVE SUBJECTS FOR FREQUENT RECOLLECTION

[Handa mayaṃ abhiṇha-paccavekkhaṇa-pāṭhaṃ bhaṇāmase]
[Jarā-dhammomhi] jaraṃ anatīto MEN CHANT
[Jarā-dhammāmhi] jaraṃ anatītā WOMEN CHANT

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

Byādhi-dhammomhi byādhiṃ anatīto M.
Byādhi-dhammāmhi byādhiṃ anatītā W.

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

Maraṇa-dhammomhi maraṇaṃ anatīto M.
Maraṇa-dhammāmhi maraṇaṃ anatītā W.

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

Sabbehi me piyehi manāpehi nānābhāvo vinābhāvo

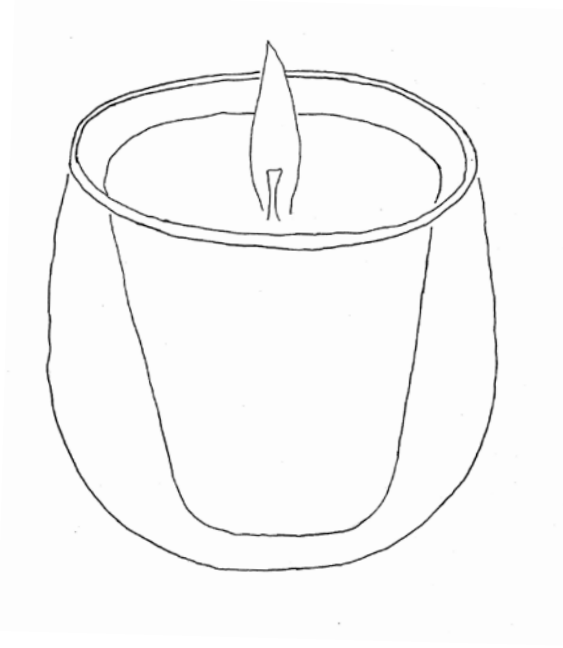
All that is mine, beloved and pleasing,
will become otherwise, will become separated from me.

Kammassakomhi kammadāyādo kammayoni kammabandhu kammapaṭisaraṇo m.
Yaṃ kammaṃ karissāmi, kalyāṇaṃ vā pāpakaṃ vā, tassadāyādo bhavissāmi
Kammassakāmhi kammadāyādā kammayoni kammabandhu kammapaṭisaraṇā w.
Yaṃ kammaṃ karissāmi, kalyāṇaṃ vā pāpakaṃ vā, tassadāyādā bhavissāmi

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

Evaṃ amhehi abhiṇhaṃ paccavekkhitabbaṃ

Thus we should frequently recollect.



EMPATHETIC DISTRESS

Q: How to cope with and prevent empathetic distress when the lives of so many people in the world are in turmoil and nature is under stress.

A: I know two doctors who worked in the emergency department for at least 20 years. They really thrived in those situations. You need a certain kind of skill and gift to be on the frontlines. A nurse who worked in the COVID-19 treatment wards once told me his stress partially came from wearing the personal protective equipment (PPE). He used to work eight- or nine-hour shifts. He was sweating all the time under the PPE, and it was hard to breathe. He said it was absolutely exhausting. His stress was situational and related to work. Hopefully, there are professionals who can help people deal with those situations.

The distress people feel in witnessing suffering is slightly different. You're not on the frontlines or in a physically stressful situation but you're feeling empathetic distress because you're experiencing the suffering of others. Now, why is that a problem? Let's say a close family member starts to engage in self-destructive activities. They're not interested in your views or in listening to you. You have empathy for them, obviously, but it's very hard to be at peace with that situation because you don't want them to suffer. The stress, I think, is from wanting, not because of empathy. I don't think empathy is stressful. It's the wanting of people not to suffer that seems to be the stressful part. I experienced that with my mom. The empathy was always beautiful, but not wanting her to have pain was stressful and reactive. I did as much as I could, but she had to

bear her own suffering. The Buddha said you pick up your own kamma and work with it. You can't work through someone else's kamma. Empathy doesn't imply, 'I must fix this,' or 'I don't want this to happen, and I wish the world wasn't like this.' That attitude is stressful because it's coming from wanting. It also doesn't mean that you don't act when you can. Empathy is an active force in our hearts and will act when it can.

Stress arises in situations where you're unable to fulfil your empathetic inclinations. Media overload can cause this. If you're watching terrible news about refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea, racial discrimination in Sudan, or the violence against women all day long, then you not only feel 'oh, these poor people,' but also, 'it shouldn't be this way.' You're going to get more distressed, but unable to do anything.

It's not that we can't engage with social issues. If the local school board is doing something that's going to affect your children, then certainly, you can or will talk to the teachers.

There's a kind of voyeurism in our society. We witness the stress of others, get appalled and shocked, and then witness it again. How is that helpful? So, step back and judge how useful is worry over issues that you have no control over.

At peace

There's this natural desire to not have your loved ones suffer. Notice how this desire causes suffering.

The Buddha spoke of *upekkhā*, peaceful coexistence with the way things are. It is one of the *brahmavihāras*. Just to remind you, there are four *brahmavihāras*. *Mettā* is a sense of goodwill to all beings. *Karunā* has a sense of compassion to all beings. *Karunā* is that which activates action and sees the suffering of others. Burnout is called the far enemy of compassion and the near enemy

is indifference, bordering upon cruelty. *Muditā* is the appreciation of beauty and joy. *Upekkhā*, as mentioned earlier, is the peaceful coexistence with the way things are. It is sometimes translated as equanimity. *Upekkhā* is always at peace because the heart is open.

So, if the heart is open but stressed, then one has to contemplate, 'What does it mean to be at peace with the way things are?' I learned this the hard way. As a young monk at Chithurst Buddhist Monastery in the UK, I used to get stressed out because I thought I had to fix the problems people came to talk to me about. The empathy was there, but I was doing the wrong thing. Their problems weren't mine. This didn't mean I didn't do everything I could. But I used to take it back to my kuti and distress myself. It seemed like a good idea, but it wasn't – because it was not constructive.

Luang Por Sumedho helped me. I began to see that I can be fully empathetic, do the best I can and not worry. It's not indifference. It's knowing the 'world is this way'. There is injustice and cruelty, and there are refugees – and I'm doing the best I can.

It's challenging to be at peace when loved ones are suffering. For instance, a grandmother thinks the way her child is raising their child may lead to bad results. That's very stressful because you don't want the innocent little one to get hurt, but the grandmother has no power, no possibility to change the situation, which is very painful. You have to go to the pain and understand life is like this.

Quite often, the movement towards peaceful coexistence with the way things are is the ability to feel heart-crushing pain.

My mother was in a lot of pain despite taking painkillers. She tried to be cheerful so I wouldn't suffer. I'd try not to worry so she wouldn't worry – two loving people trying to deal with a human situation. I contemplated this situation.

I reflected, 'What is the problem here? You're doing everything you can and your mom's not complaining. She's a brave woman. What's

the problem? Well, I don't want her to suffer, obviously. Yes, but she has to suffer. This is her body. This is her kamma that she has to go through. Again, she isn't complaining, and everything was being done.' That was a good insight into what equanimity means when the heart is open. I was a better caregiver after that. My mom realised she need not hold back her concern about pain for fear of upsetting me. Things improved, and she was less tired.

That was an easy situation when compared to some of the experiences people share with me, such as children addicted to drugs. Those are tough. What can you do? You can't force or will change. I think you first have to look at the wanting of it to be different than it is.

Ask yourself, 'What do I want that I don't have and what do I have that I don't want?' Return to the Four Noble Truths – the cause of suffering is attachment to desire.

Obviously, you want your loved ones to be free from suffering. But their suffering is not the cause of your suffering. It's the existential holding of a hope that is hopeless. If you can go right to the pain of wanting, then it is possible to come to a peaceful coexistence with the way things are. The process may be painful, and you may cry. But by opening and embracing that reality, you can come to a peaceful coexistence with the way things are.

Protecting the mind

Be careful with large-scale issues affecting the world where you have no control. Monks are asked to seriously consider *indriya saṃvara,* the restraint of the senses. Take in only as much as you need of political arguments, socio-cultural issues, and environmental problems. Do what you can and guard the mind from too much stimulation of horrible things. This isn't Pollyannaish. It's not about always having an attitude of, 'Oh, how lovely the world is.'

It's important to protect the mind. None of us are cold or indifferent. People who do retreats are compassionate and caring. But sometimes, there can be an over caring of issues and people, which can lead to suffering.

Also, if you have access to beauty, participate in it. It has an important effect on our minds. It is vital to appreciate beauty and not just engage in horror. But also contemplate on how you can get attached to beauty. For instance, I could get attached to this beautiful monastery. When I have to go into the city, I can create in my mind perceptions of, 'Oh, it's so polluted and terrible.' But that's something I'm creating. Rather, I could use beauty of the blue sky, the green grass, or sounds of birds to uplift my mind and come to a sense of joy; joy is an aspect of the open heart and is also empathetic. So, you can see that, within the whole of experience or picture, life is like this.

The Buddha's take on suffering is interesting. As the story goes, he went into a village where he saw sickness and death for the first time. The suffering didn't impel him towards compassionate distress, rather a spiritual search. He wondered if there was a dimension that wasn't subject to old age, sickness, and death.

In that allegorical tale, the Buddha encounters four heavenly messengers – an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and a *sadhu*. He asks his charioteer Channa about the *sadhu*. Channa says the *sadhu* is seeking the Deathless and the Unconditioned. That became the Buddha's search and gift of Dhamma – a contemplative's way to go beyond old age, sickness, and death – the way to the Deathless for all sentient beings.

You can see the effect one being like the Buddha has had on many cultures over 2600 years. It's visible in monasteries around the world and through beings like His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This aspiration for the Deathless is not weak or ineffective. It takes a lot of strength.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: Please explain *anattā*.

A: Here's a trick question: 'The Buddha taught there is no self, true or false?' The answer is: 'false.'

The Buddha's original insight and teaching says anything that begins and ends, and is contingent, is dependently originated. There's no essence, no personality, or no soul in it. He didn't teach that there is a self. He taught there's suffering, there's a cause for suffering, there's an end to suffering, and a path to end suffering. The teaching of *anattā* is to challenge the view, 'I am this body. I own this body and these emotions. This is my family and I have control over it.' All the self-identities that we have are a losing game. That perception is not going to set you free.

So, what do you mean when you say, 'I am this body?'

The teaching of *anattā* encourages us to question, 'Are we this body?' This way, you start to inquire, 'What is the body?'

When you practise 'bodily sensations in awareness,' you will find they're constantly changing. Sensations come into awareness, but will you find an entity there, such as 'a solid body'? And is there a 'me' experiencing 'the body'? You may call it awareness, but is that a thing? No, it's just awareness. If you investigate your assumptions of self, then you'll see that they keep falling away.

Anattā is not a philosophical position or a teaching to blindly believe. The teaching is meant to lead you, rather than position you. The idea is for you to look at habitual assumptions like 'I am a good or bad person, an old man, etc.' Let's say you're meditating, and you find yourself thinking. You quickly go into self-disparagement: 'I'm thinking too much.' At that point, stop and contemplate, 'Who is it that's thinking? There's a thought and there's consciousness. But where is this person who is thinking too much? Let's have a look.' When you check, you'll only find awareness of change, not a person.

You can apply that question of 'who is' to experiences and perceptions of pain, emotions, etc. For example, 'Who is thinking? Who is feeling this pain? Who is feeling this fear?'

These questions raise awareness of whatever *is*. They have no answer because there is none. Use them to help you see the assumption of self is simply a construct. The thinking mind then starts to fall away.

Awareness has the capacity to know change, which becomes an intuition of peace.

You start to follow that intuition rather than the thinking processes that we tend to believe in too much. This is spiritual work, not conventional life work. We follow the intuitions of silence, and the sense of identity as mind-body starts to drop off through a kind of natural process.

These days due to the COVID-19 pandemic, you may get annoyed if you encounter people without masks. You'll probably grumble. At that moment, a sense of self and other gets created through aversion. It'll seem very real. If you look at that with mindfulness, then you can realise there is annoyance and there's consciousness of annoyance. Now, who's angry here? This is the type of lynchpin investigative work we can do around the teaching of *anattā*. It's a provocative teaching because you can't really identify with this

mind and body, or your own personal history. At a conventional level, there is a 'me,' but the Buddha's teachings on *anattā* point to a deeper reality.

Q: Will sustained meditation help manage feelings of guilt? I'm constantly nagged by the ever-wandering mind that perhaps more could have been done to lessen a sick person's suffering. This feeling becomes stronger during meditation.

A: It's understandable you want to do your best. But you can't alleviate all the suffering and you'll make medical mistakes too. I had that with my mom. Her feet were a mess in the last four days of her life. We used to bind her feet because lymph wasn't flowing around properly, but I bound it up wrong. This caused her a lot of suffering. I only realised my mistake after 24 hours. It was a shock to me. Now that memory ended up becoming very strong. Even though I'd cared for her to the best of my abilities for nine years, that mistake was the strongest memory of those years. It was a horrible one, too. When I talked about this to some people, they'd say, 'Oh *bhante*, but you were so good, and you helped her.' That wasn't the point, though. I felt horrible. Then I spoke to Ajahn Sucitto. He said, 'Ah, that must have been difficult.' That was helpful. Unless we acknowledge a person's suffering, we are not with them. We can try to buoy them up by assuring they'll be okay in time. But, in difficult situations, it's good to recognise the suffering.

The horrible memory kept coming up. I refused to believe in it and continued reflecting, 'Now, this is a memory. Memory feels this way.' I would just bear with it. It would come up every ten minutes or so. Slowly, I refused to take a 'self-like' position around it.

The feeling of not having done enough is common because you always think you could do more. So, feel the memory and the pain of loss, and just not allow that to run into 'I-making, my-making'. That kind of thinking requires discipline. It's not just a discipline

of repression; it's a discipline of staying with the actual feeling.

Feelings of guilt or constant nagging are different modes of *dosa* (aversion). If you have a facility for witnessing your emotions through the heart, then you can take it to the heart before thoughts arise. Get really good at pre-thinking. When the nagging arises, you just turn to your go-to place, the heart, and feel the horribleness of that. That's when aversion comes out. One doesn't want to feel the horribleness of the nagging, so they go off into self-hatred, which, for some reason, seems to be more comfortable. I used to go into self-hatred, which felt good. Again, that's what I found with this experience I had with my mom. I went back and forth in an effort to stay with the body:

Stay, just stay ...
How could you, Viradhammo?
No, no, come back, come back, and just stay with the body.

Slowly it worked its way out and the memories became much more realistic about the good times I had with mom, about how lucky I was to take care of her and all the goodness that was around her.

I'd also ask you to reflect, 'Is meditation about not having unpleasant experiences? Is it a pacifier? Is it a tool of distraction?'

I don't see meditation as pacifying or managing feelings of guilt. I would see it as the liberation of feelings of guilt by making them fully conscious. I didn't manage the fears that I experienced. They came through me because they had a life of their own. I witnessed, endured, felt, welcomed and, in the end, understood them, which wasn't a management program. It was more like cleansing them.

Make nagging conscious and see where you can sense it in the body. Suppressing thoughts and feelings, which is an act of aversion, won't work.

The feelings become stronger during meditation because you're not distracted at that time. This is the difficulty of meditation. There aren't any escape routes. If it comes up, then that's your chance to see it fully and develop the courage to realise that this will change.

This is nature, and it feels this way.

Meditations where you can understand witnessing change as opposed to sorting out, solving, or analysing, will serve you well during times of upheaval. It is difficult to stay with unpleasant feelings, but it's important. Luang Por Sumedho used to call this kind of meditation an emotional enema. We tend to think that meditation is blissful and peaceful. No, sometimes it's purification. We've heard of Luang Por Chah's challenges with lust. He'd go days with incredible lust coming through his awareness, which wasn't fun. But he just endured and watched. So, be encouraged that there's nothing wrong with this. It's a skill to understand how to make it conscious and know it is part of your kamma and life. It'll be helpful if you can find people who can encourage you in that way.

DAY SIX

MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH MEMORIES

When I was at Chithurst Buddhist Monastery, Luang Por Sumedho used to start his retreats by saying in his deep, booming voice, 'The past is a memory. The future's unknown. Now is the knowing.'

This statement was always an encouragement to come back to the basic principle of present-moment awareness. Making that intention itself is huge. Regardless of the technique you're using or what's going on emotionally, physically, or environmentally, *now* is the knowing.

Luang Por's instruction is simple, yet we always need to remind ourselves of that.

How is it now?

Well, it's like this.

Know it as feeling, sound, conscious presence. Of course, sustaining that knowing of the way things are moment by moment is the challenge.

There's nothing to achieve. It's more like remembering: 'Life is like this now.'

THE BUDDHA'S WORDS ON LOVING-KINDNESS

[Now let us chant the Buddha's words on loving-kindness.]

[This is what should be done]
By one who is skilled in goodness
And who knows the path of peace:
Let them be able and upright,

Straightforward and gentle in speech,
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied,
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skilful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.

Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove,
Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.

Whatever living beings there may be,
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short, or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to be born,
May all beings be at ease.
Let none deceive another

Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings,
Radiating kindness over the entire world:

Spreading upwards to the skies
And downwards to the depths,
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking, seated,
Or lying down – free from drowsiness –
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.

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

GATEWAY TO THE UNCONDITIONED

In *The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness*, the Buddha suggests that the person who is skilled in goodness is 'humble and not conceited.' The last stanza of that chant is:

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

This may sound nihilistic, but the world in this sense is the world of your perceptions and conceptions. For instance, it was reported that last month was the hottest in recorded history. Yes, the conventional world is very hot, but the way we perceive or conceive that is different for all of us. Everyone's world is different. It's the same temperature, but the inner world of conceiving and perceiving is unique to an individual. That's how the Buddha would talk about the world.

It's always helpful to remember that in Buddhism there's a teaching about conventional reality as well as a teaching about looking at reality as a flow of events arising and ceasing in awareness, the 'knowing'. Both teachings are important. The conventional truth is that there is a sense of me, as a person or individual, living with my responsibilities, different kammas, national identities, literary preferences, tastes, aesthetics, family history, etc. That's at the level of individuals and it's certainly real. This is the world in a conventional sense. One has to live skilfully in the conventional world. It's the realm of morality, social responsibility, and political action.

The other way of looking at the world is inwardly, in seeing the arising and ceasing of perceptions and conceptions according to conditions. This is the only time we use the word, '*anattā*'. We don't use *anattā* in the conventional, 'worldly' way because it wouldn't make any sense – try telling the airport officer who's checking your identity you're not the person in the passport photo! You'll probably be detained. It can get totally silly. The teaching on *anattā* can be confusing if you don't understand this distinction.

Inner, outer worlds

This 'inward' way of looking at the world is important because that's where phrases like 'humble and not conceited' begin to gain significance.

The word 'conceit' has a broad scope in Buddhism. It's not just the conceit of narcissism or arrogance, but also the conceit of self-identity. To believe, 'I am better than you;' 'I am worse than you;' or 'We are equal;' is a conceit. 'I am' is a conceit.

On a conventional level, there are differences of skills and talent. Someone may be better than me at, say, making spreadsheets. What's the big deal in that? If I identify or take an identity with my successes or failures (e.g. 'I am ...') and then get attached to them, that would be a conceited view of self. This conceited view is problematic and will cause suffering.

You can see that when you hold on to fixed views – such as 'I am one way and you're that way' – you could end up judging someone. Your judgement might be quite accurate in terms of worldly dhammas but to hold it as a viewpoint and indulge in aversion or arrogance is obviously suffering.

'I am old' is a conceit if I hold on to it. Now, how would I hold on to it? Well, I could hold on to it by creating thoughts of self-pity or holding on to fears of old age or some preferred body image as

I age. These are forms of attachment to a self-identity. Whereas, if there is the humility of simply witnessing the ageing of the body as a function in nature, then there is freedom.

You're always working at two levels – conventional and transcendent. The body needs to be taken care of, clothed, and fed, but not through vanity or conceit.

Conceit is always the sense of identity with this body, with my emotions, etc. Humility is the letting go of these endless self-identities and living in a responsible way. It's very hard to do that.

When you come to the sense of witnessing or knowing change, then you see that your real home is not this body.

The idea that you'll never get sick or old is dumb and silly. When people who don't have a reference of awareness fall sick or age, they get trapped in all the self-identities – negative or otherwise – that come up, which is tragic. Practising with sickness is an important part of liberation. As this body ages and gets sick, you just witness, 'sickness is this way.' Then you have refuge, rather than identity. Yet, on a conventional level, we have to go to the doctor. It's so important to operate at both levels.

Another way to reflect on the phrase, 'humble and not conceited,' is to investigate: Why should the world fulfil my desires? Why should the world operate the way I want it to? Why should the world be just? Well, you may think it should be just because that's right. But why should the world be this or that? As you know, it's not; it's simply this way.

The conceit of desire (e.g. my desires are really what's right in this world and that the world is wrong) is just a dumb way to approach life.

Of course, on a conventional level, there are expectations. At the monastery, I have social expectations of other community members, and they have similar expectations of me. Those are the social contracts we have. If someone goes against the contract,

they're reprimanded, 'No, you can't do that.' That's at the societal level. At the inner level, if I want everyone to be harmonious all the time and agree with me, then that's conceit, and I will suffer by holding onto that view.

I do my very best to bring harmony and be amiable. I fail sometimes but am successful at other times. The most important thing is that I don't hold a fixed view of how it should be. There's this kind of humility of adaptation and yet, a responsibility for the conventions I live by. Both conventional truth and transcendent truth are important. If you just take the 'flow of consciousness' approach – it's just this way and it's *anattā* – then you could excuse all kinds of behaviour: there wasn't a killing because no one was there! It could get stupid that way. On the other hand, if you have an agreed convention that honours morality, ethics, and social responsibility, then although the world will never be perfect (no matter how hard you try), you have done as much good as possible. The transcendent teachings bring you to inner peace. The teachings on conventional responsibilities bring peace to the world. You need both to operate together.

The real home

Returning to *The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness*, I would interpret 'born' in the sentence:

> *By not holding to fixed views, the pure hearted one, having clarity of vision, is not born again into this world*

as this sense of egotistical birth through thoughts, emotions, and experiences. It's actually freeing not to create or embellish a fixed sense of self.

The other way of thinking about that sentence is rebirth. Thoughts like, 'this world sucks and I'm out of here; I've had enough,' can make the phrase sound nihilistic. That's not a happy state of mind. That thought is another kind of conceit: I am someone who was

born and doesn't want to go through birth again. The thought may be valid, but you don't even want to have the conceit that 'I was born'. Now, that's pretty radical. The body was born. The body will die. But is that my real home or my real identity? Who am I? What am I?

Consider the idea of enlightenment. It is about the Unborn, not the eternal. It's not about a person living for eternity. That sounds boring, to say the least. Enlightenment, at least in the Buddhist context, is not about the personality or body. It's about: What is awareness? Why is it always there? What's that about?

This way, the reflective mind turns away from the changing experience, not out of rejection, but with curiosity.

The mind goes into the world of experience due to desire, which is natural. There is nothing wrong with wanting experiences. But there comes a time when one gets tired of going out into the objective world. You begin to turn inward, contemplating: What is awareness? What is consciousness?

These questions cannot be explored through thought because thought is still an object. It is contingent, conditioned, and it is born and dies. One begins to understand silence is necessary for that exploration. There's also the need for intellectual humility to realise you cannot contemplate silence through thought. You begin to let go of thinking, but not by repressing it. We do that a lot. Rather, you get so tired of the thinking mind that you realise thought cannot be the way. While thinking is useful for solving problems, it's not meant for contemplating the Unconditioned.

Thought needs to be known as an object rather than being the driving force of the subject. That's the problem we face. Luang Por Sumedho's teaching of noticing the cessation of thought is helpful in these instances.

The ending of thought

Cessation, such as the end of an emotional turmoil, the end of a day, the end of a retreat, or the end of self-thought, is an important contemplative theme in Buddhism. These 'ends' are the gaps in which rebirth, or the birth of the self, takes place. It is skilful to have enough acuity and attentiveness to first, notice the ceasing of a thought, and not pick up another object, or go out into objective experiences of mind-body – and secondly to abide as a witness. As meditators, we're habituated to notice thinking and trying to force attention on the meditation object in order to stop thinking. There's this sense of me trying to do something to become something. We've never really awoken to the feeling of no thought.

Create the intention to notice the end of thought and play with that. You can experiment. For example, think intentionally, 'I – am – fabulous;' 'I – am – an – old – man', etc. And pause between each word. In that pause, you'll only find consciousness of sense experience. 'I am fabulous' is only a thought, but it can seem very real when it's driven by emotions.

Luang Por Sumedho had an interesting exchange with a woman when we were living in Hampstead, UK.

She told Luang Por, 'I'm a horrible person.'

'What have you done?' asked Luang Por.

'Well, my daughter just had a child. When I saw the baby, I wanted to poke the child's eyes out. I ran away,' she said.

'Did you do it?' asked Luang Por.

She said, 'No.'

'So, what's the problem?' asked Luang Por.

The problem was that she had taken the fixed view she was an eye-poking granny, and hence horrible.

Luang Por told her, 'Well, you didn't do it. It's just a weird thought.' All of a sudden, she could see that.

Without going into a lot of analysis, there was actually nothing evil about her thought. It was neither good nor bad. It was weird, but there was no reason for her to feel guilty. It just came up; she obviously didn't wake up in the morning and determine, 'Let's think that.'

The arising of something that seems evil is not your fault. You're not wrong for that. The key is not to act upon it; don't go there. Who knows where these thoughts come from.

Our goal must be to develop a willingness to notice that all kinds of bizarre things can come up in our experience of memory and to keep *sīla*. Her reaction was natural, but it wasn't her fault.

Compassion or acceptance allows for the most bizarre, cruel thoughts to come up, but it's not you. It's not who you are.

If a feeling or memory comes up, make it conscious. Maybe exaggerate it a bit and see what it feels like. You'll notice there is no essence to that feeling or memory. It's an emotional feeling driving thought. That realisation brings you to the end of thought and the end of that kind of 'selfing'. This way, you're using the obsessions of thought to make yourself more mindful. For instance, your mind is caught up with some kind of guilt. Notice the guilt, and say to yourself, 'I am terrible.' Then stop, and notice, 'Ah, it's like this now.' This way, you use the obsessive thought to propel yourself back into the present moment. Over time, you'll become better at noticing the end of thought.

As you notice the end of thought, you notice that personality view is a thought. It eventually ceases, leaving only knowing. The reference becomes more and more on the knowing – consciousness, awareness, or whatever you want to call it. You know that's always present. That is the gateway to the Unconditioned.

MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH RESTLESSNESS

When you start to feel restless and look at the clock wondering when the sitting will end, a sense of self is born. You feel uncomfortable. There's the desire to get out of the discomfort, and there's the idea of time: 'I have to sit for another 20 minutes. Should I continue or not?'

The sense of self arises as thought and you can notice it as an object.

You can ask yourself, 'How much longer do I want to sit,' and then stop. This way, you're making conscious the restlessness.

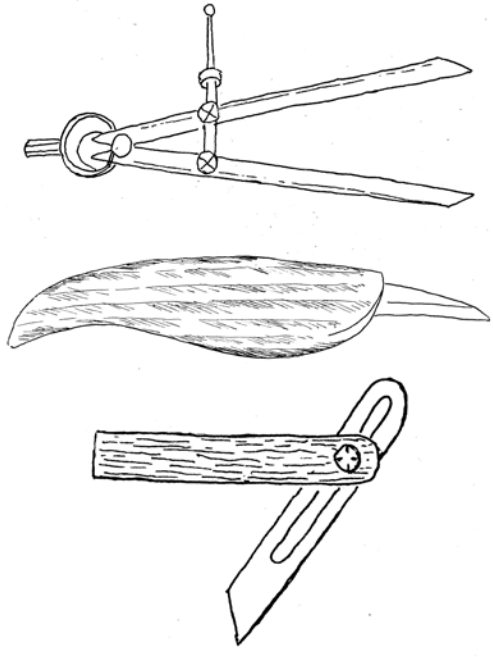
Going back to the idea that the flow of consciousness is in awareness, listen to sound. Notice it changing, and just taste the flavour of knowing stillness.

You are not trying to get something here. Rather, you're noticing. Feel your hands. Notice that the feelings in the hands are in awareness.

Awareness and knowing are constant and the objects, sights, sounds, memories, and thoughts are changing. Desire wants to go out and change the objects or gets caught up with the objects, usually through thinking and remembering.

Witness objects as changing and begin to reflect on the unchanging awareness. As Luang Por Sumedho would say, ‘Be the knowing.’

Once you understand that principle you can choose an object of meditation to sustain knowing the way things are.



DHAMMAVICAYA VS. CONVENTIONAL THINKING

Conventional thinking could be mulling over one of the teachings by the Buddha, wondering what it means. You're in a speculative, intellectual mode.

Dhammavicaya (investigation of mental states) is one of the seven factors of Enlightenment. It is the inquisitive part of our contemplative life where we can inquire about some aspect of Dhamma, but always in relationship to our own experience. That's important. You don't regard the Dhamma as a thought structure that you think you understand or is unconnected to real life and real time. If I say something abstract that you can't see in your own life, then it's not a truth that edifies you. You may or may not believe it or find it interesting – but it doesn't really edify until it clicks with your experience.

How to use *dhammavicaya*

Stimulated by a suggestion from a teacher or teachings, you observe and explore the word or phrase. If the teacher is talking about resistance, you can explore, 'What do they mean by resistance?'

You could simply say the word or phrase that's caught your attention and quietly notice how it resonates with you. It's a quiet observation. You're not just thinking about it. It's a way of focusing quiet attention on some aspects of your dhammic experience. The classic contemplation would be, 'Why do I suffer?' You could

analyse it: 'I suffer because of x, y, and z.' But that wouldn't be the same as experiencing 'what is suffering' in real time and real life. The question itself makes you conscious of the problem at hand. Then you start to just watch – and maybe you get some insight. That insight comes from silent attention.

I would encourage all of us to think less because we easily go into doubting and thinking, doubting and thinking, doubting and thinking. This cycle is common where you'll ask yourself a question and then answer intellectually. You won't see that the problem is you keep asking yourself questions. You create a question, which isn't necessarily about your existential experience. It could just be, 'I wonder what that means? I wonder how rebirth really works?' Then you'll think about it. You'll create a doubt, and you'll think – because we've all been encouraged to believe answers are the solution. The mind can easily go from doubt to answer, but it's just caught in a loop of thinking. That's not *dhammavicaya*. It's thinking, plain and simple, so be careful of that.

Often, people ask intelligent questions, but they are always driven by a habit of doubt. They're not able to see that doubt is a type of mindset. Once you know it as a mindset, you're fine. You don't have to go to thought. That's an important realisation because you tend to not be able to get out of the thinking realm or you give too much credit to thinking. This is not a dismissal of thinking. In the ordinary world, if something is not working, you try to find a solution. You need to think to do that. But spiritually, beginning to incline towards the silence of the mind is the most skilful thing to do.

Knowing stillness

Language can help you tune into that stillness. If I describe breath meditation as mindfulness of the breath, I tend to emphasise the breath. Whereas with, 'still knowing with breathing,' I'm

emphasising the still knowing. It's a different way of 'tuning in' for me. Maybe this way of using words doesn't make a difference for you, but it does for me. That's how I like to train myself.

If I can cultivate still knowing all the way to the end of the out-breath, then I could try to use that in more complex situations like annoyance.

You're usually going to thought when annoyed: 'Why don't they stop doing that?' or 'I shouldn't be like this.'

Instead of thinking, how about still knowing? You've tried it with the breath, so why not use it with an emotion? Annoyance is not still. It's vibratory. It creates pressure and tension in the body. But the knowing, what's that? Where's the knowing within a negative experience?

You could do this kind of practice with death (still knowing with the body falling apart), sickness, or beauty. Beauty's very good to use. The stillness is obvious when you're looking at nature like the vast night sky or a lake. The sky and the lake are pointing to the stillness rather than us needing nature to experience stillness.

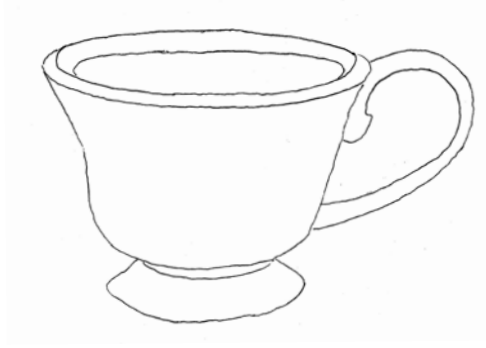
Where could that still knowing come in the contracted, more 'in-your-face' parts of our lives? Obviously, that's more difficult. Still knowing would be an interesting exercise to practise at the dinner table, or while waiting for a bus or shopping. Now, this doesn't mean you're becoming catatonic. You're continuing to function, but now you're working from a place of awareness. The emphasis is always on the knowing. If you get conversant with that and do it a lot, then that practice is 24/7. It's not restricted to the object of meditation. The object hopefully facilitates that.

The language of 'awareness *with*' rather than *'of'* has been useful for me.

When negativity comes up, we're trying to think it through. We get glued into the negativity and don't let it go. We think we must

fix, understand, or analyse it. While that can be tremendously important if there are issues of repression, sometimes we can get attached to that kind of mood out of good intentions. A more skilful option would be to determine, 'I'm going to practise knowing, say, horribleness.' That takes a lot of space. It may seem like you can't do it, but you actually can, if you play around.

Most of us understand our neuroses, so there's no real need to analyse them. Our culture sometimes over psychologises things. While Western psychology is fantastic, it has created a need in most of us to always figure stuff out or analyse it. This means, we're constantly engaged with objectives and objects, and not the 'objectless.' Some people think that letting go is a form of repression – you have to express it by 'punching the pillow' or something like that. You don't have to do that. You don't have to follow the thoughts. It depends on what you trust. I trust in awareness working things out.



MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH BREATH

How does the end of the out-breath feel?

Practise receptive awareness by using sound: ‘Sound is like this.’

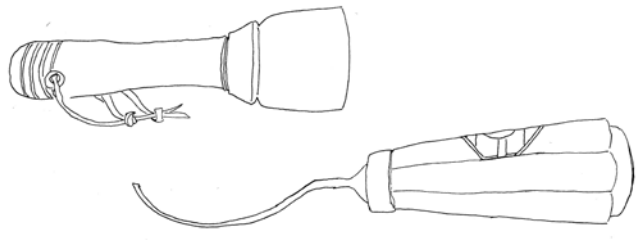
There’s the still knowing.

Notice you’re not searching for something, but you know it *is*.

Feel the breathing of the body.

Feel the end of the out-breath and notice the still knowing.

Establish the stillness of knowing and ride it all the way to the end of the out-breath.



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

***Note**: Ajahn gives a combined response to the below two questions.*

Q: A few days ago, you used the image of writing words on paper, saying the paper is like awareness, always there and available, though the words may change and move around. I found the image very useful to switch from chatter in the mind to white, clear spaciousness. Would you say the words etc. were in nature the same way as feeling tired or hungry? I can see it's natural for words and thoughts to arise, but is there a difference between this and natural physical states? Many distinguish between nature and culture. Anthropologists talk about it a lot, but in this, it seems culture is just a part of nature. I will think about this for some time, but for now I am enjoying the white paper. Thanks.

Q: How does one deal with stupidity in the world with moral skilfulness? A quote that speaks to my heart is, 'All it takes for evil or harm to continue is for good people to do nothing.' How do we do something in a skilful way that does not hook our mind into *saṁsāra?*

A: In nature, anything that arises is natural, but it's conditioned in different ways. The biases and prejudices we might experience as human beings are natural. Their causes and conditions can be familial, cultural, etc. They arise because of natural causes.

It's quite interesting what anthropologists say about the mind. I'm reading essays by Toni Morrison to get an idea of the cultural biases that come through literature. She's a good literary critic. She shows how Black people are misrepresented, and that's really edifying for me on a social level. But that to me is more the work of compassion at a societal level. The work of liberation is spiritual to me. It has to do with quietness and the silence of the mind.

The paper analogy is important for me. I'm always trying to be socially informed, but not get burnt out by the information. I want to protect my mind because death is close. Information can be toxic. You just pick up enough information to be informed, and not be over-stimulated by it.

As you get older, your inclination is to less excitement, less information, less filling of the mind, and more space and silence. Who wants to party at 73? Can you imagine going to a pub at that age? For me, that would be torture. There's a kind of natural inclination to spiritual life as we age. We are very fortunate because we are Dhamma practitioners, and we have a path, tools, *kalyāṇamittas*, literature, meditation, and study groups. It's really good kamma to be able to have that. Use this opportunity of ageing, if you are materially secure, to develop your spiritual practice as well as to be available to society in ways that are wise. It's okay if no one is listening to you because your refuge now is in the heart.

It's also very important to know how the mind works and the biases that are closing our hearts. We need to be quite careful with that, especially if the culture is promoting hatred. You can approach those frameworks of perception and bias by simply going to the open heart. Just get to know that these biased perceptions, such as guilt or hatred towards oneself or others, are closing the heart.

If you really work with negative emotions like fear and liberate them, then goodness can manifest in ways that are not blocked by biases and prejudices.

In Buddhism, the world is made up of six senses (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind). All those structures of perception need to be known.

I had an interesting encounter in Ottawa, Canada, once. We were shopping for sewing machine needles. There was a hijab-clad woman at the store. We started chatting, and she was hilarious. She was a very funny woman. I found that surprising. I realised I had a biased view that people with hijabs must be serious. I didn't know about this bias until it came into consciousness. Since my heart was open, I enjoyed talking to this person.

I think if the heart is open, you'll be able to notice the hidden biases and be with them because your focus is the person and not the perceptions. I had that insight when I was a layman. In my early 20s, I was visiting Morocco. I had these strange ideas about Third World countries. In Morocco, I saw good people, happy people, depressed people, as well as bad people, but they were all just people. That was an important insight.

In 1977, when I visited Toronto, I noticed a lot of hatred towards the Hare Krishna Group because of their wrong deeds. I got tarred with the same brush. During my walks, people would yell things like 'get a job'. A man spat on me. It was quite ugly. People assumed I must be crazy because they projected their perceptions about the Hare Krishna group onto me. People would look at me like I was an insect. I felt like a pariah in my hometown. The late Venerable Anando and I would go on alms rounds every day. We didn't get food, and after a while we were afraid because we knew we'd get abused. But we kept at it. One day, when we were bracing for the next insult, two Italian men said, 'Good morning! How are you?' That was a relief. The situation changed when His Holiness the Dalai Lama became popular. Once, he was giving a Kalachakra initiation in Toronto. I attended the first three days, which were on the Four Noble Truths. It was beautiful. His Holiness the Dalai

Lama invited us, Theravada monks, to the stage to chant. The event was an hour's walk away from my mom's place. When I was leaving the event, people honked their horns in appreciation: 'Good on you mate!' They weren't abusing me, which was nice.

Luang Por Liem is totally free of biases. He once said, 'People are just people,' which is brilliant. We don't have to deconstruct our biases. I think things will work out by keeping the heart open, noticing the biases and trying not to respond from a fearful place.

Once, Nick Scott and I travelled from Warsaw to St. Petersburg. It took two-and-a-half months. We flew to Warsaw and decided to use local buses or walk the rest of the trip. We walked a lot in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. One of the things we decided was to call the 'weird' people who test our compassion, 'Indra'. Indra is the warrior king of the *devas.* He is also a trickster in Hindu mythology. It was really interesting. When we encountered the 'Indras', we'd just be open to the person. We'd be cautious and streetwise, but open. It was a fun way to travel.

In terms of the question on thought and mind, we need to understand that at the level of human interaction, we want to do as much good as possible and as little harm as possible. The amount you can do depends on your age, available resources, your character, and vocation. My vocation is not social work, but I have been able to contribute something to society, which feels okay. When I was studying at the University of Toronto in the sixties, there were a lot of radical, anti-war demonstrations. Everyone seemed angry and even violent. I didn't want to be a part of that and chose a different vocation.

At the minimum, as individuals and human beings, we're ensuring every interaction is based on compassion and kindness as much as possible. Then, there'll come a time in life when you have to leave all types of proactive engagements to other people. This is the model in India. When you're younger and you've got lots of energy, time,

and resources, you're active in society. When you retire and children are old enough to take care of themselves, you prepare your mind for death. Of course, death can happen tomorrow or 20 years later.

These post-retirement years of mental stability and health, even though the body may not be in its prime, are very important for spiritual practice. To not engage with confusing issues is a good thing. There was a time and place for that. You did the advocacy work as a youngster. Perhaps, it's time for something else. An elder who is wise, available, has the capacity for compassionate listening, and is not caught up in worldly, everyday issues is a valuable being in society.

Do consider what retirement means to you. Surely, it's not just improving your golf score. Take the quietness of the mind as a serious issue.

One way to deal with the evil in the world is not to get stressed by it. Protect the mind and bring it to loving-kindness and stillness. Know your limitations. Don't get burnt out. My suggestion is, 'less, not more'.

In my own life, I determined that I've got to sort out my own mind first. How can I have a family or be a social activist if I'm still fraught with fear? So, I decided to go to a monastery. As situations arose later in life, I had enough resources to share. That was a natural evolution. You have to give yourself time to do the undergraduate work of the heart. It involves learning about meditation, understanding your own mental makeup and transcendence, and how to incline the mind towards it. A retreat such as this is helpful. In monastic life, we give junior monks time to get their head around the Buddha's teachings and the workings of their own heart. They typically teach only after ten years.

If you have or almost have grey hair, consider the spiritual life. It is not a running away from conventional life but putting into the conventional world wise beings who eventually have some influence.

Q: If awareness can exist without material, why do we need this body to realise the Deathless?

A: Well, you have no choice. You're incarnate in a body, and you suffer. The Buddha asks, 'Why do you suffer?' And he offers a teaching. So, it's just the way it is, isn't it?

Q: When this retreat ends, I plan to sit virtually with a sangha at the Toronto Zen Centre on weekdays. I feel it'll be helpful to practise with a group, but it's a different tradition with their own set of rituals. Also, should I sign up to receive private teachings from the *rōshi*?

A: Join in the rituals. They're great fun. Wherever you are, be it a church or a Zen temple, join in and try to get the feeling of what the rituals are. Or just watch like an anthropologist. That's what we tell guests who are shy of our tradition. They're uncomfortable with some rituals and conventions like bowing. We tell them to just be like anthropologists and watch. When you go into someone's spiritual home, you want to find out their rituals and be sensitive to them: 'How do I be polite in this environment? What is communion in this particular situation?' You have to be very mindful. Find out where they leave their shoes and how they conduct formal meditation sessions. That's a beautiful thing to do.

The relationship with a *rōshi* is personal and important. You first have to build trust with the teacher by basically interviewing him. You want to make sure the teacher has a strong moral foundation with impeccable credentials, as they have a lot of power. In the past, there were a lot of problems in Western monasticism, where people misused that power. It has improved now. It's a much more gracious and mature time. Twenty years ago, people were a bit more naive about what a teacher could or couldn't do. As for us in Theravada, we have strict guidelines around money and relationships that protect both the laity and monks.

When 'interviewing' the teacher, ask for their opinion about your practices. If they offer positive feedback, then they're tuning into your own practice, picking up who you are, and encouraging you in ways that make sense to you. This means the teacher is listening to you.

Q: Is it meaningful when I experience visual objects in the mind during meditation? I sometimes see a ball of fire or energy. It just comes as I'm sitting, with no emotions, words, or clear meaning. Sometimes I experience the faces of teachers too and that often comes with warmth and feelings of tranquillity and hope.

A: If your project is awareness, and you begin to sense the silence of that, would the light imagery or *nimitta* help you? Could you hold that imagery as an object of calming, or would it excite you? Would you get lost in it? You could be fascinated by the *nimitta* or become very tranquil. You must be careful when absorbing into an object like a light image, as you could become dependent on it and think that awareness is a kind of absorbed meditative experience just like a trance.

Awareness is not dependent on deep states of tranquillity. We're interested in a sustained knowing of the way things are for long periods of time. If the images are just coming and going, then see if you can stay calm, allow it to be what it is, and not get caught up in too much thinking about it. If it comes a lot, experiment with holding it in your mind. See what happens. But don't create a self around it: 'Oh, I've got this.' Don't create doubt around it: 'What is that?' Just acknowledge that it's a phenomenon that has arisen. It is as it is. It might or might not have a calming effect. But the project is sustained stillness, awareness, and composure with the way things are, which allow you to contemplate phenomenon and life experiences.

It is skilful to bring up the images of teachers. I visualise and imagine Luang Por Sumedho. When his image comes into consciousness, it's beautiful and lovely; the heart is filled with gratitude and warmth. That's a skilful way of developing open-heartedness.

It's not just about one relationship, though. It's about all beings all of the time.

People have strange experiences during meditation like feeling their body is 10ft tall. It's important to understand if these types of experiences are composing or exciting the mind.

If you had an extraordinary experience, then are you spending the next five sittings trying to repeat that? You're in trouble then because you're in time. There was the past: 'I really meditated very well that day. I'm a basket case now. I need to get back.' Now you're stuck in time. You have desire, you have self, and you also have the whipping afterwards when you felt like you 'failed'.

All meditators have these experiences. The holding of tranquillity as something we want to repeat is a big stumbling block for people because it can be addictive. You experience a beautiful feeling. But if you spend the next six months trying to get back that feeling, then you won't see the desire to get or the desire to become. You may also judge your present moment as pathetic.

Luang Por Chah said, 'If your meditation makes you peaceful, then accept it. If your meditation doesn't make you peaceful, then accept it.'

When it is tranquil, ride with it. When it changes, you acknowledge: 'Well, it's supposed to change.' If there's restlessness, accept it: 'Restlessness feels like this.'

That's the movement to transcendence.

I'm not dismissing deep states of tranquillity but be careful. If you hold onto that side, then the other side is going to plague you. We're trying to be 'side-less'.

When meditation has a lot of tranquillity, it's nurturing and energising. It gives you a lot of inspiration. The difficulty is to not hold on to it and not try to get it back. That's why they say, 'Whatever happens in mediation, give it all up.' This is the idea of sharing merit. Give all the goodness that came from your meditation to everyone all over the world. It's hard to do, though. So, when it is peaceful, say, 'Thank you.' When it's not, say, 'The practice shouldn't change because awareness is unchanging.'

You always move to the Unchanging, rather than to the duality of experience.

When Luang Por Liem experienced exalted states of mind, he didn't hold onto them. He simply accepted them: 'It is as it is.' It arose and ceased. Now, of course, there's no arising or ceasing of experiences for him. How did he get there? By not creating or holding onto anything.

Q: The end of the out-breath does indeed seem to be an interesting place to hang out. I'm noticing a lot of stillness there, and conversely, a bit of upheaval. It occurred to me that hanging out here is a practise for my final out-breath. I found this thought disturbing at first, but in fairly short order, it seems to be becoming a place of comfort.

A: Yes, I contacted a lot of fear there myself. Fear is an important human predicament. It was essential for me to understand it deeply, not at the level of thought, but at the *hara* level, in the stomach, and the heart. I also had to liberate it from the conditioned nature of my sense of self. A lot of that came about through this capacity to just allow the out-breath to be what it is. Sometimes the out-breath is like an incredible, deep yawn felt in the *hara* or like a queasy tension. The natural reaction is wanting to do something, but I've learned not to let it go to thought. Fear is there, but it has no narrative or story. It's just conditioning. I don't have to do anything about it; just accept and let it be. Once you let the out-breath be as is, you

may notice that the body is tense on the in-breath. Now, what's that stress all about? That would be an interesting contemplation.

The out-breath is also the place where you get kidnapped by thought, plans, etc.

When you make the out-breath a 'project,' you tend to be with the body more. Also, if you pay attention to a bodily component for 45 minutes or more over six days, you can imagine how beneficial it'll be in ordinary life because you now have a subconscious movement of attention. Say, you're in the marketplace where 'something' is happening. At that time, some of your attention is going to be on the out-breath because you've been training to notice it. This is fabulous because you now have a way of processing things that were triggered by complexities you might not have experienced in a retreat. Attention is no longer just in thought or personal relationships. It's deeper. Observing the out-breath is also calming and peaceful. But it's not a trance. You're fully open, awake, and with life as it presents itself.

Q: How do I reach out to someone who I see as my teacher and hope I might be received as their student?

A: In Theravada Buddhism, senior monks are teachers for anyone who wants to come. We don't set up personal relationships, but if you come to a monastery and meet one of the senior monks, then they get a sense of your story and the kinds of things you are learning about. That would be one way to establish a relationship with a monastic. The monk knows you and you don't have to repeat your story every time. It's a natural occurrence in monasteries. The duty of monks, especially of abbots, is to always be available to the laity because that's how we serve society. A lot of people come and talk about their practice. I get to know them, and they're very good friends now. But there isn't a *guru-shishya* (teacher-disciple) relationship like you might find in Tibetan Buddhism. Theravada

teachers don't give much direction in terms of what you should do with your life. We're not therapists. We don't have the skills to help a person with PTSD, marital issues, etc. The conversations are about Dhamma. We try to view any problem a layperson may be experiencing in terms of greed, hatred, and delusion, or through the Four Noble Truths.

Q: I find it very helpful to let the mind rest in the knowing rather than the object of breathing. Will the parallel be awareness of space in vision, or awareness of silence around sound if all of these practices have the effect of stopping the mind and opening the heart to silence with deep tenderness?

A: Yes, definitely. Awareness of space is an intuitive one. Space is a common analogy. It's similar to the example of print on the book and the page of the book. In a room, when you take your attention away from objects, you begin to see consciousness, awareness, space. From that you can understand the craving for objects is the wrong place to look for peace.

The abandonment of the strategies of craving is very important for realising the Unconditioned.

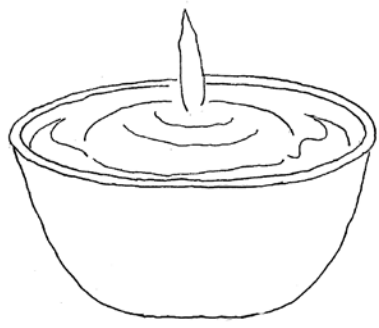
Also, is the space here different than out there? You realise it's the same. You get a sense of what awareness, space, or knowing mean. These are really interesting parts of our spiritual life. We get past our emotional baggage and the mind begins to quieten.

As you age, go for simplicity rather than complexity. What could be simpler than space?

We can't teach that to minds intoxicated with objects. You have to teach moral integrity. As your attention gets refined, even the doing of meditation objects becomes too coarse. You can relax away from that and notice space. But this isn't a case of being spaced out. You're very conscious in choiceless awareness. You're choosing to be present and open, but away from objects.

Q: During meditation I seem to give instructions or reminders to myself like 'I am aware'; 'Let go'; and 'I am grateful.' Thus, I'm always talking to myself. Is this okay to do throughout the meditation?

A: Yes and no. My first teacher, late Venerable Bhikkhu Ñanasuci, once asked, 'What's the word the Buddha would have used the most?' Well, you truly can't know the answer to that question. Similarly, it kind of depends on the make-up of your mind. If you're an obsessive commenter with a machine gun of comments, then it's probably not good. But if you know how to coach yourself with language, that would be great. For instance, popping in the word, 'grateful,' eases your heart and you abide as gratitude for a while. That's a really good use of right thinking. You're using it correctly. So, it depends on habit and the result. Also, you want to taste the silence of no thought and have an aptitude for that.



DAY SEVEN

MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH BECOMING

As I've been suggesting, it's helpful to awaken to the mood of the mind right from when you get up in the morning. It doesn't take the thinking mind long to create a self and others as well as a past and future. The whole world is born into consciousness through thought, through self, and through mood. You can know that as an object. When you do, you start to touch the silence that's behind the world.

So, what is the mood of the mind? This isn't a judgement. It's an awakening. Then tune into silence by listening to the sounds around you. In the listening, you also hear the silence, don't you?

Since you're tuned into the present moment, you know the way things are. It's very simple, isn't it? The habits of thought and of becoming as well as all the wanting and not wanting make life complex. Awakening to them is very simple.

Creating affection is a pleasant thing to do. So, make conscious someone dear to you. Realising, naming them, bringing them to mind at the in-breath, and feeling them at the heart: 'May they be well.' What a lovely thing to do, isn't it? It's like a giving. Then you keep tuning into the silence, affection, and gratitude.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: How do you fulfil your social responsibilities and act skilfully in the face of worldly injustices?

A: First off, protect the mind from anger and righteous indignation – because we are cultivating something deeper than what's happening in the world. If you're really interested in getting angry, then go for it. If that's what turns you on, then be angry. But how effective or profitable is that? One wants to guard against righteous indignation and anger (which could be justifiable) because that's been very destructive in human society on all ends of the spectrum.

Can one be engaged without being angry? Is there some logic in being engaged without being angry? Does that make sense or is anger a necessary part of being engaged? Is being enraged an essential part of effective action?

When I was studying at the University of Toronto in the mid-1960s, there were anti-Vietnam war protests on campus. Jerry Rubin, a radical left dissident, and part of the Chicago Seven group that was arrested for sedition during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, USA, once spoke at the university. He had the Viet Cong flag around his neck at that time and incited everyone to extreme anger. I was against the Vietnam War, but I didn't want to be angry or self-righteous. I preferred to cultivate inner freedom and participate wherever I could as peacefully as possible.

My question isn't how much you engage in social activism, but does anger facilitate peace? Does an angry person serve peace in the world? You may think living a peaceful life as a monk is not really going to stop the downward trend of societal corruptions and similar issues. If so, in an ideal situation, social activism can become your vocation. Dr. Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama can be described as social activists. They also took up the spiritual challenge of remaining loving in horrible situations.

Can you do social activism without becoming angry? That would be an interesting exercise. If you're intent on social activism, then pick up the cause where you might have some power, societal connections, and resources to create change. You use that 'vehicle' to understand and liberate your heart from anger.

It's way too easy to blame your anger on other people. We can find lots of things in the world to hate. As American novelist Toni Morrison said, 'Goodness is difficult.' It's not easy to do social activism as a spiritual practice. But it's an interesting challenge.

Whatever you choose, always be responsible for your own mind and heart – and keep moving towards compassion. I chose monasticism as my vocation, but it was not to run away from social responsibilities. I felt the need to do the 'undergraduate work' of training the mind. Things have evolved from there, and I'm here now.

Hatred vs. anger

There is a difference between hatred and anger. Hatred is pernicious and destructive for the individual and society.

Anger is also problematic, but someone could just flare up and be without hatred. It could be an aggravation of something in life. Anger is habitual. Some people are very passionate that way, and

anger is a quick, volcanic arising. But it's socially awkward to have people angry all the time, to say the least. It can certainly be painful because we often direct anger towards the people closest to us, which is tragic. So, anger must be addressed. You have to patiently work on not believing in it and not going there, developing awareness about how anger manifests in the body as well as being willing to ask for forgiveness. But there is a massive difference between held, visceral hatred and the flaring up of anger.

Ajahn Bodhipālā, who resides at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, UK, is originally from Cambodia. She was in Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge took over. She witnessed the violent, horrible deaths of several family members. Then a layperson, she fled to the United States where she had a successful career as a computer programmer. She carried a lot of hatred for the Khmer Rouge. She developed a practice of visually torturing Khmer Rouge soldiers. She would constantly imagine cutting up the soldiers with a razor to the smallest pieces possible to inflict the most amount of pain. She eventually realised the hatred was destroying her. She went back to her Buddhist roots and began to practise *mettā bhāvanā* to develop the forgiveness capacity. It took a long time to move the heart from hatred to forgiveness. Eventually, she returned to Phenom Phen, the capital of Cambodia, where she established a refuge for abused women. She did the most stunning act then. She visited a nearby village where Khmer Rouge soldiers were residing. She asked them for forgiveness for all the hatred that she had previously 'directed towards them'. The soldiers cried, and they asked for forgiveness too. This is an example of the spiritual or inner transformations we are capable of as humans.

Now, forgiveness is not condoning. Just like his Holiness the Dalai Lama, don't allow the mind to go to hatred.

Q: How do you hang out more in the silence at the end of thought?

A: You start by noticing the tendency to get rid of thought and then making conscious the end of thought more and more. In that moment of noticing, try to create a positive perception of, 'this is it; I don't have to go anywhere,' instead of, 'oh god, I'm thinking too much'. The shift from thought to the object of meditation happens very quickly. Also, this critical judgement is not analytical; it's just a reaction to thought. But it's not coming from awakening; it is due to resistance and rejection. So, make conscious the end of thought by doing the exercises we've been doing in this retreat. Just say, 'This is it.' Affirm it. Make it important: 'That's it. I don't have to do anything else.'

You keep doing that. It may take 20 years but keep doing it. It's very, very subtle. The desire to get rid of thought will surely lessen.

Once you have a taste of the nectar of silence, you will incline towards that. However, old habits will be there. This is the frustrating part of the contemplative life. Even though you have insight, the power of habit will overwhelm it.

There are many situations in life when we have to wait for things to happen, be it a traffic jam or a medical appointment. You have nothing to do in those moments but wait. Usually, when there's nothing to do, we want to do something. You'll probably browse magazines, scroll through your emails, or do something else. Well, why don't you do nothing? Why do anything when there's nothing to do? Just sit there and abide in witnessing. You realise the mind wants to do something. That's the movement of thought and of becoming and doing. While it's okay to read and answer emails, notice the tendency to do something. Make it conscious: 'Oh, there's nothing to do.' Then listen to the silence. Take these little opportunities that exist in life. Obviously, the more you introduce them into your day, the more silence will become conscious.

We've got a lot of 'horrible toys' to fill the mind. There's this constant going out and consuming. That's what a consumer society does. We might not be consuming gross material objects, but we are imbibing a lot of information. The mind does like to go out a lot. As Luang Por Dune says:

> The mind going outside is the cause.
> The result of the mind going outside is suffering.
> The mind knowing the mind is the path.
> The result of the mind knowing the mind is the
> end of suffering.

You know the mind, you know knowing. The more you intend that, the more it'll happen. I don't know any secret, quick methods that would work. I tried drugs, which didn't work. I messed it up even more, so I don't recommend that. A lifestyle that is non-distracting and doesn't stir the mind a lot helps in that way. The sense of silence then becomes more obvious.

Q: I've been finding 'the still knowing of' very useful, experimenting with bringing up worry or fear into the still knowing and abiding there. Also, with discomfort in my knees and seeing that the still knowing of the pain allows it to be as it is, there's less resistance. I wonder about experimenting with half-open eyes as in the Zen tradition to help transition into life generally. This morning, I meditated looking at the light forming in the trees in front of me. I worked with abiding in still knowing and bringing up worry. I wonder if this might be a good method for me to expand the practice into the less beautiful parts of life.

A: Yes, that's the kind of experimentation you want to do. We all have our own life programs that we're working with both in terms of conditioning and social situation. When we experiment, we're able to figure out if it works.

So, how can we bring this into all of life because this should be 24/7. What's the point of experimenting if it's just limited to the zafu?

The intuitions that make something an everyday part of life are important and fruitful. Also, that kind of experimentation can be effective because it's personal and about one's own situation with an understanding of the basic principles. Luang Por Chah would say, 'Always question yourself,' not just intellectually, but also by looking in this way.

Beauty helps too. The Buddha said monks should live in forest environments. But am I dependent on the environment? Do I have to live in a monastery or a beautiful place or can I practise in a more raucous place? Practice has to be the same whether we're in the forest, a beautiful place, the airport, or the office. The environment is incredibly helpful, but the practice should be the same in all environments. That only makes sense. Otherwise, it's not transcendent.

Q: When all else fails in my meditation practice, I turn to *mettā*, so I really appreciate your reflections on the *mettā* chant (refer to *The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness*, p193). However, when asked about sending *mettā* to individuals, your answer suggested this is not the intention or the method. It is about openness, oneness, and knowing the feeling in the heart. I have been sending the energy of *mettā* to individuals. Please clarify the *mettā* practice.

A: When I am at a store, I don't send *mettā* to passers-by. I just keep the heart open. If the heart contracts because of something, then I can sense that. I never learned this way of sending *mettā*. In Thailand, where I trained, it was about the development of the *pāramī* of *mettā,* the development of energy, and the development of the heart. I use imagery and phrases like 'Luang Por Sumedho' on the in-breath and 'may you be well' on the out-breath. You could say that's sending *mettā*, which is fine, but these are just verbal

strategies. What matters is, 'Does it work for you?' If yes, then don't worry about the language.

It is beautiful that we human beings can enter into that kind of relationship, but I don't like sending *mettā* to myself deliberately. If there is self-disparagement or aversion to others, then the heart is closed. If I stay centred with an open heart, then when self-criticism starts to ramp up, I can sense the constriction in the heart.

It's not about sending *mettā* to myself. It's not around the energy of self and other. It's not in the model of self and other. The model of flow of consciousness is the model that's governed by dependent origination. With *this* as condition, *that* arises. When there is *this,* there is *that.* The social aspect of Buddhism, the part we call conventional truth, is the model of self and other. I'm using the model of dependent origination where the sense of self and other is a perception that comes and goes, and I'm moving towards the emptiness of those perceptions with an open heart.

Q: Is there a reason or a purpose for the accumulation of pain in the legs and back when sitting cross-legged?

A: You're probably not used to sitting cross-legged for several hours. During my time in rural Thailand, most of the houses had no beds, chairs, cushions, or any type of furniture. The monks were used to sitting on cloth mats. If you grew up in that kind of environment, then sitting cross-legged is natural and there's not much pain. If you're not used to sitting cross-legged, then obviously your muscles aren't developed for that. The pain could also be related to an injury or old age. You can work towards getting the body in shape for sitting by consulting a good yoga teacher.

There's no purpose to pain, but you can use it to learn to peacefully co-exist with pain, but not to the extent that it hurts you. The older you get, it's not about staying in shape, but about keeping 'this

thing' on the road. You don't want to wreck your back or knees.

The cross-legged posture is very grounding. A tall spine is good for meditation because the energy flows freely. It takes time to develop the posture. If you want to develop it, then maybe start with 30 minutes on the floor and 30 minutes on a chair. Move into it gently instead of hurting yourself. Then learn to abide peacefully with the discomfort. The pain itself becomes a teacher around resistance. Having said that, one of the problems I faced was wilfulness. I was wilfully trying to not move, which was unwise. I wasn't reflecting on pain. I learnt that eventually.

Pain is just a big part of being incarnate in a body. Meditators with chronic pain learn a lot about it. They develop skilful means of being at peace with pain. You develop the ability to notice the desire to move and be free of pain. You learn to let go of that and be at peace with unfulfilled desire.

Q: Do you fear death?

A: Well, not today. Tomorrow maybe; I don't know. The question is quite abstract. A more useful one would be, 'Can I abide in peace with fear?'

Fear manifests in all kinds of ways. If I understand fear and I've learned how to release it, then when it arises, the refuge is not in the emotion, but in the knowing. The fear will arise, stay for a while, and cease.

Q: Do monks always eat at set times?

A: Our eating regime is not moral. You must understand that all of our rules aren't around morality. Most of them are around organising monastic life and sticking to values of simplicity, renunciation, and sense restraint. Monks don't marry. Now

marriage is not immoral, but can you imagine a monastery of 50 monks and families? It wouldn't be a monastery anymore. It would be a commune with different principles of organisation. The Buddha suggested developing a monastic life, which is very simple and without distractions. Music can be very spiritual and isn't immoral, but we don't have a big music collection because that would just be another avenue to go out into the objects of the world. The principle of monasticism is that it's the transcendence of the need for objects. Simplicity really helps in that respect. If a monk is restless and has no avenues of distraction, then they have to look at the restlessness. They abide with it and understand this kind of drawing out into objective experience.

People will equate rules with morality, but it's not that. You probably have some rules in your home to help everyone live together harmoniously. It's the same principle in monasteries.

Q: When feeling lots of anxiety or fear of contracting COVID-19, how can you meditate especially with the pain or not being able to breathe?

A: Develop strength of awareness in the ordinary and in safe situations. You can gain insight and understanding in those circumstances. When life becomes complex, you have some tools, foundation, and a momentum of awareness and insight, which will serve you well.

If you're absorbed in breath meditation, then it'll be challenging not to be able to breathe. But if awareness is your practice and you can't breathe due to a panic attack, can it be possible for awareness to know panic?

You can prepare for death, sickness, and pain by being aware now of little pains and annoyances.

The future is unknown. Now is the knowing.

Q: As I rest more in knowing and try to bring that to my daily life, there seems to be a lessening of will and motivation for my usual activities. I do what needs to be done and try to bring the knowing mind to that but there certainly seems to be a dropping away of motivation in many areas.

A: This is very common. The basic sense of going out into objects is no longer interesting. You don't need to do that anymore. You prefer to rest and abide in the beauty of the peaceful mind. But it's not passive or dysfunctional. This is actually the brightness of being. It's very awake and it's a skill to abide in non-desire, non-becoming, and non-resistance. Abiding in that is very fulfilling. Yet, when there's need, we will respond instantly without any hesitation. So, this is, I would say, a good sign. Society might think you're losing the plot here, but this is not passivity. Passivity is bad when it goes to thought. The thought then just spins around in self-narratives and downward spirals of depression. Instead, this is about abiding in stillness and peace because it has that fulfilment of non-desire. The thing about desires being fulfilled is that they perpetuate more desires. Whereas with cessation of desire you no longer need to fulfil desires. Yes, we have biological and social desires of what we'd like to affect with family and friends. But as the need for objects falls away, the taste of peace becomes more pleasant and interesting than the taste of movement, excitement and interest. You become interested in peace, I suppose, so, savour that.

MEDITATION

AWARENESS WITH PERCEPTIONS

Awakening to the way things are – simple, isn't it?

Thought makes it complex. So, come to the simplicity of knowing.

What language do you use to stay there? As I was saying earlier, 'This is it.' This knowing is the goal.

You can create, in some way, pleasantness and affection in the heart – welcoming the breath and even curiosity of the out-breath.

Whether it's affection or curiosity, both are aspects of awakened knowing. With curiosity, you're not trying to get an experience. You're simply looking at your experience right now. For instance, you're looking at the end of the out-breath just like a scientist would be looking at lab procedures.

Affection is both warm and an attitude that helps you sustain this capacity for awareness.

These are the general principles. You can agree or disagree with them. If you find them helpful, then find ways to keep introducing these simple principles into your meditations.

TRUST IN AWARENESS

It's our final evening. As I always joke, if it was a terrible retreat and you're happy, or if it was a good retreat and you feel sad, or if it was an indifferent retreat and you feel indifferent, then know time is a feeling. Scientifically, time is considered an absolute, but I think there are different opinions about that. Time is a felt thing. If your meditation went really well, it must have felt short. But, if it was horrible, then it could have been eternal hell. Whatever you feel now – happy, sad, or in-between – the awareness is timeless. Awareness, consciousness, presence, or knowing is pure and mysterious, but you know that you know this ineffable presence of knowing. It has no quality or shape. It's not square or round. It doesn't have a haircut. It's a mystery and yet, you can abide as the knowing. It's not hidden in any way.

Sadness at the end of a retreat or happiness at the end of a sitting are the qualities that we experience. We respond to them because we are biological and emotional beings. But is that the only thing there is? Is this endless response to stimuli, pain, and pleasure the only thing there is? The Buddha said no. There is an alternative to pleasure and pain, and that's the transcendent silence of knowing the way things are.

Intuitive awareness

The title of one of Luang Por Sumedho's books is *Intuitive Awareness*. It's a phrase he was using a few years ago. I didn't pick up on that phrase in the beginning. I wondered, 'How do you explain this?'

If you have a rigorous intellectual approach, then words have specific meanings. While this may be true, the idea of a reflective teaching is not to nail down the exact, 'eternal' meaning of a word. The word is simply just trying to get you to look at life in a certain way, so you understand something about it. Over time, you accumulate wisdom through reflective understanding of the Buddha's teachings and become less and less confused by conditions. It's a confidence that is not based on some kind of Buddhist intellectual fundamentalism. While it can be helpful to be knowledgeable about some ideas, it's simply at the intellectual level for me. The confidence to know the path existentially and emotionally is the meaning of 'intuitive awareness,' as described by Luang Por Sumedho. You intuit that's the way to go.

The awakened mind is a simple thing. These days, we hear the phrase, 'uncertain times,' a lot. When haven't we lived in uncertain times! It's weird and uncertain now, but what is certain is that you know it feels uncertain. The only liberation from uncertainty is knowing that it is uncertain.

Luang Por Chah constantly stressed the 'uncertain' theme. If you take it in a social context, you can get really afraid. Global warming, pandemic, wars, and political strife are all causing uncertainties in the world, and if you really proliferate on them, you'll be very worried. But that's not what Luang Por Chah is saying. He's asking us to look at the feeling of worry as something that is coming and going; look at the feeling of uncertainty, which is coming and going; and look at the feeling of time coming and going.

In Buddhism, this practice is called *aniccasaññā* (perception of change). This perception is always possible. After this retreat, you may feel inspired or want your money back. Two weeks later, you may wonder about what you heard on the retreat. At that moment, you can just say to yourself, 'I don't know what he was talking about,' and you'll be on the path again. This is the beauty of it;

it's always there. The issue is not so much about understanding the teaching, but about trust.

Faith

What do you trust spiritually? What do you have faith in? Do you have faith in dogma? We'd like to stay away from religious fundamentalism because we feel it's conceited, aggressive, and patronising.

You can have faith in material things like car brakes and your insurance policy, but what does faith and trust mean spiritually? When push comes to shove, what do you do? Worry? Then, there's a faith or trust in worry, a habit of worry, or the kamma of worry.

So, one needs to make conscious the intention to trust in awareness.

You have to do that consciously and deliberately because the other parts of our habitual conditioning click in very quickly. Hopefully, due to a safe and wholesome environment, you have a chance to develop a sensitivity to awareness of the way things are during this retreat.

In situations that are not dangerous, when you feel vulnerable and your fears or worries come up, you can begin to trust in awareness of vulnerability rather than running with thoughts of worry and fear.

Much of the popular press is stimulating lots of fear in our minds. There are surely things to be afraid of, but the sense of being vulnerable is an important human condition to begin to make conscious in a safe place.

Knowing vulnerability

There was a question about austere practices that monks adopt. Well, I could fast for ten days with just water, or I could go without sleep. I did them, but that was only through will power. The real austere practice for me was being vulnerable and in situations that

I did not feel comfortable. I was safe though. In those vulnerable moments, the ego mind would come up. There was fear, worry, self-doubt as well as the wanting to be liked by others. If a person I wanted to like me looked at me sullenly, then I'd worry about them. This happened to me once. I later found out that they had influenza, and it wasn't about me.

The proliferation of mind that takes place with vulnerability and self-doubt is a huge part of our suffering.

How do you liberate the mind from that? A lot of people do it by developing skills, but sometimes they are just a cover up. There are people who are powerful, but still vulnerable. Yes, we need to deal with the sense of not knowing and not being sure about the future functionally, but emotionally bearing witness to vulnerability is the way to liberate fear from the heart. If you have PTSD, then you'll need professional help. But, for most of us with our average garden variety neuroses and vulnerabilities, this makes a lot of sense. Certainly, I found it helpful.

Offering goodwill and kindness

In our culture, there's a lot of self-disparagement, self-criticism, and idealism. A sense of self is created from ideals – the shoulds and shouldn'ts – that have been inculcated into the mind whether it's around being a man, woman, mom, or dad. A lot of self-criticism, guilt, and lack of self-acceptance stems from that conditioned idealism. In this way, attachment takes place in our cultures. We can be very smart and clever about these issues. But this isn't an issue of the intellect, rather the heart. What works for me is somehow by-passing the endless analysis and getting to the root of the problem. It is both a visceral and conditioned result in the heart.

Sometimes, Buddhism and meditation can adopt a warrior-like tone. For example, we often hear of killing the *kilesas*. I question whether that works – because it's imbued with wilfulness and

becoming. Whereas, when you feel vulnerable and fears are coming up, it's an opportunity to witness the way things are. This witnessing of vulnerability is a kind of self-love because you are no longer rejecting it or pushing away the feelings and demanding that you be some ideal that you think you should be. This willingness is *mettā bhāvanā*.

Mettā bhāvanā is not just a dualistic way of sharing feelings of loving-kindness with others. This active experiencing of *mettā* is profound. In this way you are not dwelling in aversion. You're offering goodwill and kindness to that feeling of vulnerability. As Luang Por Sumedho said, 'It all belongs.' It is an open-hearted acceptance of the way things are. It's far from a narcissistic love.

It seems to me that awareness and goodwill must be conjoined. It's not like you do one and then the other. The whole path is really one in that way.

We use language to compartmentalise things, but is not the open heart simply a dynamic availability to all of life, which then responds to all of life according to the circumstances?

So, if there's pain, there's compassion. If there's beauty, there's joy. There's no desire because the heart is fulfilled. There's peacefulness and equanimity because there's no desire. The equanimity isn't cold. It has a kind of openness. How do we come to that?

As they say in one tradition, 'Trust in Allah and tie your camel.' So, having tied your camel – such as paying your insurance bills and making sure you've got enough food to ride out the snowstorm – you want to be able to enter into those difficult states of consciousness because that's where the sense of self, distraction, and blame get born. In the witnessing of that and the allowing of that, the separation of ego and consciousness begins to fall away, and compassion begins to manifest. This is not a deliberate act. It's more like the naturalness of the heart, which is liberated from fear, greed, hatred, and delusion. It's nature; it's not like you have

to do it. His Holiness the Dalai Lama isn't doing it; he just is it. He is a Bodhisattva.

A lot of my suffering has been that sense of vulnerability. For instance, when teaching, you are out there, just 'naked' on stage, and raw emotionally. Plus, you don't have a textbook to guide you or a back-up person. You feel vulnerable during the early days of teaching, at least I did even though the environment was safe

Actually, being vulnerable in a safe place was the best austere practice I could have. Feeling doubt and fear and not just riding over them in an intellectual manner, but being in the midst of that, bearing witness, and then seeing what kindness is in those moments was powerful. It's incredibly powerful over a long period of time. The calmness then comes naturally. The openness comes naturally.

Freeing the heart

Meditation can be viewed as an accumulation of calming states of mind. But it can be a purification too. Meditation can be viewed as a willingness to bear witness to the arising of difficult states of mind and a cultivation of open-hearted awareness around them. These are powerful things to do.

As long as negative things are haunting our minds, we will want to free ourselves from them. These negative feelings are not a mere blip in consciousness. They're powerful stuff. These resultant things that come through us carry a lot of energy. You may or may not know why you're experiencing a certain emotion. While it may be helpful to know the 'why', a lot of times it's not important. You have enough sensibility to know what this feels like. The more you can witness that, I think the more the freedom becomes apparent. Now, that's not an issue of control. For me, it's an issue of awakening.

If the heart trembles too much and is too shaken, then you just get distracted. So, you need to learn to calm the mind. But you don't want meditation to become a precious experience: 'Leave me alone, I'm meditating. I'm precious now, you coarse thing.' That's not the spirit of it. You don't want to go there because that's boring and not freeing. So, find places of calm in your own mind and environment. As you enter into the complexities, reflect, 'What is it that doesn't change?'

At the end of a retreat, it's important to let go of everything. If you think you might lose this peace tomorrow, you're right. I guarantee it. It's supposed to be that way.

So, if the mind has become calm, great. Get good at that if you can. But realise if it's circumstantial, then it's not freedom. Awakening to the way things are is not a circumstance. It's not about good or bad weather. It's transcendent.

Now, back to what I asked, 'What do you trust when push comes to shove, and the volcano starts to erupt?' If you can trust in awareness, then you've got the path to freedom.

Homework

I have homework for you. It's very simple. Look at *vibhava-taṇhā* for a year. This is the way to deepen Dhamma practice. You take a little bit of the Buddha's teaching and apply it.

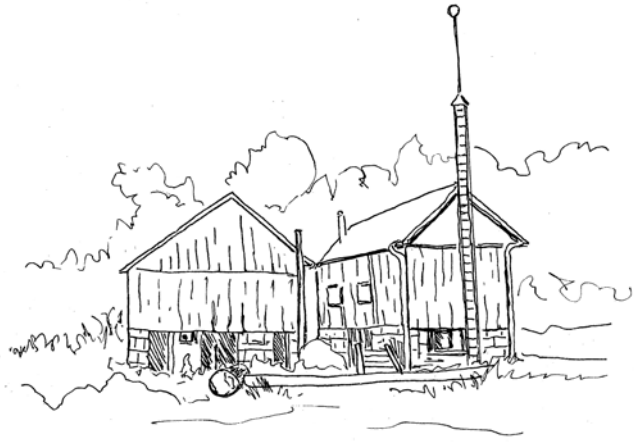
We have a lot of resistance to the way things are, be it physical pain, family strife, our own emotions, state of the country, etc. Trying to get rid of thought or an emotional state to get another state are all resistance. If we don't understand resistance and are constantly reacting to it, then we haven't understood one of the three types of craving.

According to the Buddha, there are three kinds of craving – sense-craving, craving for a future state, and craving to get rid of.

Determine to watch resistance and create tiny reminders like leaving a note on your fridge or desk. Every time you resist, use language like 'this is what resistance feels like' to understand the craving. This way you'll get past the reactivity to that mind state. Knowing resistance doesn't mean you condone things, or you don't disagree with people. It's not about the way you engage socially, but how you react inwardly. You could also use the word, 'non-resistance,' and then watch resistance. You just keep watching that. This is called *dhammavicaya*.

Once you awaken to resistance as an object, you're starting to let go of craving.

Sometimes resistance has a biological necessity. For instance, if your leg hurts, then move. There's nothing right or wrong about it. For the next year, you're working to understand resistance as a mind state. It's easy to intellectualise the teachings. But, this way, you take just one little bit of your mind and consciousness and use the teaching to understand and observe the mind. That'll bring you into awareness. You'll be looking at the way the mind works rather than getting caught in the storylines. You'll also be reflecting on how the mind works. This way, the ability to reflect on your own conscious experience gets better and more refined.



EPILOGUE

There is the Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated and Unformed – this is one of the phrases from the Pali canon that can be described as the taproot of Ajahn Viradhammo's spiritual cultivation. This commitment to and exploration of the Deathless has defined his spiritual pursuit and is the foundation of his teachings.

Ajahn's teachings help us understand the three characteristics of existence properly, which leads one towards the exploration of transience, the sense of self, and the nature of experience. He often says, '*That which knows suffering doesn't suffer*.' Ajahn emphasises that the teachings of the Buddha would be incomplete if they do not encourage us to realise the Deathless.

Ajahn's teachings motivate us to explore the relationships we create with objects and how an experience can be approached objectively. But by only exploring objects, do we lose sight of something beyond? The answer to this question, Ajahn Viradhammo emphasises, is not to be found in analysis or active thinking, but through unbiased observation, receptivity, and gentle curiosity – basically, with our heart. This is where our innate capacity to be aware abides.

By avoiding verbiage, which he describes as 'loaded' (with preconceived notions), technical terminology, and dogma, Ajahn skilfully uses day-to-day, simple language, and familiar metaphors to guides us in a manner that's straightforward and direct. Setting aside confusing analyses and lists, he shares his own experiences with adopting the Buddha's teachings in a way that is easily and enjoyably assimilable.

The preceding pages are transcripts of a retreat led by Ajahn Viradhammo in the late summer/early autumn of 2020. Amid

the fear and uncertainty of the COVID lockdown, these hours of teaching and contemplation were a great source of uplift and inspiration to the participants. His unique, gentle, and wise offerings were and continue to be a precious gift in times of great turmoil and panic.

Over the years, Ajahn Viradhammo's metaphors and phraseology have evolved. Yet, they are consistently faithful to the main implication of his explorations – *awareness*. As a student of Luang Por Chah and Luang Por Sumedho, his teachings are loyal to the ethos of the Thai Forest Tradition, which is: personal insight and meditative experience are the most dependable ways of understanding life. Honouring the advice of his teachers and by taking their teachings to heart, Ajahn's voice is spontaneous, as he offers relatable, yet profound teachings.

After setting the stage with the traditional refuges and precepts, Ajahn Viradhammo presents the idea of *receptivity*, which he states is crucial to our spiritual growth. Receptivity moves us away from control, thereby reducing the possibility of stress during meditation. Receptivity is indeed where it all begins – where opinions and judgements gradually lose their footing. When we are receptive, we witness the arising of a spontaneous curiosity, unclouded by thought or doubt.

This curiosity is neither intrusive nor does it pull us away from the point of it all. It simply frees us from the confines of our thinking minds, which are often constricted by our habitual value judgements. A palpable sense of care and compassion accompany receptivity and curiosity – and they give rise to a feeling of acceptance and wellness.

A great reminder to the adept as well as to beginners is Ajahn's encouragement that meditative practice is largely built upon *reflection*. Once the base of receptivity is in place, our curiosity around emerging sensations, thoughts, emotions, and memories

leads us to reflect on *cause and effect.* We begin to realise that we add a lot to everything that arises. We add our likes, dislikes, judgements, and criticisms, which somehow distort what's arisen into something quite different.

Ajahn encourages us to understand that *reflection* is the ability to bear witness by neither adding nor denying, akin to a mirror or the surface of a placid body of water. Something has arisen and we remain receptive and curious. We notice the *background* in which all things arise. We try not to embroider what should or shouldn't be – we learn to let go of the drama. This naturally gives rise to a feeling of stillness and silence; a stillness in the midst of movement and a silence that can be touched even in the presence of sound. He calls this, '*Listening with the heart'* or '*Tuning into affection'*.

With this approach, we sustain our innate capacity to receive, empathise, and celebrate others' successes in a way that's not biased, coloured, or lopsided. We move towards experiencing the *brahmavihāras* in a manner that's beyond intellect and analysis. We begin to understand and participate in what's truly abundant, exalted, and immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will.

This, says Ajahn, is the inclination that spontaneously accompanies stillness, silence, and composure. It's always there, but we habitually tend to overlook it as we are constantly preoccupied with activity or with objects. We can now see that our thoughts, attitudes, feelings, etc., which cause stress, anxiety, and alienation, are neither *who we are* nor are they definitive of our nature.

Witnessing in this manner engenders a wakefulness and alertness that takes us to spaciousness and freedom. What a relief to finally know that grumpiness has *arisen* and that *I'm not a grumpy person*. We then relax into this knowing, as there's objectivity and space around whatever arises. Our hearts don't feel cramped, restricted, or heavy. With willingness to accept, there's relief – and the burden of judgements and mental proliferation gradually let go.

A large part of what we face when we are truly aware is not beautiful, comforting, or sublime. We come face to face with our fears, anxieties, criticisms, impulses, etc. We see how we are compelled to immediately satisfy the demanding voice of desire. Facing all this requires commitment and confidence.

By trusting awareness and simply allowing emotions to arise and have their say, we do ourselves a great favour. Their energy runs out and they diminish, subsumed into the very awareness that bore them. We learn to witness the process of their cessation. Even if it's only for a moment, it gives us an undeniable taste of freedom. May these pages offer you the same sense of liberation.

This book can be used as a guide for a seven-day self-retreat or it can be used every Saturday or Sunday over seven weekends. Or you may simply want to use the themes listed to guide your daily meditation sessions. In whatever manner you decide to use these precious offerings, may these pages, as Ajahn would say, bring you unshakeable deliverance of the heart.

Amarasiri Bhikkhu

APPENDIX - AN OUTLINE OF BUDDHISM*

A great variety of forms of religious practice are associated with the word 'Buddhism'. However, they all take Siddhartha Gotama, who lived and taught in northern India around 2,600 years ago, as their source of inspiration. It was he who in historical times became known as the 'Buddha,' that is the 'Awakened One,' one who has attained great wisdom through their own efforts.

The Buddha did not write anything down but left a remarkable legacy in the form of a teaching (the Dhamma) that was at first orally transmitted by the religious Order (the Sangha) that he founded and personally guided for 45 years. This Order has survived the centuries, preserving the wisdom of the Buddha in lifestyle as well as in words. To this day, these three elements, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, are known and respected by all Buddhists as 'The Three Refuges' or 'The Triple Gem'. They have also come to symbolize Wisdom, Truth, and Virtue - qualities that we can develop in ourselves.

After the Buddha's time, his teaching was carried from India throughout Asia, and even further. As it spread, it was affected by its encounters with local cultures, and several 'schools' of Buddhism eventually emerged.

* As an overview of the Buddhist tradition of which Ajahn Viradhammo is a part, here is an outline from Amaravati Publications. Please refer to publications@amaravati.org for details.

Broadly speaking, today are three such schools: Theravada (The Teaching of the Elders), which still thrives in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia; Mahayana (The Great Vehicle), which embraces the various traditions within China, Korea and Japan, and Vajrayana (The Diamond Vehicle), which is associated primarily with Tibet.

Teachers from all schools have made their way to the West. Some preserve their lineages as found in the country of origin, while others have adopted less traditional approaches. The approach and the quotations used below are from the Theravada.

The Buddhist Path

The Buddha taught a path of spiritual awakening, a way of 'practice' that we can use in our daily lives. This 'Path of Practice' can be divided into three mutually supportive aspects – virtue, meditation and wisdom.

> *Where there is uprightness, wisdom is there, and where there is wisdom, uprightness is there. To the upright there is wisdom, to the wise there is uprightness, and wisdom and goodness are declared to be the best things in the world.*
>
> THE BUDDHA

Virtue

You can make a formal commitment to the Buddha's Path of Practice by requesting the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from a monk or nun at a Buddhist monastery, or by taking them yourself at home. Taking the Refuges implies a commitment to live according to principles of Wisdom, Truth, and Virtue, using the teachings and example of the Buddha. Someone living in this way develops the self-discipline and sensitivity necessary to cultivate meditation, the second aspect of the Path.

Meditation

Meditation, as the term is used in common parlance, is the repeated focusing of attention upon an image, a word, or a theme in order to calm the mind and consider the meaning of that image or word.

In the Buddhist practice of insight meditation, this focusing of attention also has another purpose - to more fully understand the nature of the mind. This can be done by using the meditation object as a still reference point to help in revealing the attitudes that are otherwise buried beneath the mind's surface activity.

The Buddha encouraged his disciples to use their own bodies and minds as objects of meditation. A common object, for example, is the sensations associated with the breath during the process of normal breathing. If one sits still, closes the eyes, and focuses on the breath, in due time clarity and calm will arise. In this state of mind, tensions, expectations, and habitual moods can be more clearly discerned and, through the practice of gentle but penetrative enquiry, resolved.

The Buddha taught that it was possible to maintain meditation in the course of daily activity as well as while sitting still in one place. One can focus attention on the movement of the body, the physical feelings that arise, or the thoughts and moods that flow through the mind. This mobile attentiveness is called 'mindfulness'.

The Buddha explained that through mindfulness one realises an attention that is serene. Although it is centred on the body and mind it is dispassionate and not bound up with any particular physical or mental experience. This detachment is a foretaste of what Buddhists call '*Nibbāna*' (or Nirvana), a state of peace and happiness independent of circumstances. *Nibbāna* is a 'natural' state, meaning, it is not something we have to acquire or add to our true nature, it is the way the mind is when it is free from pressure and confused habits. Just as waking up dispels the dream state naturally,

the mind that has become clear through mindfulness is no longer over-shadowed by obsessive thoughts, doubts, and worries.

However, although mindfulness is the basic tool to use, we generally need some pointers as to how to establish the right objectivity about ourselves and how to assess what mindfulness reveals. This is the function of the wisdom-teachings of the Buddha.

Wisdom

The most generally used wisdom-teachings of the Buddha are not statements about God or Ultimate Truth. The Buddha felt that such statements could lead to disagreement, controversy and even violence. Instead, Buddhist wisdom describes what we can all notice about life without having to adopt a belief. The teachings are to be tested against one's experience. Different people may find different ways of expressing Truth; what really counts is the validity of the experience and whether it leads to a wiser and more compassionate way of living. The teachings then serve as tools to clear the mind of misunderstanding. When the mind is clear, 'Ultimate Truth', in whatever way one finds to express it, becomes apparent.

Following the path

When asked to explain why his disciples always looked cheerful, the Buddha commented:

> *They have no regret over the past, nor do they brood over the future. They live in the present; therefore, they are radiant.*
>
> *SAṂYUTTA NIKĀYA 1:1*

Someone who has fully cultivated this way finds serenity and patience in themselves in times of difficulty and the wish to share good fortune when things go well. They live a life free from guilt and, rather than having violent mood swings, the mind and heart stay steady and buoyant throughout the circumstances of life.

These are the fruits; but like most fruit, they have to be cultivated slowly and persistently with good heartedness. For this reason, the guidance, or simply the companionship, of like-minded people is almost indispensable. The Refuge of Sangha is a reflection on this. Most generally, 'Sangha' refers to all spiritual companions, but this spiritual companionship is highlighted by the religious order of alms-mendicants who live under a detailed code of conduct that unambiguously presents the values of the Buddhist path.

Buddhist monks and nuns are not preachers – being specifically prohibited from teaching unless asked to do so – they are spiritual companions, and their relationship with the general Buddhist public is one of mutual support. They are prohibited from growing food or having money; they have to keep in touch with society and be worthy of support. Buddhist monasteries are not escape-hatches, but places where others can stay, receive teachings and most importantly, feel that their act of service and support is appreciated. In this way, the monks and nuns provide more than companionship and guidance – they also present the opportunity for others to gain confidence and self-respect.

> *Do not think lightly of goodness, saying, "Nothing will help me improve." A pitcher is filled with water by a steady stream of drops; likewise, the wise person improves and achieves well-being a little at a time.*
>
> DHAMMAPADA

The Four Noble Truths

In order to help people realise that the normal understanding of life is inadequate, the Buddha talked about '*dukkha*', translated as dissatisfaction or unsatisfactoriness. He often summarised his teaching as the truth about '*dukkha*', its origin, its ending, and the path to its ending. These core teachings, to be measured against one's experience and used for guidance, are known as the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth: There is Dukkha

Life as we normally know it must always have a proportion of disagreeable experiences - sickness, pain and distress are obvious examples. Even in relatively affluent societies people suffer from anxiety, stress, or a loss of purpose; or they feel incapable of dealing with life's challenges. Moreover, agreeable experiences are limited and transient, for instance, '*dukkha*' can be brought on by the loss of a loved one or being badly let down by a friend.

What also becomes apparent is that these feelings cannot be relieved for long by our usual responses, such as seeking pleasure, greater success, or a different relationship. This is because '*dukkha*' stems from an inner need. You could call it a longing of the heart - for understanding, peace, and harmony.

Because it's an inner or spiritual need, no matter how we try to alleviate such feelings by adding something pleasant to our life, it never quite succeeds As long as we are motivated to seek fulfilment in what is transient and vulnerable – and it doesn't take much introspection to recognise how vulnerable our bodies and feelings are – we will always suffer disappointment and a sense of loss.

> *Being associated with what you do not like is dukkha, being separated from what you like is dukkha, not getting what you want is dukkha. In brief, the compulsive habits of body and mind are dukkha.*
>
> *DHAMMACAKKAPPAVATTANA SUTTA: SETTING THE WHEEL OF DHAMMA IN MOTION, SAṀYUTTA NIKĀYA 56.11*

The Second Noble Truth: There is an Origin of Dukkha

The Buddha's experience was that this wrong motivation was in essence the origin of dissatisfaction. How is this? By alway sseeking

fulfilment in what is transient, we miss out on what life could be offering if we were more attentive and spiritually attuned.

Not using (through not knowing) our spiritual potential, we are motivated by feelings and moods. However, when insight wisdom reveals that this is a habit rather than our true nature, we realise that we can change it.

The Third Noble Truth: Dukkha Can Cease

Once we've understood the Second Truth, the Third follows on, if we're capable of 'letting go' of our conscious and unconscious self-centred habits.

When we are no longer defensive or aggressive, whenever we respond to life without prejudice or fixed views, the mind rests in an inner harmony. The habits and viewpoints that make life appear hostile or inadequate are checked.

The Fourth Noble Truth: There is a Way to Stop Dukkha

This involves the practical guidelines for bringing a spiritual focus to bear on life as we are living it. We can't 'let go' until we become capable of that through cultivation of our spiritual nature. But if there is proper cultivation, the mind will naturally incline towards *Nibbāna*. All that is needed is the wisdom to know that there is a way and the means to accomplish that way.

The 'Way' is defined as the Noble Eightfold Path.

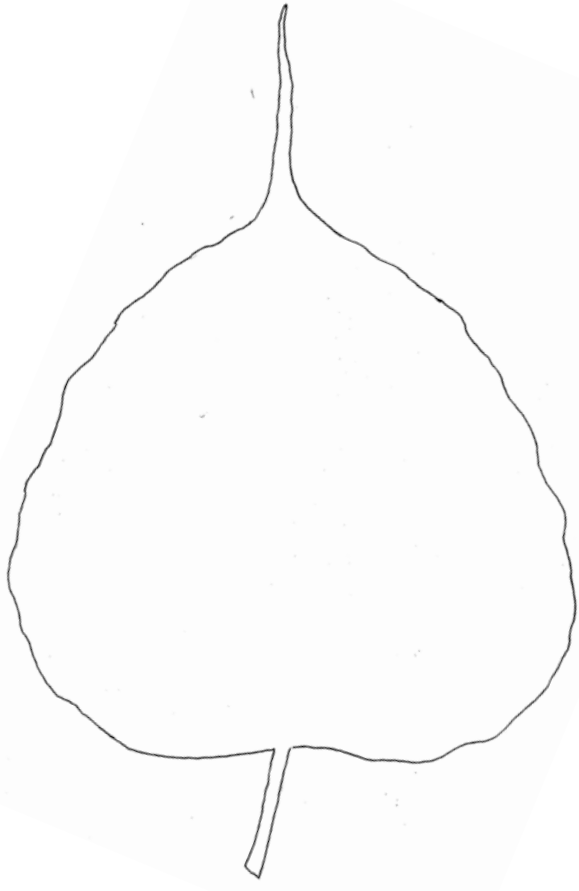
The 'wheel' symbol that is often used in Buddhist iconography is a depiction of this Eightfold Path in which each factor supports and is supported by all the others.

Buddhist practice consists of cultivating these factors: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

The 'Rightness' of them is that they entail living in accordance with virtue, meditation, and wisdom rather than from any self-centred position. Such a Way is therefore 'Right' for others as well as oneself.

> *Whoever has understanding and great wisdom does not think of harming themselves or another, nor of harming both alike. Rather they think of their own welfare, of that of others, of that of both, and of the welfare of the whole world.*
>
> *AṄGUTTARA NIKĀYA 4:95.99*

> *Do not rely upon what you have heard proclaimed or upon custom, or upon rumour, or upon scripture, or inference or established principles, or clever reasoning, or favouring a pet theory.*
>
> *Do not be convinced by someone else's apparent intelligence, nor out of respect for a teacher.*
>
> *When you yourself know what is wrong, foolish and unworthy, and what leads to harm and discontent, abandon it. And when you yourself know what is right, develop it.*
>
> *AṄGUTTARA NIKĀYA 3:65.*



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book, like much of life, is the result of wholesome collaboration. The sincerely diligent effort of dear friends spending many hours poring over these pages to get it to you, the reader, is truly commendable and leaves me amazed.

The inception of this book was the result of a meeting one afternoon at Tisarana when Nithya and Colleen Glass presented an idea that they had. The idea was to create a meditative companion – a sequel of sorts to *The Contemplative's Craft*, which was published a few years ago. The content of this new book, they said, would feature transcripts of a retreat held during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Soon this idea gathered momentum and took shape into what you hold in your hands today. Along with Nithya and Colleen, the enthusiastic and continued support of the Ottawa Buddhist Society is something I'm deeply grateful for. Apart from hosting the retreat, they further offered to sponsor associated costs of this book. Most of its key members have been actively involved right from the beginning of this project.

Much gratitude to my dear friend Ajahn Sucitto whose skill and love of language have transformed spoken words into readable printed format. Despite his many teaching engagements and other commitments, he has given so generously of his time to correct, refine and polish this manuscript. His way with words is magical. Thank you, Ajahn, for working your magic.

Through this entire process, Nissanka Pussegoda, Joan Thompson, Philip Jurgens, Lisa Gorecki, Teri Phripp, and Corinne Baumgarten have always been available and provided recordings

and other material that were the basis of the initial transcript. This was then painstakingly edited by Jane Brown, Vivienne Bartlett, Nithya, Colleen Glass and was passed on to Jan Andrews for another round of editorial work. Many thanks for your involvement and generosity.

Marsha Stonehouse was eager to contribute her sketches that provide lovely texture by representing scenes from life at Tisarana. Nicholas Halliday offered his skill with graphic design, and we couldn't have asked for a better person for this task. Thank you so much, Marsha and Nick, for your artistic touch that has added such an appealing dimension to this book.

Finally, I'd like to express my heartfelt appreciation for Venerable Amarasiri's involvement. Attending meetings, taking notes, responding to emails, *et cetera*, he encouraged us all with his kindness and generosity.

Memory is an unreliable faculty, so if I've forgotten to mention anyone's contribution, please excuse my lapse. Know that even if you haven't been mentioned by name, you have my most sincere appreciation and gratitude.

Much love,

Ajahn Viradhammo

GLOSSARY

Pali is the scriptural language of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Several Pali words, as well as some Thai, Japanese, Spanish, and Sanskrit words, are used throughout this book. This glossary briefly defines those terms.

ahaṃkāra I-making.

Ajahn (*Thai*) teacher.

akāliko timeless, beyond time.

ākāsa space.

anattā not-self, impersonal, without individual essence.

ānāpānasati mindfulness of breathing.

anicca/aniccaṃ impermanent, changeable, inconstant, uncertain. The nature of all experiential phenomena.

aniccasaññā perception of change.

ariya (*Sanskrit*) noble one.

asaṅkhata the negation of conditionality.

asubha unattractive.

avijjā ignorance, obscuration.

bhakti (*Sanskrit*) devotion, involvement.

Bhante venerable sir (honorific for addressing monks).

bhāvanā cultivation of mind.

bhava-taṇhā desire to become something, one of the three types of craving that cause suffering.

bhikkhu monk.

brahmavihāras sublime states of mind (goodwill, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity).

chakra (*Sanskrit*)	centre of spiritual energy.
citta	heart and mind, active aspect of awareness.
cittānupassanā	attending to the *citta*, mindfulness of *citta*, the third foundation of mindfulness.
dāna	generosity, giving.
deva/devatā	celestial being, demi-god, spirit.
dhammavicaya	investigation, contemplation of Dhamma.
dosa	aversion.
dukkha	pain, suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness. It may be physical or mental. The term is quite broad and includes pain; the suffering due to change and instability; and the unsatisfactoriness or unreliability of all formations.
Guru (*Sanskrit*)	teacher.
hara (*Japanese*)	soft belly, the region between the navel and pelvic girdle.
hiri-ottappa	conscience and concern.
idapaccayatā	Literally: 'conditioned by this'. The principle of specific conditionality whereby one facet of the natural order affects, gives rise to or conditions another.
indriya saṃvara	sense restraint.
jāti	birth.
kalyāṇamitta	spiritual friend.
kāma-taṇhā	sense desire, one of the three types of craving that cause suffering.
kamma (*Sanskrit: karma*)	intentional action (of body, speech, and mind). These actions ripen as results (*vipāka*).
karunā	compassion. Second of four sublime abodes (*brahmavihāras*).
kilesa	defilement, habitual attitudes of the mind that enforce obscuration of reality.
kuti	solitary dwelling, usually isolated.

Luang Por (*Thai*) Venerable Father.

magga path.

mamakāra my-making.

Māra the lord of death; symbol for any root or cause for a defilement or deluded mind-state.

mātikā matrices or lists.

mettā friendliness, goodwill, benevolence, loving-kindness. First of four sublime abodes (*brahmavihāras*).

moksha (*Sanskrit*) liberation from the cycle of birth-death cycle.

muditā joyfulness arising from appreciating goodness, appreciative joy, empathetic joy. Third of four sublime abodes (*brahmavihārās*).

nāda (*Sanskrit*) 'sound' – referring to the silence behind sounds; used as a meditation object.

Nibbāna (*Sanskrit: nirvāna*) the extinguishing of the 'fires' of greed, hatred, and delusion.

nimitta sign, often associated with mental images that may arise in meditation.

ovāda exhortation.

pah (*Thai*) forest.

papañca mental proliferation.

pāramī (*Sanskrit: pāramitā*) cultivations, virtues, perfections, blessings.

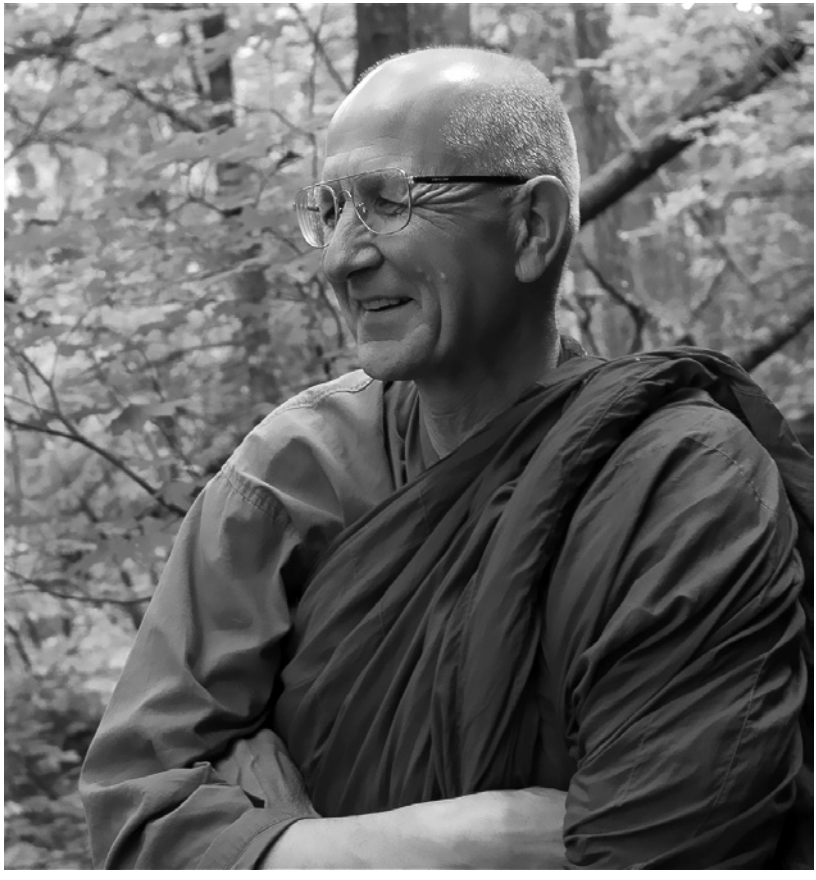
phala fruit (referring to the result that arises from the ripening of kamma).

phassa contact.

pong (*Thai*) swamp.

prung daeng (*Thai*)	Literally: 'seasoning and dressing up', refers to the inclination of proliferation, blowing thoughts out of proportion.
pūjā:	Literally: 'act of honouring', the ritual of making offerings and chanting to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.
Rōshi (*Japanese*):	Literally: 'old master', an experienced teacher with great wisdom.
rūpa/rūpaṁ	form (or bodily form).
saddhā	confidence, conviction, faith, trust.
sakkāyadiṭṭhi	personality view.
samādhi	unification of mind, collectedness.
samaṇa	contemplative, renunciant.
samaṇa saññā	the perception of being a renunciant.
sāmanera	novice.
sammā	attuned, holistic, appropriate, skilful, 'right' (not opposed to 'wrong' but standing on its own merit, leading to the wholesome).
sammā samādhi	right collectedness, the eighth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.
sampajañña	clear comprehension, full awareness, clear knowing.
saṁsāra	The repeated 'round of birth' – the cycle of birth, growth, ageing, and death without end that chains beings to existence.
saṅkhāra/ saṅkhārā (sing./plural)	activities, formations, fabrications, programs (by analogy with computer programs). Referring both to the volitional activity of 'forming' things, and the things formed. As the fourth *khandha* (aggregate), it is primarily mental. Deeply conditioned habitual reactions of the mind.
saṅkhata	conditioned.
shikantāza (*Japanese*)	choiceless awareness.
sīla	moral integrity.

sīlabbata-parāmāsa	attachment to systems and customs, attachment to rituals and techniques.
shishya (*Sanskrit*)	disciple.
sop arom (*Thai*)	know the mood of the mind.
sukha	pleasant, happy, joyful, at ease, peaceful.
sutta (*Sanskrit*: *sutra*)	discourse, teaching by the Buddha or one of his contemporary disciples.
taṇhā	craving, desire. Literally 'thirst'. The cause of suffering, as defined in the Four Noble Truths.
Theravāda	Literally: 'The word or speech of the Elders'.
toraman (*Thai*)	frustration.
uddhacca	restlessness, excitement.
upekkhā	Literally: 'to watch over', to observe without bias, equanimity. Fourth of four sublime abodes (*brahmavihāras*).
Uposatha (*Thai: wan phra*)	Observance Day (corresponding to the phases of the moon) on which Buddhists gather to reaffirm precepts, listen to the Dhamma, and practise meditation.
vedanā	feelings.
vibhava-taṇhā	desire to get rid of something, one of the three types of craving that cause suffering.
vicikicchā	persistent doubt.
vipāka	result (of kamma).
Vinaya	the monastic discipline. Early Buddhist scripture and subsequent commentaries referring to appropriate monastic conduct.
wat (*Thai*)	monastery
A note on honorifics	The words, 'Ajahn' and 'Luang Por,' are not titles; they're honorifics used in Thailand, connotating respect, endearment, and honouring the person addressed.



AJAHN VIRADHAMMO

Ajahn Viradhammo was born in Germany in 1947 to Latvian refugee parents. They moved to Toronto, Canada, when he was four years old. As a child, Ajahn had experiences of deep silence, which kindled a curiosity that went beyond the mundane. This curiosity expressed itself as a yearning to travel.

While living in India in 1971, he was introduced to the teachings of the Buddha, which culminated in Ajahn being accepted into the Bhikkhu Sangha of the Thai Forest Tradition. He was ordained at Wat Nong Pah Pong Monastery in Northeast Thailand under the guidance of Luang Por Chah, an accomplished meditation master and teacher of great renown.

After a visit to his family in Canada in 1977, he was asked by Luang Por Chah to join Luang Por Sumedho at the Hampstead Vihara in London, UK. Subsequently, he played an active role in establishing several monasteries in England – Cittaviveka Forest Monastery at Chithurst, Aruna Ratanagiri Forest Monastery at Harnham, and Amaravati Buddhist Monastery at Hemel Hempstead.

Thereafter, Ajahn Viradhammo was invited to establish Bodhinyānārāma Monastery in New Zealand where he served as abbot. In 2002, he moved to Ottawa, Canada, to care for his elderly mother until her demise in 2011. During this time, he was invited to establish Tisarana Buddhist Monastery in Perth, Ontario, Canada, where he now resides full-time, leading the spiritual community as abbot and senior monk.

NOTES

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THE CONTEMPLATIVE'S COMPANION
REFLECTIONS ON PRESENCE

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THE CONTEMPLATIVE'S COMPANION

This book is based on a meditation retreat organised by the Ottawa Buddhist Society and taught by Ajahn Viradhammo during the COVID-19 pandemic. His wise and gentle teachings, offered before vaccines were announced, were an inspiration during those trying and tumultuous times. His reflections skilfully guided participants away from heavy and negative mind states that were prevalent at that time.

Setting aside conventional analysis and lists, Ajahn Viradhammo presents his reflections on presence as a companion to all contemplatives. He speaks from his own experience, uses everyday language, and cites familiar metaphors to generate deeper understanding and compassion. Ajahn's teachings hold out touchstones that guide readers in a straightforward, intuitive manner, encouraging us to awaken to what IS, moment to moment.

TISARANA BUDDHIST MONASTERY