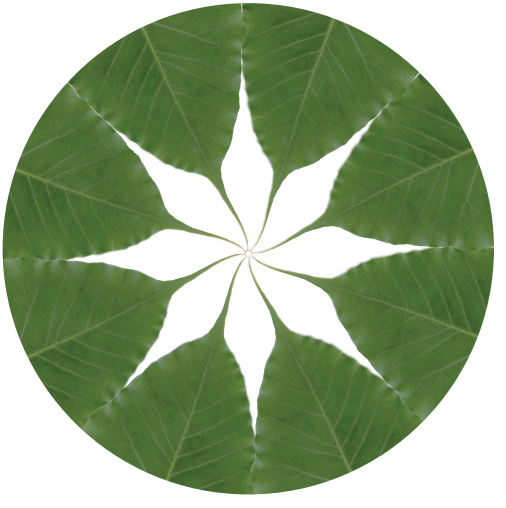
awakening presence



THE NUNS' COMMUNITY
AMARAVATI & CITTAVIVEKA BUDDHIST MONASTERIES

Awakening Presence

THE NUNS' COMMUNITY
AMARAVATI & CITTAVIVEKA BUDDHIST MONASTERIES

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An acknowledgement to the many people who have helped with transcribing, editing and bringing this collection of Dhamma teachings together.

May they all realise Nibbana.

Contents

Preface

In 1979 four women arrived at the newly established Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery in West Sussex, England, to live and practise Dhamma with the developing community of monks there. The monastery had been established some months earlier by Venerable Ajahn Sumedho, who had come to England in 1977 at the request of his teacher, Venerable Ajahn Chah. Inspired by the example of Ajahn Sumedho and the monks who accompanied him, an increasing number of people were becoming interested in exploring the monastic way of life.

In October of 1979 those first four women who wished to undertake training as nuns were given Anagārikā Ordination. They lived within the Eight-Precept discipline modelled on the white-robed *maechee* of the Thai Theravadan tradition. After some time however, it became clear that a

more detailed and comprehensive way of training would be beneficial for the nuns, to help support their day to day lives in community as well as provide the opportunity for a greater degree of renunciation.

At that time, *Bhikkhuni* Ordination was not readily available within the Theravadan Tradition. There was, however, the possibility of a Ten Precept (*sāmaneri*) ordination, which allowed for renouncing the use of money and which could be further developed into a training structure somewhat similar to that of the *bhikkhus*. So it was that, on 14th August 1983, those same four nuns were granted the Going Forth in the first Ten Precept ordination for women in Britain. With the help of a designated senior monk, a way of training for the nuns began to take shape, drawing from the sāmaneri (novice) standards as well as those of the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni *Vinayas*. The result is now known as the *Sīladharā Vinaya Training,* and comprises some 120 rules and observances.

It was in the following year, 1984, that Amaravati Monastery was established in response to the need for more facilities for the nuns, as well as for a larger venue for public events. Situated in the rolling hills of Hertfordshire some 25 miles north of London, Amaravati now consists of a large Temple, lodgings for monks, nuns and lay guests, as well as a large interfaith library, retreat centre, and facilities for family events.

The Nuns' Order has been established for over 20 years now, and as can be expected of any new venture of

such import, it has been through its ups and downs as we learnt through experience (as opposed to ideals) what actually works – what is supportive and what is not. This rocky process of birth and coming to maturity is a natural one it seems, and one of essential learning experiences too. Many women have come and gone over the years, testing the waters for various periods of time and adding their own unique ingredients to the developing form. We are still a relatively small community, with nineteen sīladharā and at present, eight *anagārikās*, and perhaps the rocky waters are not entirely passed, but the base now feels quite strong – with an increasing sense of stability, maturity and ever-deepening commitment.

Since the beginning of this Sangha in Britain the nuns have mostly lived and trained in the double communities of Amaravati and Cittaviveka, sharing with the monks the various administrative duties and teaching responsibilities. Over the years, the monks and nuns have learnt a great deal from each other, gradually developing skilful means of fostering and supporting a mutual respect and spiritual friendship within the *brahmacariya* life.

As we endeavour to find what sustains us as *samanas* in a Western context, many aspects of the inherited traditions and our life in these monasteries have been questioned and creatively challenged. To know what is the right process in transplanting a tradition that has its roots in Ancient India, its branches in Thai culture, and its new leaves unfurling in the

post-modern West and emerging 'global village', does have its challenges – to say the least.

However, to be able to cultivate the Path of the Buddha at all in such times and places as these, with supportive conditions, seems extremely fortunate. The way forward is not always easy to discern, but if we allow the timeless guiding principles of the Dhamma to affect our hearts and inform our actions, then we can trust in the unfolding of the process, with the Triple Refuge as both inner and outer support.

The teachings offered in this small collection have arisen from the experience of the contemplative life of the nuns. They are reflections born of the moment, in response to specific occasions – during a formal retreat, on the weekly observance day at the monastery, or at a public talk.

Some editing has been necessary, of course, to render the spoken word into something that can be easily read and pondered – removing some of the repetitions and amending other aspects of the extemporaneous presentation. As far as possible however, care has been taken to retain the teacher's style and the immediacy of her words. As such, the reader would be well advised to avoid approaching this as a complete or polished presentation of Dhamma, such as may be found in the suttas or commentaries. Rather, they are reflections to support contemplation, arising directly from the practice and understanding of each Sister.

These talks were gathered without any particular theme in mind. Nonetheless, a certain thematic sequence became apparent when we read through the material. Thus, we decided to abandon the traditional form of ordering the teachings according to seniority in favour of allowing a more natural flow of theme, tone and tempo throughout the talks.

We begin with Ajahn Upekkhā's open invitation to us all to establish presence, and move through a more detailed reflection on working with feeling, offered by Ajahn Thānasantī. Ajahn Sundarā's exposition then challenges us to end suffering through penetrating 'la grande illusion', followed by Ajahn Thāniyā's lightly humorous and touching talk encouraging us to befriend Māra, the perpetrator of that illusion. Ajahn Jitindriyā takes this exploration further, examining in more detail the 'stuff' of awakening – showing how the states that we continuously try to avoid are the very states that, examined in the light of Dhamma, can lead us to freedom. Ajahn Medhānandī follows with a beautiful and poetic encouragement to awaken – to come out of the shadows and light the candle of discernment. The concluding talk, by Ajahn Candasirī, then reminds us of the necessity to include – even to start with – ourselves when we aspire to serve the world through emanating the boundless qualities of heart.

While those who know the Sisters will no doubt be able to recognise their respective 'voices' through these talks, we hope that the common thread of Buddha-Dhamma will also

be clearly discernable, coming through in a way that can nourish the hearts of any who dip into these pages.

We would like to dedicate this collection and any blessings that may accrue from it, to our teacher and preceptor Luang Por Sumedho.

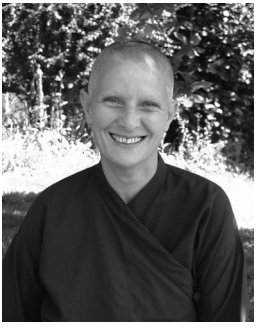
May it be of service in the liberation of all beings.

The Authors

Being Present

Ajahn Upekkhā

from a Dhamma talk given in the
Temple at Amaravati (November 2003)



Ajahn Upekkhā was born in the south of France in 1949. She travelled to India in 1974 and became interested in the spiritual path through the study of yoga, meditation and service. In 1979, she met a disciple of Ajahn Chah who was living and teaching in France and studied with him for two years. She consequently made visits to both Chithurst Monastery and Harnham Monastery in 1981. She returned again to England in 1985 to visit the newly established Amaravati Monastery – then decided to stay on. She took Anagārikā Ordination in 1986 and Sīladhara Ordination in 1988. Having re-visited India and Thailand for periods of practice in recent years, she is now resident again at Amaravati Monastery in England.

Tonight is said to be a very auspicious time – at one o'clock in the morning there will be an eclipse – some say it may help us towards a change of consciousness. So we can use this opportunity to pay attention to what is happening to us, to pay attention to what is happening in the moment – moment by moment. This is something quite challenging, because the mind is always looking for something that is going to happen in the future. When I heard that something special was going to be happening tonight, I thought, 'Oh, maybe I don't have to do anything – maybe I'm going to become enlightened without doing anything. It's just going to happen!'

But when I come here and do the puja and sit in meditation, I realise how difficult it is to be present – to be here now, to be awake. During the chanting I observed how easily

my mind would go off and not be present with the words I was chanting. When I realised and recognised that, I just brought the awareness back, remembering to be present. Instead of following that with judgement or criticism about myself, I felt a sense of gratitude that I was able to remember to come back to that presence, here and now.

What's happening when we're in meditation, interested in being present – and yet the mind goes off to something else? The question arises: 'Why am I *not* interested? Why am I coming here and sitting if I am not interested?' Then there is another voice that says, 'But I *am* interested. I want to be here because I want to train the mind to be present, to be awake, to de-crease the suffering.' If I don't dwell in the past, and don't just believe whatever the mind says, then I will avoid some suffering in the future, and will learn to be present, to accept the experience as it is and to know what it feels like. What is happening in the body when I am present? Do I feel at ease? Do I feel relaxed? Or do I experience some pain and discomfort? And what is happening with the thoughts that are arising? Where does the mind go – in which direction? Is it concerned about my past experience, or is it interested in the future? Whatever's happening now I don't seem to be interested in, that seems boring! But when I realise this, and just feel it, then I feel good.

So the way I was practising tonight was by just coming back to my heart and asking: 'Where is my heart?' I was trying to locate it. Do I feel my heart from the back between my shoulder blades...is it more on the left...or on the right?

I was trying to feel it, as a means to help me stay in the moment, to be present, to be awake. When I was able to do that for a while, it felt as if suddenly the body was becoming balanced and harmonised, naturally, and it felt good.

So then, what I could not understand is why – when it felt so good, expansive and nice, not a minute after that, my mind went off again. Why is that? It feels so good and I'm still not able to sustain it for very long. Is it feeling too good that I'm afraid of? Am I not used to feeling very good? Am I attached to some habits of being anxious, or being worried about something, or wanting something that is not here? Or is it an idea I'm attached to.

Often it *is* an idea that takes us away, like: 'Tonight something special is going to happen to me.' I was thinking that maybe I was going to levitate because when you suddenly feel good and balanced, there is a lifting of energy, you feel very light, and I thought: 'Maybe I'm going to rise up, up into the sky...maybe that is what is going to happen tonight!' But then I recognised the thinking, and pulled myself back again to just stay with the sensation.

When I investigated what had happened, I realised that out of that sensation I had created a strong desire. So I asked myself: 'What is that desire?' There was a strong desire, the desire to have power. A desire that people would see that I'm good at my practice. Then I explored that: 'Why do I want people to recognise that I'm good at my practice?' Because I want to be recognised, I want to be acknowledged, I want to be loved. So my question then became: 'Okay, can I

relinquish that desire?' I'm not going to free myself if I depend on other people's opinions of me, because there will always be one person better than me in that process. That is something that I am never going to win. It is impossible. If I wait for other people to appreciate who I am, I am never going to be satisfied. So can I accept myself tonight, can I relinquish this desire, can I do that? 'How can I do that?'

The way to do it is to come back to that space of the heart. If I come back to the pure feeling, then there is no desire there. I just feel what is happening with the sensations in the body. That is the only reality there is now. The heart is beating. Can I stay with that? That is the reality. That is what is true, what is happening now.

Instead of being here, with this, we tend to make up stories about ourselves. But actually, there is no question of someone loving us, or not loving us, or someone being better than us, or not better than us, or our being intelligent or clever, or not. That doesn't exist. It just exists in the mind. It is not the reality of it. Everyone is here trying to do the same thing – to be here and now, to be present. Nobody is concerned about me actually. I'm the only one concerned about myself; infatuated with the sense of 'me'. That is what creates suffering.

Coming back to the sensation, to the feeling, then everything is okay. This is what it is to be a human being, just this. Allowing this to happen – to be fully incarnate – to accept this body and mind the way it is, instead of trying to make it better. It is not going to get better. In fact, maybe it is going

to get worse! In getting older, physically, everything is going to fall apart. I notice I have more wrinkles, a moustache is appearing now, and my breasts are falling, and my buttocks too. So physically when I look at myself, it *is* getting worse, it is not getting better. And my mind is not getting better either. Actually, it gets better when I am present – when I'm present my mind is clear. But if I am not present, then I forget things, I am not able to speak clearly, I am confused. So it is actually safer to be here and now! This is the way to find peace, and a sense of ease.

It is also the way to not feeling defeated. When there's pain in the body, and I'm attached to it, then it is easy to feel defeated. I do not want to be attached to something that is painful; I do not want to be attached to something that is going to die. It's useless. But this is unnecessary suffering because the body is something I cannot control. So, just investigate that and wake up to the truth. Similarly, why be attached to the mind? I want the mind to be a certain way. But that also is going to go. So why spend so much energy on it, on caring about how this body and mind appear to others? Coming into the present means making an effort not to do that any more. We no longer think of ourselves as *me*, *this person,* sitting in meditation. Actually, there is nobody there. There is *phassa*, contact, the sensation experienced in the body – we don't have to create an identity or a story around that sensation. Then, we don't have legs, or a heart, or a face any more – we just experience pure sensation. We lose the identities and stories we create and come fully into

the experience of the present moment. This way we accept the experience of the body without becoming attached to the body, or identified with it. And when we do that, we feel quite contained. A sense of peace arises, a sense of ease.

So, how you are feeling tonight? Right now, how do you feel? Do you have any expectations, or are you just waiting for my words? What is arising for me right now is a sense of love for all of you, and gratitude that you are here with me, that you share this life with me. I feel that by your presence, you are supporting my practice. The Buddha once said to Ānanda that friendship, *kalyānamitta*, is one hundred percent of the holy life. Since I've come back from France, I recognise how important this friendship is to me. I need friendship. Without friendship I don't think I could grow or carry on with life. So the Sangha is very precious, very important. I realised this when I was in France recently.

I went to France because one of my brothers was dying from cancer. I spent one month with him while he was in hospital. It was a very painful process because he was experiencing a lot of anger, fear and anxiety. It became very clear to me how powerful the work is that we are doing here, because my brother never practised meditation, and never reflected much about death. What happened to him at the end of his life? What comes up when you are dying has a lot to do with what you practise during your life. For him, my brother, he never paid attention to his anger, and that is what came up – anger. He spent his life controlling his anger and when you spend your life just trying to control and use your

will-power, then what will come up in the end is a lot of anger and frustration, because you are losing control. And you don't know what to do. It was very painful to see that state of mind. I urged my nephew and niece, my brother and sister, to really pay attention to how they live life, because how we live is how we die. If we have a lot of anger and judgement, or jealousy or competitiveness, and if we repress it all, then that is what will come up in the end.

So we have to see how blessed we are to have met with the teachings of the Lord Buddha, because we have the opportunity to investigate, to really look at these hindrances like anger and ill will, which are big obstacles. And desire – like tonight for myself, the desire for power. All of us, we all experience the desire to control very strongly. I want to be in charge. I want to control the world and I want to control all of you. That is my desire, so that I can do what I like. 'I will have fun', I think, if I can do it. But actually, I realise that when I try to control life, I don't have fun. In reality it brings me a lot of suffering. When we start to control, we have to keep on controlling. When I try to control, I build up a lot of tension in the body and mind and I become very rigid and forceful. I'm not soft and kind, I'm very bossy. But if I flow with life, with how it is, without controlling it – connecting with what is happening here and now, listening to what is happening around me, then there is a softness in that. These kinds of qualities of the heart rise up: softness, gentle-ness, being able to listen, being able to receive life as it is.

It can be very hard; it can be very challenging. People may come to us and say that what we are doing is not the right thing – and if we're present, we'll be able to receive that. But if we're trying to control life, then what happens is that we become very rigid, blocked, and get defensive. If someone comes to me then and gives me some reflection, what happens is that frustration arises, and fear and anxiety, and I will try to justify or attack in return. In community life this is something that can happen often. So we are learning to trust in just being present.

Practising meditation morning and evening is very important to help us to understand how our mind works. What are our attachments? What are our fears? If I know my fear, or my desire, then I will be able to deal with it, to relinquish it, to transform it. I will be able to recognise my intention in my relationship with the world – is it a pure intention, is it clear, or do I want to get something? Do I want to prove something? We are then able to recognise that we need to be present. Can we pay attention to the feeling, come back to the feeling – how you feel in the body when you are standing, talking to someone, or sitting, or walking? This is mindfulness, awareness, attention – bringing awareness back to the present. The body doesn't lie; it never lies. The body always tells you the truth about where you are. But if you listen to your mind, that is where you go wrong. The body is the best tool you can have because it is always there with you, each moment you come back to the body to see where

you are, how you feel. That is your support to stay present, to be able to receive life without trying to control it. And if we forget, instead of getting upset or being critical toward ourselves, we just feel grateful to remember. This is very important: *'Thank you for remembering. I can start again....'* This is the beauty of the practice, of the teaching. We can start again. We can drop the past and start afresh.

I was talking with one of the anagārikās this afternoon about this kind of 'boss' inside us, the judging mind. We 'should' do this, and we 'should' do that, 'be awake', and 'be aware'. In this we are trying to work with an *idea* of perfection, but with great misunderstanding of what perfection is. We are always trying to get things perfect, but actually there is nothing that we can get perfect. The only thing we can do to be perfect is to be here and now, because the world is never going to be satisfied with whatever we are. Always something is not going to work out the way we want it to.

So, where my support to remember comes from is in talking with a friend. I come back to friendship – that helps me to remember, because I can get lost a lot of the time. When talking to a friend, we reflect together, and this helps us both to remember. And if I see my friend practising very well, that supports me. If I see people doing something good, it lightens my heart and makes me happy. If I see people happy, it makes me happy. I rejoice.

I found our recent *Kathina* day very special. I don't know why, usually I don't really enjoy Kathina. A lot of people

come and it is often very busy. It is also very beautiful with lay people coming and it is an incredibly touching and powerful festival, but I don't really completely enjoy it. This time, however, I did really enjoy it. I really loved the space. It was very quiet. A lot of people came, but everything was very light and joyful. Wherever I looked, I saw joy in people's faces. It was a most beautiful day. It was not because we did anything special. If you talk to the work monk, or to the work nun, they may not have felt like that, or to the lay people who did a lot to organise this Kathina day. Maybe they did not feel that way, but actually it was a beautiful day, a very powerful ceremony. What was that? I don't know. Maybe we – all of us, this thousand people or so – were completely present, here and now on that day. That is the power of being here and now – flowing with life, accepting how it is without making any problems, or looking for a goal, for the best goal, but rather just doing. That's it – doing without a doer.

When I see where I have come from, and where I am now, I feel very happy. I feel grateful that I met with the Buddha's teaching, which makes me feel that I am getting better and better. But I have to be careful not to think about the future, because I can begin to think that I will continue to get better and better! This is the danger, because it may not be so. Maybe this is it – maybe I'm not going to go any further than this, and I just have to accept it. The way I can accept it is to stay with now, with the feeling, not looking for something different or better. So I really encourage you to pay attention

to that, and not to try to get better – it's not worth it – just be with what is happening now. Accept it, and try to stop listening to the voice that is always judging, criticising us or the world – it is not real.

Feelings: Beyond Good and Bad

Ajahn Thānasantī

from a Dhamma talk given
in Ottawa, Canada (August 2003)

Ajahn Thānasantī was born in 1962 in Southern California. In 1979 she began her undergraduate studies at the U.C. Santa Cruz. There she was introduced to Buddhism and meditation through a class taught by Jack Engler. She finished her degree in Biology and subsequently worked as an analytical chemist while attending intensive meditation retreats annually.

In 1987 she made a pilgrimage to Asia. Meeting Dipa Ma; a close encounter with death; paying respects to Ajahn Chah and being in the forest monasteries of Thailand crystallized her aspiration to be ordained. She consequently asked to join the community at Amaravati, taking novice precepts in 1989 and Sīladhara Ordination in 1991. Ajahn Thānasantī recently spent over two years in a remote forest hermitage in the Australian Bush. Her interests include using nature as an aspect of the Path and bringing awareness to the full human condition. She has been teaching internationally since 1996.

While I was staying at Amaravati recently, I talked with Ajahn Sumedho about practice. One of the points of the discussion I remember clearly was around the nature of 'feeling'. In the monastery, although there may be some occasional disagreement among the community about aspects of the discipline, the place where the greatest amount of agitation arises is around feelings – what people feel about things. Problems arise due to habitual tendencies of mind that emerge when we are with others, when we're in this area of relationship.

In meditation, one of the first signs to manifest when the mind becomes unified in concentration is that the hindrances fall into abeyance. Similarly, when we apply mindfulness to objects of mind, they are known for what they are; so even if the object of mind is a hindrance, mindfulness can restrain

the habitual tendencies associated with it. Classically, concentration and insight practices are taught to sharpen the faculties of mind and to develop insight into the characteristics of feeling – also to observe the sense of self that gets constructed around the feeling. These methods have been tried and tested; the insight that can be realised through them is transformative.

Most of us are still affected by habitual tendencies when we emerge from states of concentration however, or when mindfulness is not strong enough. So integrating the practice into daily life will centre largely around dealing with these feelings and habitual tendencies – all part of the common experience of living in the world.

So, how do we allow feelings into conscious awareness? How do we see them for what they are; see what they are rooted in? Can we see the fear and contraction that often happens around feelings? Rather than taking a position about different ways and techniques of practice, we need to recognise that suffering occurs in our lives because we're not looking in the right way at our relationship to feelings. In order to understand suffering and the end of suffering, it is useful to ascertain from where the suffering is arising.

We all experience the five hindrances – desire; ill will; sloth; restlessness and doubt, so it is imperative that we develop tools to work with them. For example, when anger is arising, it is important to understand how to bring that into a balance, to allow the intensity and fire of that experience to soften. When there is greed, we need to find a way of relating

to that experience that enables release and letting go. When the energy is low, it is useful to find ways of stirring it up and bringing more juice to the system. The Theravada tradition has many ways of cultivating specific attitudes as antidotes to each of these hindrances.

One way we can work with hindrances is by consciously cultivating their opposites. When there is anger, for example, we cultivate a kindly attitude; when there is greed we can look at the unbeautiful qualities of the object associated with it; when there is restlessness and agitation, we can focus on that which brings calm and collectedness.

Another approach is to cultivate the Factors of Enlightenment that bring counterbalancing qualities. For example, equanimity and concentration can be a counterbalance for restlessness; investigation of themes of Dhamma can help us to work with dullness. Likewise, we can contemplate feelings in terms of Right View – by seeing their inherently unstable, changing nature (*anicca*); by seeing that the feelings we experience are not who we are (*anattā*), and that they aren't the place to find ease (*dukkha*).

These tools I mention are specific to what is arising, and how we are relating to it. The problem is that often we forget the context, and simply identify with the object, taking ourselves to be what we are experiencing. So we might think: 'Desire is bad, greed is bad, anger is bad, ill will is bad, sloth and torpor is bad, restlessness is bad...and because these things are bad, then, when I am angry, I'm bad!' When there is identification with these feelings, the corresponding

judgement arises, since this is who we take ourselves to be. So, in addition to developing skill in bringing difficult mind states into balance, we also need to learn how to be present with them just as they are. When we're asking something to be different, there is often a subtle form of judgement: 'It's not okay, there's something wrong in this experience.'

Shifting from a goal-orientated practice to a practice of choiceless awareness – seeing things for what they are – addresses the dilemma in two ways. Firstly, when we notice that there is judgement arising, we see that our motivation is no longer coming purely from compassion, we see we are actually eliciting the very forces we are trying to overcome. Secondly, it is in the nature of goal-orientated practice to see things in terms of time, and good and bad – a dualistic view that carries within it great potential for solidifying a sense of self. When, from a position of ignorance, 'self' is trying to get rid of a feeling of 'badness' associated with whichever object it is identified, it simply perpetuates suffering.

Let's say we're listening to a guided meditation on the *sound of silence*[1] and we find ourselves thinking: 'What is this? I don't understand. I can't hear the sound of silence. What is she talking about?' Then there is judgment: 'Oh, I shouldn't think like that, she's a nun.' Then there is doubt: 'Now what do I do?' Then there is a contraction around the doubt. So rather than just being present with what is arising, and responding skilfully: 'Oh, there's aversion; aversion feels like this,' there's contraction around the doubt, and a not wanting around the contraction, and the whole thing

becomes a mess. It solidifies. We are far away from the present moment because we have identified with the feeling, without really watching what is happening. We feel disconnected; we cannot hear anything except the rattling of reaction on top of reaction. We begin to wonder: 'What's the problem? How did I get here? I'm supposed to be meditating!'

The truth of the present moment is what is actually happening right now. It is a direct path to seeing things clearly. We can inquire: 'What is this? Oh, this is aversion. Okay, what is holding the aversion in place? It's being held in place by the fear, anxiety and the tension around not wanting to feel the aversion. Well, that's okay too.' That's perfectly okay as an object of meditation; there is nothing at all inappropriate about fear, anxiety and tension being an object of meditation. When there is spaciousness of heart and mind to feel what we are feeling, things fall into place. The sense of the present moment imbued with fullness returns when we ask: 'What is this?' 'Oh, she said something I didn't understand – that I can't relate to. I feel a sense of shame not understanding what I am supposed to be doing.' When we are able to be with complexity, and then allow it to return to its simple fundamental form of unpleasant or pleasant feeling, the layers reveal themselves. This is how we can be present with things as they arise – in our personal relationships, with our family, and with the world.

So when a disturbing mood or an irritating thought arises, we can release it into the sound of silence, and watch where it goes – like throwing a pebble into a pool of water.

What happens to it? Are there ripples left when something is released into the sound of silence? The sound of silence is a vast, empty, embracing capacity that can hold all thoughts, moods and feelings, good and bad. It has no preferences, it just is. This all-embracing quality of the heart and mind brings us to an experience of refuge – a place of safety that can be relied upon. The fear and contraction that we habitually experience begins to find an avenue of release. With this, we are able to be present with all experience. This is the way to the end of stress. However slippery, uncertain and unstable feelings may be, when there is the right relationship with them, they lead to peace. With Right Understanding the heart is full. This is a blessing.

Some of my recent experience in Australia relates to this. I was living at 'Wat Buddha Dhamma', a remote place in the middle of the Darug National Park, about two and a half hours' drive north of Sydney. I was there for over two years. For most of that time I lived in a small kuti on sandstone rocks in the middle of the bush. Before going there I had spent many years in monasteries in the English countryside. On weekends and on festival days in particular, there are many visitors that come through the gates and share and delight in the Dhamma, as Amaravati is a pilgrimage place for Buddhists from all over the world. At Amaravati, remote wilderness and sometimes the experience of silence and solitude are to be discovered in the heart rather than in the environment.

Australia was on the other side of the planet from where I had been living. The retreat centre and hermitage were off a dirt road; it took a 40 minute drive that separated your ligaments from your bones to get there. The facilities were rustic. There was some solar power but no mains electricity; water was collected from gutters on the roof. There was only one trip a week to do the shopping and to collect the post.

Although I love nature, when I first got there it felt completely foreign. The trees and creatures were different, and there were many unfamiliar poisonous snakes and spiders. The seasons were opposite. At first, I was petrified to go off any path because I thought 'they' were going to get me. I did not know who 'they' were, but I was convinced 'they' were out there and were going to get me! It took me about six weeks just to find the confidence to walk off the path, and trust I would be all right. However, once I got to know the people living there, I had a sense that I was placed in a context, and not just dropped on another planet. I began to feel more comfortable.

I started my retreat with the clear structure for formal practice that I was used to and that I felt comfortable with. It included sitting and walking meditation, paying respects to teachers and elders, and some study of the Vinaya and Suttas. Over time, I began to see more of the creatures and feel more comfortable with nature, and I finally realised there was nobody 'out there' to get me. When I discovered how rare

it was to see the snakes, I felt privileged and gladdened when I saw them.

I began to feel an increasing sense of welcome from the land. I felt relaxed, comfortable, confident and at ease. I felt a sense that the land was happy that I was there. Feeling genuinely welcomed in the marrow of my bones gave me confidence. I felt safe. The bush taught me the value of feeling welcomed.

The ants started teaching me the value of respect. I was born in a city and I did not understand the ways of the bush. The Australian bush is different in many ways from any other wilderness I had experienced. Firstly, there are thousands of species of ants, and when you walk, the ground is continuously moving with ants. I was raised to think, 'It's just an ant. Who cares?'

Now at one time, there was an anthill by the path on the way to the meditation hall; it was spilling over onto the path, so I had the bright idea to sweep it up – to move it slowly, gently, day by day. But the nature of bright ideas is that they can be totally disconnected from nature. When I started sweeping the base of the anthill, instantaneously, the whole anthill was on red alert and thousands of ants were charging towards me! I realised: 'Well, what I did was rather insensitive. After all, it's their home, and who am I to say they're not supposed to live here? Who am I to decide whose path this is?' So I put the broom down and decided to give them some healing energy. As I approached with a different intention, they calmed down immediately – they

seemed to understand the difference between the intention to harm and the intention not to harm. I began to think: 'What would it be like if respect was just a way of being, rather than something that had to be earned?' This realisation changed the way I started relating to the nature around me, as well as to myself.

Another kind of ant called a *bull ant* has pitchforks that it uses as hypodermic needles to inject its poison. If they bite you, it is two weeks' worth of feeling: a week of pain, and another week of itch. The bite swells up to the size of half a golf ball. So it is an experience you do not easily forget. These ants are big, over an inch long. They are not that common, but when they are around everybody knows to respect them. It does not matter how tall you are, whether you are six or eight foot tall, they will fight to defend their territory. They are ferocious.

There was a bull ant nest near my kuti. I walked on their path several times a day. It was *their* path, and that was obvious from day one. I had to step out of their way on their path; however, ten feet further along was *my* walking path. They were often on it looking for dead bugs that they could drag back to their nest, but I could walk with my eyes closed at any time, and they would get out of my way. They knew it was my path. This is the intelligence of an ant!

What I began to realise is that in nature everything has a boundary, and responds to respect – only we do not allow ourselves to experience this, because we tend to block out any sense of connection with the idea: 'It's just a tree,' 'It's just a

rock,' 'It's just a dumb ant.' We wall ourselves into a prison, where we cannot feel or connect with the world around us, and suffer because of the separation we have created.

Gradually, I began to relax my sense of formal meditation practice, and just began being present with nature as it was arising. Slowly, over the time I was there, I began to stop differentiating between nature that was internal and nature that was external. There was just nature arising; sitting in nature, watching the birds, the lizards, the various animals; observing the trees and the sky – all the while watching my heart open and feeling my body enliven.

The sense of welcome that I received from the land created a context that enabled awareness to rest in the heart and open to feelings that I had not previously been able to tolerate or accept into consciousness. Layers of feelings began peeling off. I had no idea how much fear I had lived with all my life. I thought I was a courageous person. I would do the most frightening things, but it was because I did not want to be ruled by fear. It was fear of fear, rather than courage that was driving me. I did not know it.

Being in a place where I felt welcome and safe created an opportunity to see things about myself that I had never seen before. Held consciously and with kindness, they were allowed to release and end. This process allowed a sense of aliveness to emerge. The energy that went into keeping a lid on feelings, and the corresponding tension in the body was released.

So it is really helpful to create contexts where we feel safe enough to feel what we feel, to enable ourselves to be present with fear, to understand it and not react in the face of it. Fear is underneath many of the most disturbing emotions, such as anger and greed. When we can be present with fear, and respond compassionately rather than with reactivity, we undermine many other negative habits of mind. In bringing fear into conscious view, we relax into the heart that is resting in awareness rather than identifying with the object. Not only is fear released, but also there is a change in the whole basis with which we view feeling.

When we look to the conditions of our body and feelings for fulfilment or perfection, we are setting ourselves up for frustration. Yet, it is through this very experience that we can discover the heart of awareness that is luminous – untainted by the qualities of what it embraces. Instead of trying to fit experience into a system or technique, we develop a sense of the richness of the human territory. We are able to respond to life with awareness, kindness, and genuine respect. Such respect honours it all, without differentiating internal and external, nature here and nature there. There is just nature arising. Beyond good and bad, life is full of blessings.

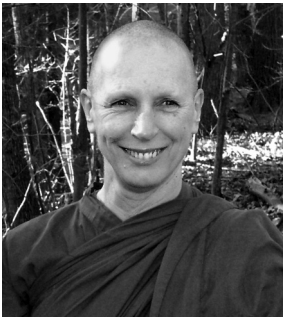
Note:
[1]The *sound of silence* is a powerful tool that can bring balance to conditions, and act as a gateway to experiencing the heart of stillness.

When we listen in an attitude of relaxed attention, we can sometimes hear a high-pitched humming sound in the background. To practise with the sound of silence, we let our attention rest with this sound. When we allow the sound into the fullness of the body, the muscles relax, the tensions of mind dissipate, the mood brightens and energy is gently aroused. Thus it brings balance to the body, heart and mind, and leads to the stillness of the heart, the purity of the essential mind. We let the sound take us through this gateway, and rest there.

La Grande Illusion

Ajahn Sundarā

from a Dhamma talk given during
a Thanksgiving retreat in California, USA (2002)



Ajahn Sundarā was born in France. She studied dance in both England and France. In her early thirties, after working for a few years as a dancer and teacher of contemporary dance, she had the opportunity to attend a talk and later, a retreat led by Ajahn Sumedho. His teachings and his way of life as a Buddhist monk resonated deeply. Before long, she visited Cittaviveka Monastery in West Sussex, and in 1979 asked to join the monastic community as one of the first four women novices. In 1983 she was given the Going Forth as a sīladhara and shortly afterward went to live at Amaravati Monastery where she participated in the establishment of the Nuns' Community and training. In the mid-nineties she spent over two years in Thailand practising in Forest Monasteries. For the last 15 years she has taught and led meditation retreats in Europe and North America.

This is the third night of our retreat. What is the result so far? Have you made peace with yourself? When we first look closely at the human mind, we may experience suffering from our approach to the practice itself. We may struggle to make peace with ourselves. We may experience tiredness or confusion. We may suffer – without understanding the roots of suffering, without knowing how to let it go, how to let it die its own natural death.

Why is this so? It is because the mind looks for safety, and often, its first recourse is to try to distract itself – to forget. Its second is to rationalise poor conduct. We do this out of habit without awareness or understanding. In this Dhamma practice, we can't really lie to ourselves. It doesn't work. We have to look at painful things. Usually, we don't want to see our habits or our delusions; consequently, it's hard to be

at peace with them. But, when the mind is shaken out of habit by the harsh reality of grief and crisis, we can wake up! Though we would not ask for a major crisis in our lives, that could be precisely what compels us to turn away from our tendency to follow desire, selfishness, or blind habit – to turn away from the world and towards the Dhamma.

We want to identify with what we imagine we are: the thoughts coursing through our minds, the feelings that arise in our hearts, the sensations of our bodies. We want to be 'good', 'pleasant', 'worthy of respect'. So the first step in this practice is to challenge that sense of who we think we are. How do we do that? By questioning, by investigating: 'Who is it that is thinking inside this mind? Who is it that is suffering in there? Who is it that conjures up this strange train of thought?'

The natural pattern of the deluded mind is to think that suffering happens outside of oneself – that there is something or someone out there to blame: 'The reason why I am upset is...' Each of us can fill in the blank with our own story; someone or something outside of ourselves has hurt us, irritated us, upset us. We come closer to the truth by recognising that we're upset, because our minds are generating random or obsessive thoughts that can feel very disturbing. We do not feel in control or in a state of equilibrium. So we attempt to find order in our mind by changing or adapting to our conditions. That's part of being a social creature: we try to 'fit in'. That's what happens in monastic communities sometimes, some lay people come, and after a time may think

'The monks and nuns look happy and peaceful, and they are beautiful without their hair; I want to be like that, so I will shave my head too!' We had to make a rule that women are not allowed to shave their heads until ordained.

The Buddha said not to waste energy looking critically at other people, wanting them to change. Instead, we need to focus our energy observing our own behaviour, our own mind, and our own self. His teaching points to a way of approaching and understanding the self which is not caught, not deluded, not agitated by what goes on in the mind. It is not grasping and, at the same time, it's also not pushing away. It's the Middle Way, which is another way of saying the enlightened way.

Perhaps we want to think of nothing, to have no thoughts, just endless bliss and perfect peace. But this is also delusion, only a more subtle form. Ajahn Chah said that being stuck in peace is a lot worse than being stuck in suffering. When we're stuck in suffering, at least we know that we want change; at least we know we want to be free from of it. One of the obstacles on the path of the holy life, the *brahmacariya* life, is the desire to have a blissful mind; it's not that difficult to achieve with the strong cultivation of concentration. In fact, bliss is inherent to the mind itself; it's not that far away from us. But if we allow ourselves to attach to bliss, then we may forget the Four Noble Truths and the path to liberation. We end up stuck in tranquility, without wisdom.

I don't mean to say practice should not take us to a place of peace and bliss. If it does, that's great. But it should be

recognized for what it is. Even the happiness of a peaceful mental state, the Buddha said, is suffering – we habitually cling to it, and we suffer. Instead, we can use it as a foundation on which to investigate the nature of our mind and the characteristics of phenomena – but we must be careful that we do not then become unmotivated to contemplate the truth of our existence.

So it's important to know how to practise correctly, to understand both the means and the goal of our practice. The goal, as the Buddha said, is *Nibbāna*, the ending of all our misery. The Buddha knew profoundly the needs of human beings. He encouraged us to observe what is closest to us – our mind, with its thoughts, its feelings, its perceptions – and to realize that they're not what they appear to be, or worth taking refuge in.

The Buddha taught that clinging to desire will always be unsatisfactory. If the body is sick, attaching to the desire of not wanting the body to be sick only creates more suffering. That thought is a form of denial of the experience of sickness. Similarly, if your mind is not concentrated or feels confused, then refusing to be with that lack of concentration or confusion is abusive, in the sense that it does not allow you to see things as they are – to penetrate the truth as it is, free from all judgments and all clinging. Even grasping after the desire to make oneself 'good', or to try to make others 'good', can give rise to abusive thinking.

From a mindfulness viewpoint we can see that which is suffering. And we can see that mindfulness has nothing to

do with any particular train of thought. This is important to realise because you'll never liberate yourself unless you allow the mind to be as it is. For example, if your conditioning is to be irritated, impatient, heartless, lacking in compassion – how are you going to liberate yourself if you cannot recognise these aspects of yourself, or if every time you look at these things you crush them, push them down, suppress them?

This is where the Buddha asks us to begin the practice. We start by observing our thoughts, feelings, moods, and perceptions – all the activities in the mind. If a feeling of jealousy comes up, we notice that it arises and passes away. Selfishness, meanness, hatred and other painful mental states also may arise, and likewise will pass away. Happiness, feelings of love and joy also arise and pass away. As we accept the momentary reality of those states, we're able to let them go. Then we begin to recognise and understand our experiences as they are, instead of wishing them to be otherwise.

To observe ourselves takes courage and fearlessness. How many of us can just listen, simply listen, to the manifestation of pain as it arises and until it ends? Our habitual way is often quite extreme and simplistic: I like/I grab, I don't like/I kill. The level of response can be quite aggressive. Or, it may be more refined – maybe you don't kill, but there's still aversion; maybe you're not averse, but there's still irritation. From feeling peaceful, relaxed and calm, you suddenly feel irritated. How do we respond when this happens? Do we remember the goal of practice?

The goal is to release the mind from suffering. The means is awareness, our capacity to observe ourselves and the activities of the mind, without any agenda. However, if you come from a deluded perspective, you will notice that there is an agenda, however subtle – as soon as something unpleasant is felt, the mind sends immediately the message of aversion, 'This should not be here – get out!' The same applies to that which is pleasant, that which we like: 'This should be here – always!' We need to understand that those reactions are arising in the mind most of the time.

Another aspect of the practice which can be quite confusing is that the more determined you are to do something good, the more challenged you may become. Let's say that you determine to do something wholesome and you will notice that, not long after that, *Māra* (the Buddhist personification of evil) will come along and test you. One year, when I was a novice, I resolved to refrain from eating any chocolate for a certain period during the three month 'rains retreat'. We didn't have much, maybe a few squares from time to time, so it was not a massive renunciation – but I decided to give it up anyway. From the day I took this decision, about a week before the rains retreat began, what arose in my mind was: 'Will I be safe? Won't I murder somebody? Will I become violent and start beating people up?' It was Māra telling me that if I give up that piece of chocolate, my world would collapse – an illustration of the power of the forces we have to deal with!

Our good fortune is knowing that the more we practise and gain insight into this experience of suffering, the more we become confident in observing our experiences as they really are – seeing them as impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) and 'not self' (*anatta)*.

Our identification with suffering is very strong – we get sucked into it, and it's really hard to pull ourselves out. We might think that as we practise the mind should really come together and be more peaceful, but that's not always the case. As we deepen our practice, we become aware of deeper layers of the mind's conditionings and conceit, and can sometimes be more forcefully challenged.

Ajahn Chah used to say, the most important questions to ask every day are, 'Why was I born?' and, 'Why am I here?' So what are we here for? What is the goal, the purpose of this practice? Should we make a list of what we don't want to be (jealous, angry, selfish, confused), and a list of what we do want to be (good, patient, kind, virtuous, wise)? Where does that leave us? How much chance is there to actually let things go? With mindfulness, instead of taking a position for or against any states of mind, we notice their coming and going. As we see their arising and passing away, they start to lose their intensity, their substantiality, and we'll see them as energy – 'empty'. Do you understand?

If we use this approach for everything that we encounter in our practice, then nothing will be a problem. It's a matter

of being patient and allowing the symptoms and the cause of our suffering to be seen as impermanent. Nothing arises in the heart without causes. If we stay patiently with the symptoms, we may get in touch with the causes at a deeper level. Sometimes, for example, if we stay with anger long enough, we'll see the fear that lies behind the anger. But if we're obsessed with getting rid of anger as quickly as possible, we won't see that it is prompted and generated by some kind of fear.

The Buddha said there are only two things that manifest in the mind: the arising of suffering and the ending of suffering. A pretty miserable programme if you don't see it from the right perspective of non-grasping. Where's the joy and happiness in that? Well, there is joy and happiness, but it's not the joy and happiness that comes from a deluded view. True joy and happiness come from the freedom of knowing that whatever arises in the heart is not worth clinging to. Whatever you cling to will make you fearful that you'll lose it; you cling to the desire not to lose something you like and then, you cling to the desire to get it back. And there it is: dukkha!

During my early years of training, I remember having an insight that made me skip down the lane at Chithurst – even though skipping was not allowed. I remember being very happy – knowing that there is no happiness and that I would never be 'happy' again! I felt so joyful, prancing up and down with this insight. What I had understood so very clearly at that moment was that I would never be fooled by happiness.

When happiness came, I would feel it totally, when it went, I would not suffer. Many years later, I heard that one of the great meditation masters in Thailand had a sign at the entrance of his monastery that said: 'What joy it is to know there is no happiness in the world.' Of course, I got fooled again many times. But once you have the insight you can never be completely fooled again.

Insights are the point of transformation when the heart knows, really knows, for itself – beyond teachings, beyond teachers, beyond anyone. When, through wisdom, you have true insight, you don't need to rely on any external authority. When the Buddha says that we must understand dukkha, he means that when we do really understand it we will never be fooled by suffering again. Only when the Buddha really understood dukkha, its causes, its ending and the path leading to the release of suffering was he able to proclaim that he was free from dukkha.

The reason I say all this is to encourage you to continue seeing everything that is taking place on this retreat as a gateway to insight. The key factor in your practice is to find a strong refuge in awareness, however you are able to do it – whether you use your body to cultivate awareness, your breath, a word like 'peace' or 'buddho', or the movement of your feet in walking meditation. The simpler you keep it, the more clearly you will see the mind. This is what enables the wisdom of the mind to cut through its own delusions.

Upasikā Kee, a respected female meditation master in Thailand, said that there is nothing more fun than getting

a handle on the *kilesas*, the defilements in the mind. When they arise, 'kill them off...that's Vipassana', she says. She did not mean that we should really kill anything, but that we should develop a sharp mindfulness to free the mind from all its delusion. Mindfulness acts like a knife cutting through the misery we carry around.

Enjoy your journey during this retreat. When you get up in the morning, whether you feel utterly wretched or you feel like you are going to transcend it all in one day, whatever you feel, that is a gateway to enlightenment. In the early morning, you go to the sink, brush your teeth feeling cold and miserable: 'Oh no! Sitting and walking all day! Let's go back to sleep!' You start getting dressed – it's so cold and miserable: 'I think I'm going to declare myself sick today. I'll put a note on my door: DON'T DISTURB!' Notice that this is the mind going through its Māra stages. It is becoming '*māraic*'!

You have to remember that Māra is always around the corner – he tempted the Buddha for 45 years. Who is Māra? One of the great Sufi poets said that if you want to know the devil just look at yourself. It's so true, isn't it? We get often fooled because the devil is not necessarily so terrible looking, it can also be quite a sweet manifestation. When we look at ourselves we're not that bad, are we? The devil can look quite nice a lot of the time. I like the way one of our senior teachers once described delusion. He pointed out that there is nothing more comfortable than delusion. If you want to know delusion, look at your comfort zones. There is something very cosy about being deluded.

A well known teacher said once that people can spend a whole day thinking stupid thoughts without a flicker of doubt, but ask them to be mindful of one inhalation and they go berserk. Isn't it strange? We can indulge in selfish, destructive things all day long in small and big ways without any qualms. Often, it's not until we awaken that we notice the damage of unskilfulness and its destructive results. Remember: the practice is to develop the means to free ourselves from unskilfulness, and the goal is liberation from all suffering.

The Buddha keeps reminding us to be observant, and to be mindful in all areas of our life, of all our actions and thoughts – all of them, the good and bad. He doesn't ask us to judge what we experience, or reject those that are painful. He doesn't ask us to do that. Wisdom itself knows this – without pushing anything away or holding on to anything. This is the Middle Way, the path of non-grasping, non-clinging. It is the end of 'la grande illusion'.

Here: Māra, Sparklers, and the Heart

Ajahn Thāniyā

from a Dhamma talk given during a retreat
at IMS in Barre, Massachusetts, USA (April 2002)

Ajahn Thāniyā was born in 1960 in New Zealand's King Country. Having left there to further her studies she reconnected with an early faith in meditation and the Buddha. Eventually this lead her to go to Thailand to pay respects to Luang Por Chah and, out of gratitude for his teachings, to find a place within his monasteries to live the Holy Life. She traveled to England in 1990 to join the community there, taking Anagārikā Ordination in 1991 and Sīladhara Ordination in 1993. She lives and trains at Cittaviveka Monastery – where she is currently the senior nun.

I've been appreciating the quality of silence in this room; with so many of us gathered here it is remarkable. It seems a pity to break it. This evening I just intend to resonate with you; you don't have to remember anything I say. My invitation is to rest back, to come into your body, and feel what happens when I say things – feel where my words affect you. Use what I say as you would a tuning fork. There's nothing I'll say you don't already know. We're recollecting and then resonating with the things we find precious. Even the Buddha, when he was sick, got his disciples to chant him a recollection of the Enlightenment Factors. That's interesting, isn't it? Even for a Buddha just hearing the different qualities of awakening was healing, strengthening. It's in that spirit I'm offering this.

So, what's it like when we really come back into ourselves? Many of us were moving along quite quickly, and now we're on retreat – we've come to a place where we can stop, a place that's safe, a place of refuge. We can start opening. Appreciate what that is like. It's not always an easy thing to open. Because... what is birth? Birth is birth into vulnerability, birth into feeling. So as we start to calm and settle, to come into the 'here-ness', we'll be aware of all kinds of seasons passing through our hearts. I noticed yesterday that I felt quite expansive – everything was possible; a summer feeling of fullness. Then earlier today – maybe it was that the snow had started to fall – I felt small and sad. We can feel quite different heart qualities.

Sitting today, I felt a quality of sadness, and I didn't even know whose it was. We will be affected by the presence of others, so all we can know is that there is this experience – sadness or whatever. We're in a shared field. The same kinds of forms – these human ones – they start to resonate with each other; there's a morphic resonance. So I don't have to sort out why I was sitting here at two o'clock feeling sad and small, rather it's a case of being able to open to that and let it do what it does. And I can know this evening that there's quite a different season. Can we just allow this ebb and flow? And know what it takes to keep coming into 'here-ness.'

There's been encouragement over the preceding days to start coming out of any ideas about what we should be doing or what should be going on, into knowing what *is* happening. It is critical that we start becoming more sensitive and responsive

– that we're not here practising out of some idea about how we should be, what we need to be like, or how much better we have to become. When I say those things it's obvious that it's impossible to be practising out of such notions. They are endless. And I've found that those voices are completely merciless – the ones that are not about what's going on here, but are about what 'should' be happening.

Some years back, I had a week of solitary retreat and I was doing it in the nuns' cottage. At Chithurst, the nuns live in a separate area – it's about a ten-minute walk down hill from the rest of the monastery. On one of those days I wasn't feeling so well but walked up to the main house at the meal time anyway. I got up there and thought, 'No, I'm not up to eating.' So I asked permission not to and went back down again. I went back and sat, and ended up just sitting for about five or six hours in meditation. I felt quite present; feeling the body, feeling what was going on with the different agitations and things, until the mind just opened – it was calm and bright.

In the cottage you can hear everything. At about five o'clock, I heard this *'rattle, rattle'* downstairs – it was the teaspoon drawer opening. I realised it must be tea time; I heard water boiling. So I thought, 'Oh, maybe I'll have a drink. I haven't eaten, I'll have something to drink.' And then this voice came. It said, 'You're so lazy! You know you should be practising. Here you are on retreat, you should be practising!'

I had this incredible feeling. I realised, 'Ah-ha, I've caught you!' It was like catching Māra with his hands in the till. It was very important for me because I saw how merciless that voice is. There was I, unwell, having sat for many hours, and just going to have a cup of tea. This is what many of us are up against. So it's very helpful, as we're practising, to remember this. Māra is not going to let up when approached from any intention to placate. We have to come from quite a different approach.

So where is the place we can actually be free from that assault? The place that is loving and affirming, that says, 'For a start, look at what you've given up to come here. You can trust your movement to awakening.' In my case, I've gone from one side of the world to the other, given up home and family to cultivate Dhamma. So we can take confidence from that renunciation and the faith that supported it, and empower ourselves. We don't need someone standing over us with a stick. We are 'waking up' beings. There doesn't have to be a judge. There doesn't have to be a diligent disciple. Even diligence, as a view, can be abandoned. We trust our aspiration. This is important when so many of us have got voices that are just not going to let up in terms of what we 'should' be, or what we 'should' be doing. They can eat away at our confidence. So we keep deepening, firming, growing the confidence that all that is needed is to open to what's happening right here and now. We don't need to be anywhere else. And nothing else needs to be going on. This is the quality of the Buddha knowing the Dhamma.

Then we can start checking out for ourselves what helps us to do that. What helps us to come to a place of refuge? For those of us gathered here, we understand that *sila* is the first thing. It does matter how we live. We really taste the fruits of our life when we sit in meditation. We see that when we aspire to live well, it means we can be more and more present with experience. Even when we seem not to be fulfilling our sense of what is good, we can be present because we can trust our aspiration. We can trust our movement to harmlessness. Feel out what things provide a wholesome ground so that we can come into the here and now. In this present moment, what is needed? Faith. Faith in the Buddha's teaching that, '*the Dhamma is here and now; knowable*' – that it's just a matter of opening and seeing; and that this is transformative.

A verse of the Buddha's says,

> *'Let a person not revive the past nor on the future build their hopes, for the past has been left behind and the future has not been reached. In the present let them dwell having insight into each presently arisen state. Let them know that and be sure of it, invincibly, unshakeably. Today the practice must be done for tomorrow Death may come, who knows? '*

It conveys the sense of the time being *now*. We have everything we need *now*. To be waiting until tomorrow, when we feel a bit calmer or whatever, isn't really where it's at. Everything can be awakened to right now. The Pāli is: *Paccuppannañca yo dhammam tathatā vipassati asanhiraṁ*

asankuppaṁ. Three words I like to contemplate are: *Paccuppan,* which means the here and now; *tathatā,* which is the sense of 'thus-ness' – really knowing the here and now suchness of things. It's not about constructing all kinds of different moods and tones in the heart, but just knowing the way things are. The third one is *akuppam,* which is unshakeability – unshakeability in this.

Awakening is often talked about as '*the unshakeable deliverance of the heart*,' which I find is a gladdening way to think of it. My experience is of a shaking, of being resonant and affected by things. Where is the place we can be fully with the way things are, and the heart be still? Still, so that it can fully receive, be fully empathetic. This is the possibility the teaching points to. We can come into the present moment, and find calmness and stability in that. What I mean by calm is collectedness, wholeness, a unity of presence. Then, it doesn't matter what's going down on some level – obviously some things are more skilful than others, but in terms of our heart experience we can open to the whole of it – deeply, softly, and with this confidence that presence is transformative.

But it's a challenge, isn't it? There is so much that can be pushing us forward and back – back into the past, into regret or negativity; or forward into the future. We really need the realisation that there is no other time but now. The past has gone. There are ripples or resonances that are still here. Certainly as we come into the body we can feel the effects of our lives. But they're here, now. So it's here and now that the healing and the release can come. We can't go back and

straighten out the things that still chew at us, but that chewing is here, and we can do the healing here. The future has not yet arrived; we're just chasing phantoms and imaginings when we start going forward in time. And mostly we're going forward with fear – all the thoughts that come are strategies to keep us safe, to make the unknown known. So we need to come into here, and experience the sense of refuge and safety in that.

It's fascinating how we construct things. A couple of years ago I was back in New Zealand. It was my niece's fifth birthday. She is a sweetie. She hadn't yet lived with television or anything like that. It was a great disappointment for her realising that she hadn't woken up an inch or more taller. She had been to kindergarten, and they make a fuss on your birthday at kindergarten, so she had been a queen all morning. We'd been careful not to overdo it, so we didn't have a special birthday tea on her actual birthday – we'd had that the night before. At teatime she was sitting there and she started sobbing. She sobbed and cried into her tea and said, 'I'm too tired to eat.' The thing was we had a few sparklers. Sparklers are very exciting when you're five years old. She said, 'I'm too tired to eat. And I'm too tired to stay up until it's dark. And I'll *never* see the sparklers!' Then she said, 'I was tired when I was three. I was tired when I was four. Now I'm five I'm *really tired*! When I'm six I'll be tired. When I'm seven I'll be tired. I'll *never* see the sparklers!' This is almost verbatim.

I thought, 'Wow! Five, and it's already like that.' This is just what it's like, isn't it? We take the mood of the present

moment and we wash it back, and we wash it forward, we totally become it, and we're trapped in it. We lose the sense that it's something dependently arising. The next night there we were rushing around the house, sparklers flying. The whole thing was gone.

It brought me up short to hear this thing so clearly articulated. With the movement backward, it's not even that we are moving back into some kind of reality. We're moving back into something that's created by the moods and feelings of the present. And we move forward from the same place. There's no freedom in that. We completely box ourselves in with the moods and feelings we're bound by at the time. We've just got to come into the present moment, and trust the flow. Know the suchness of things: they're just like *this*. And we try not to keep adding more to them. 'Sadness is like *this*.' And feel it wash through here and wash through there and come through the body. It doesn't need to be more than that. Can we be that simple? Things are as they are. And they arise out of causes and conditions. And when those causes and conditions cease, they cease too – if we let them. Even if we don't – that's their nature.

This is the sense that '*The Buddha is my excellent refuge,*' as we chant, '*for me there is no other refuge. The Dhamma is my excellent refuge. For me there is no other refuge. The Sangha is my excellent refuge. For me there is no other refuge.*' What this is pointing to is coming into the 'thus-ness' of things. I think of the Buddha as that quality of awakening; the Dhamma as the

way it is; and the Sangha as the movement to actualise that – which we see in these incarnations. It is the sense of 'waking-up-ness'. What other refuge is there? As we practise, we start to realise its profoundness: when we can actually come into *here*, come into *now,* and be with *this*.

Many of you will have experienced that when we come into the pain in our bodies, come into the pain in our hearts, it can be lovely. What is lovely is being here and being willing, open, and receptive. When we stop arguing with conditions we sense a stability of mind. The Buddha's teaching is extraordinary in pointing out that, rather than instinctively moving away from pain and suffering, if we trust suffering, come into suffering, then in that very act there is the cessation of it. We see the deeper ground, which is this awareness – that which can know, that which can allow the flow of things, allow things to wave through. As we start to open in our practice, and some of the armouring and the speediness fall away, all kinds of things will wash through. And we trust that all of them can ripen in awakening.

There's a lovely sequence that the Buddha taught: '*...rooted in desire are all things; born of attention are all things; arising from contact...converging on feeling....*' This passage then continues and ends with: '*yielding deliverance as essence are all things; merging in the Deathless are all things; ceasing in Nibbāna are all things.*' It conveys the truth that we can awaken to whatever – the agitated mind, the calm mind; this feeling, that feeling. Some are certainly easier, because they're easier to keep stability

with. That's the value of cultivating wholesome states, they're easier to come into contact with. But whatever we can contact, we can awaken to.

Everything is trying to help us wake up. If we get resentful or angry, if those states arise, the tendency can be to think that such stuff shouldn't be happening. I had a retreat a few years back in which I realised I was feeling resentful. Things were shaping up in the Sangha in a way that didn't seem to suit me very well at all – they've certainly taken some opening to. So I was walking up and down, walking up and down, and just trying to stay present to this unpleasant feeling. Then as I started to get more used to it and more able to handle it, to feel it, and then to come around it and under it – it was quite revealing for me. That very resentment was an incredibly caring voice which was saying, 'Hey, you're not looking after yourself well enough.' It seemed like this voice had started quietly, and I hadn't noticed it. It had just been poking me from the side. I hadn't listened, and it had got louder and louder, meaner and meaner, until there I was for a couple of weeks having to receive it. But the thing I was left with, and that I now experience more and more, is that *all* of it wants us to wake up.

So we can trust going into this stuff. There are no demons. And when we come into our hearts, they are 'awakening hearts'. We explore the different qualities and tones that arise – the ones we think are okay and the ones we think shouldn't be there, and find out what's holding them, what's around them, what they're about. Let them yield deliverance – even

momentary deliverance. Then we get more confident. We become fearless. We're fearless in our knowledge that it is enough to be here, coming into the 'thus-ness' of things.

It helps to have good friends around, doesn't it? We realise we're in a huge field of support, and it can give us the courage to keep moving into the areas where our hearts start shaking. We can take confidence and strength from each other; gladness, a sense of Sangha, and rejoice in it. And we can use these tones to help collect the mind as we sit in meditation. We're in a whole field where waking up is happening. We tune into that so we can support ourselves and each other in being fearless. Birth into the body is birth into fear. Birth into the Dhamma is birth into fearlessness.

That's enough. I wish you all courage.

The Stuff of Awakening

Ajahn Jitindriyā

from a Dhamma talk given during the monastic winter retreat at Cittaviveka (January 2002)

Ajahn Jitindriyā was born in Sydney, Australia, in 1963. While studying art at college she was drawn more deeply to spiritual questions through investigating the nature of perception and consciousness. She graduated with a Diploma in Visual Fine Arts and later traveled through Southeast Asia, India and Europe. While living in England in 1987, she became seriously interested in meditation and the teachings of the Buddha. Feeling a strong connection with the community at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery and the teachings of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho, she asked to live and practise in the way of the monastic Sangha there. She took Anagārikā (eight precept) Ordination in 1988 and higher ordination as a Sīladhara in 1990. Over the years she has lived and trained in various communities of this order, spending time in England, Australia and the USA. She is currently resident at Amaravati Monastery in England.[1]

Retreat time in particular offers a wonderful opportunity for reflection; affording so much time to cultivate this practice, and with so much support. It's unbearable sometimes! All this good fortune – yet oftentimes what we have to sit with is absolutely excruciating, just the opposite of what one would want or what one would expect. What we have to meet within ourselves on this path is extremely challenging. Sometimes we can see this with clarity and understanding, and sometimes not. Sometimes we are caught up in the whirlwind of it, in the *dukkha* of it. In both of these times, however, we can learn a lot: when we're caught into it all and when we have clarity and perspective on what we call 'my stuff.'

I was reflecting recently on the different psychological models we have – the model of the Buddha's world and the

way he communicated the Dhamma can be seen as a certain psychological model. Within that, *Māra* was the deluder – the personification of delusion – that which had to be conquered. Nowadays, I think it can clash slightly with the kind of Western psychological model we've been brought up with and conditioned by. Nowadays, it's just 'my stuff' – *my* emotional world, my grief, my rage, my despair – having to 'work out *my* stuff'. But actually, we're talking about the very same forces in the mind.

There are different ways the Buddha talked about dealing with Māra, the deluder. In fact, the whole path of training – *sīla, samādhi, paññā* – is to do with overcoming Māra. Ultimately, however, just to *know* Māra, to *know* all the forces of the mind, is the way in which we can overcome their deluding power. *Maya,* in Sanskrit, is another word for mind – meaning that which is illusory and has the power to delude. Knowing it for what it is, however, is really the place of victory.

Can we see our 'stuff' just for what it is, rather than making it into a big 'me' and 'my problem' – the things *I've* got to work out, resolve, fix, get beyond, get rid of; thinking about what I'm lacking or what I've got obstructing me. All this stuff! It's really just the play of the mind, *maya*, that which comes to be – has causes and conditions for its existence. It's the stuff of the world. And, it's the stuff that we learn from, actually. Without Māra, there's no awakening really. If we don't acknowledge suffering, if we aren't aware of suffering, then where do we find the energy to understand it and go

beyond it? Māra, then, can be seen as the force that goads us toward awakening. In other words, whatever we've got to work with, it's the stuff of awakening – if we can find the right relationship to it.

Once we undertake this practice, it can take a long time just to get to know ourselves, to start to look inwardly and get to know all the forces that are pushing and pulling us. We get to know our own ways and means of being in the world, and of taking on the practice, the discipline and the meditation techniques. We see our own tactics of mind in relationship to pleasure and pain – we see what we get stuck on and what we want to get away from. It takes a long time to get to know ourselves. Often, we pick up the practice with our own deluded views, and it can take a while to see that as well. Not that it's wrong – it's absolutely inevitable that this happens. We pick things up according to the way we understand them, we put them into practice and then we learn – 'is it working or not working?' 'What are the results of the way I'm practising?' And this can be a really hard learning experience; at least, in my experience!

At first, there is mostly an intellectual appreciation of the Dhamma, where everything suddenly makes sense. 'Ah ha!' The map's clear... there it is, it's all laid out. 'How wonderful someone understood all this and presented the path of practice; and here I am with the great good fortune to hear about it, and the opportunity to practise and be supported in it.' And off we go: inspiration, aspiration, wonderful teachers, wonderful support, and then, sooner or later… *'Ahhgggh!'* I

guess it depends somewhat on the individual just how long it takes to all fall apart. It might be a short time, it could be a couple of years, or for some it might be 10, 15, even 20 years! But eventually, at some point, it *will* fall apart. And I think that's really where the practice begins, actually.

I have this funny example. Probably most of you here haven't seen the movie *Matrix*, but talking about this reminds me of a scene in that movie where the hero – who's being cultivated to conquer Māra, basically – has his first chance to test his developing mental skills. In this test he has to leap off a skyscraper across to another building. So, he's psyching himself up – he knows it's just a matter of mind power: 'I can do it, I can leap through the skies, I can get there, it's all in the mind. Okay, here we go!' And he is so convinced he can do it, you know, he has developed some skills already. So off he goes: takes a running start and leaps into the air and… '*Ohh no!'* Down, down he dives and *splat* – flat on the ground. *Uggghh!* You know that feeling?

Yes, okay, now we have a clearer understanding of what we're working with – end of part one, intellectual understanding complete. Part two: experiential understanding! Now, this is a different realm – and a very interesting realm. It is new territory that we start to explore when we work experientially. Yes, we still have a degree of intellectual understanding, and a little bit more wariness and caution about how to use that and just how far it can guide us. It's a bit like a guiding star – it is not something to grasp at, it is not something to 'become' on that level. As a guiding star it can give us

some direction, but actually, we have to walk this path *in* our own experience, in the territory of our own hearts, with our own mind – no one else has walked there before. The Buddha walked the territory of his heart and his mind, which was huge. He was able to leave a teaching behind which was incredibly comprehensive and all embracing, with different aspects of the teaching directed to different kinds of beings caught in different predicaments. So we can always find something helpful for each of us in his teachings, but we need to take that into the territory of our own hearts.

This is unknown territory. This is where we meet our deepest fears, powerful emotions and the raging worldly winds. This is what we have to meet and learn from, and we have to find the skill, the tools, and the support we need to meet those things in our own practice, in our own lives – to deal with them skilfully, in a way that leads to understanding and release rather than to more complication and dukkha. That is only learnt through our own experience. And, in my experience, it's not unusual to learn from getting it 'wrong', so to speak. Going up this track… 'Oh, that's the wrong way'; going up that track… 'Oh, this is the wrong way!'

Someone once suggested to Ajahn Chah that he seemed to be contradicting himself in the different instructions he gave to different people. And he said, 'You know, if I see someone coming towards me and they are veering off to the left, I say, "*Go right, go right.*" If I see someone coming and they are veering off to the right, I say, "*Go left, go left.*"' You see, there is no 'right way' in this sense of things. In my experience,

finding what the *Middle Way* is, is a bit like finding yourself in a ditch on the right side of the track, picking yourself up and waddling over to the left. Then finding yourself in a ditch on the left side and so, picking yourself up and coming back to the middle. Or sometimes the learning can be a little more instantaneous, somewhat like being slapped on both sides of the face – you've got to find the middle where it doesn't sting any more! Then, just stay on course for a while. It's a bit like that.

We know when we find the middle – there's a resting, a clarity, there's an understanding on a very intuitive level and we can just *be* with things the way they are. Then the tension and conflict eases out, unravels, dissipates. The more we find that 'way of being' (it's not a static position, it's a living, responsive, sensitive way of being), the more we begin to recognise it intuitively, and something in us learns and grows in confidence with the experience of that.

Now, even in saying that much, however, it's easy to grasp the wrong end of the stick, or the view, thinking that if something results in ease then that's the 'right way'; or if I'm experiencing pain, then that's the 'wrong way.' It's not as black and white as that. This particular view is something we can easily get caught in because of the nature of the experience of pain. There's a fundamental assumption we operate on that says: 'This is wrong, it shouldn't be like this, it's too painful... something must be wrong here.' Either, 'I'm wrong' or, 'you're wrong'; 'I'm bad' or, 'you're bad'. We have a lot of conditioned judgments in reaction to painful feelings.

They may be quite obvious to us, or they may be very subtle views that are hard to uncover. It's in the nature of any being to move away from pain – to contract, to shrink away, to want to get away from pain. As long as we are not waking up to that conditioned activity, however, we are actually moving away from our opportunity for awakening and freedom from suffering.

Recognising where the pain is, and turning to face it – doing what we can to increase our capacity just to be with it, understand it – is the way to cessation. Cessation is not in moving away from it out of reactivity. In my own practice I've investigated this a lot. What does it take to actually be with painful stuff in a wholesome way? In turning to face the pain we can also experience a lot of other stuff in reaction to it. Fear can come up very powerfully, or rage and anger. Can we be with that? Even before we get to touch into the primary pain, to really feel into it, we meet these other kinds of barriers – more of Māra's screens or chimera, trying to deflect us from seeing something. So practice is about increasing the capacity of awareness to settle around that which is uncomfortable or painful, and finding ways to open to and be easeful with that experience, so as we can see and understand it clearly.

For me, this is the only way I really learn, that is, from *experience*. Because if I take the teachings that I hear, or some of the teachings that I can read in the suttas, at face value and try to apply it without contemplating, without looking into my own experience, it doesn't necessarily work. Like with

certain instructions on how to dispel hindrances or how to employ restraint with sense desire or anger – I can easily take these instructions as kind of dictates from on high. The inner tyrant, or super-ego, picks them up and attempts to enforce them, and of course, there is more suffering.

I have found that a much more open-hearted approach works for me. For example, if desire or anger is present, well, first of all I try to listen to all the judgements that may arise: 'desire!… anger!… wrong! Be restrained, *do* something about this.' I notice that if I relate to the experience in a wrong way, it increases the sense of struggle or tension – which doesn't lead to the ending of suffering. But if I can catch what's going on – and presently my way of working is: 'Just give it space... whatever's present here, just give it some space...' – then somehow there's a kind of stretching of the internal space to accommodate the feeling, rather than react to it. In this giving of space, in this opening around something, there's no struggle. The energy of the particular hindrance or disturbing emotion starts to unravel by itself.

Of course the intensity of some of these things is such that you are caught into them before you recognise what's going on, and then it's a matter of trying to remember to *acknowledge* the pain (first Noble Truth), *be with it,* and give it space. If we find ourselves caught in a struggle, it is usually because there is unrecognised, unaccepted pain at some level. The judgment and the struggle that ensues then is double pain, extra pain, fuelled by the desire to get rid of it or the desire to

fix it – *vibhava-tanhā*, the desire to get away from pain, to not be conscious of it.

Moving experientially into the territory of our own heart, we're moving into those places that actually haven't seen the light before. In psychological terms, we might call them our own 'shadow places', or in Buddhist psychology, as I said before, this is where we meet Māra and all his powerful forces. It is new territory and often we just don't know where we are, or where it is taking us. This is one of the benefits of having community, a teacher and the schedules of the monastery – all so helpful in just providing some kind of container for the work that one is doing, because one can find oneself in some very vulnerable spaces, some very unsure spaces, where our old views of ourselves and things start falling apart and we're just not really sure what's going on any more, either internally or externally. That holding environment of the monastery, the teacher and the teaching then is very, very helpful. Our own commitment to practice is also a container of sorts – which can hold our experience in a certain way, a wholesome way – allowing this work to continue. Our need for security is so strong that our tendency is to want to find a position, to find 'who' we are, to identify with this thing or that thing. This is a major force in the mind.

That searching force, *bhava-tanhā*, is always looking to *be* something, out of this sense of insecurity. As we try to arrest that force of bhava-tanhā (which is what much of the practice is about – to ease it up), we have to start to get familiar with

that very uncomfortable place of not quite being anything at all, or not quite knowing what's going on. It feels very uncomfortable, but actually, it's a very potent place to practise. You can see the mind, in all its desperation, searching for security or affirmation or approval; needing something concrete, something firm, some 'thing' to identify with. That's just the force of bhava-tanhā. It's there, and it's what we have to learn from – to see how it's always leading us into new births, new positions, new views of ourselves and others and the world. We can see these positions and views taking shape, forming, and we can also see them breaking up and dissolving.

We can start to investigate the true nature of our experience. What is it, this true nature? The Buddha is always pointing it out. If we could just recognise the true nature of phenomena as it's happening, this in itself is what leads to freedom. To recognise the characteristic aspect of impermanence in all of our experiences – whether they be ephemeral thoughts and feelings, or whether they be views and notions, or whether it's this bodily experience made up of the four great elements: it's all *anicca* – impermanent, continually changing, mutable. This is an opportunity to see *that* as the reality – that *is* 'the way it is'.

The Buddha said that it was the recognition, the realisation and understanding of impermanence that actually leads to liberation. The seeing of anicca gives rise to what's called *nibbidā* – disenchantment. Sometimes it's translated as revulsion or disgust – words which have their own rather powerful

connotations in the English language – but I generally prefer this word disenchantment, or weariness. It implies a losing of our fascination – no longer able to be fascinated or 'enchanted' by what is now seen to be ephemeral and changeable. Whereas when we don't understand what impermanence is about, we're habitually trying to gain some kind of foothold or security in the ephemeral world of thoughts, feelings, perceptions and sense impressions. We're trying to find security where there is no security – trying to find self, soul, being, in things that are inherently insecure, in things that inevitably change. That's not where we're going to find security.

The Buddha talked of *Nibbāna* as the supreme security, a refuge, where suffering is 'wholly destroyed'. It is the result of understanding impermanence, becoming disenchanted with the world that's continually changing, the world of sense impressions – the play of mind and matter in continual interaction. You don't have to learn how to arouse disenchantment; it arises naturally when we see clearly this nature of things. The result of that disenchantment and weariness, the Buddha teaches, is *virāga*, dispassion – where that basic desire for *becoming*, or *being some thing* in that changing world no longer arises. This can be difficult to understand just at the intellectual level, however.

The result of virāga is liberation. What is it that's liberated? The Buddha talks of the liberation of the mind, or heart. In the suttas, there are various words used for the mind, such as *mano* (intellect), *citta* (heart) and *viññāna* (consciousness);

however, they are not always used in consistent ways – sometimes as synonyms and sometimes describing discrete faculties or functions. This is where it has to be in your own practice, in your own experience, that you understand what it is that is liberated. You understand fully what it is that arises and ceases, and you understand fully what it is that is liberated from that round. In your own experience, when there's a letting go of something that is seen to be impermanent, or when something is seen *through* as it arises and passes… what is it that's not caught up in the movement? What is it that knows ease, stillness and peace? This is to be known directly by ourselves.

The Buddha pointed to something he called *anidassana-viññāna* – non-manifestive consciousness, or consciousness that no longer gives rise to formations, no longer concocts the world. This is the mind that comes to stillness, experiencing *cessation*. 'Cessation of the world is cessation of suffering' – the mind that is liberated understands that cessation. It's not an annihilation, it's more a realisation of that which always was ephemeral and illusory, the letting go of that, and abiding in the nature of the mind that is no longer caught up in or deluded by it. That's the direction. It's something that we may taste only momentarily in our practice but it is an experience that continues to inform and direct our cultivation of the path.

As we continue the practice, there are always more challenges however; there is always more to learn. It seems to me that practice results in a gradual breaking down of the various views we accumulate. Once something works for us in our

practice, we often end up creating some kind of view about it. It's another attempt of the deluded mind to establish some kind of security or foothold. Sooner or later we are going to meet the limitations of that view, it will all 'fall apart' and we're going to find ourselves again in unknown territory, meeting the unknown. Part of that process, at least in my experience, is that in coming to the edge of those views, it often feels like coming to the edge of 'myself', and having those views fall apart, often feels like 'myself' falling apart, or experiencing this sense of dying.

When you meet the limitations of who you *thought* you were, when you meet the fears of your own failure, created from your own expectations of yourself – when you just can't meet that image of what you're 'supposed' to be – then what happens there is very powerful. In my own practice, this has been the point of the most incredible kind of pain actually, and the kind of effort it takes to stay with that process and the learning and letting go that can happen there is very powerful. What you need there is the heart capacity just to be with the unknown, to be with the painful; the capacity to acknowledge the depth of your own hatred and fear of pain, to hold the strength of your own rebellion and resistance; you need the capacity to be fully present, compassionately, with all of that.

It is at once both a humiliating and empowering process. I remember the words of a Zen teacher, Charlotte Joko Beck, who said, 'The Path to Enlightenment is just one humiliation after another!' This gives me some confidence – like that

analogy of taking a fall from the skyscraper – it's all part of the Path. I coined my own term a while back: *humilification* – purification through humiliation – when you really do feel like a total failure. Fortunately, I had a good spiritual friend who advised me...'Great – just *be* a total failure!' Huh? 'Yeah, be a total failure, it's absolutely okay.' Oh, that was interesting. In just being able to meet this fear – the pain of: 'Oh no, it's really not working...I've done my best and it's all going wrong!' – in meeting that fear and resistance and letting it be, giving it space; in no longer struggling and resisting and denying, that feeling became very small actually, and dissolved. Just like the teaching in the Tibetan story of Milarepa, who came back to his cave to find it had been taken over by demons. As long as he tried to get rid of them and got angry and resisted them, they grew bigger, stronger and more menacing – they just fed on that. But with loving kindness and acceptance and being made welcome, they got smaller.

It's the same with the stuff we find within, the stuff that we fear – the big 'monsters' and the ghastly things we can't bear to face or think of. Those kind of things actually feed off our resistance and denial. Yet, if we can give them space, we can see…'Oh, just feelings; perceptions…just that much' – not in denial or rejection but in a full acceptance and opening to just what is. The intensity caused by the struggle then fades out – the energy that was trapped there is released, unbound, freed. And that's quite a relief to see and know! It's as if we become deeply whole again, no longer split and struggling within ourselves.

It's amazing how many of these 'ghouls' and 'monsters', these powerful forces we have to meet enfolded within our psyche. But we can learn how to let them be; give them space; accommodate them. It all amounts to the same thing – a *dispelling* of dukkha and delusion. Giving it space means accommodating what's there. It doesn't mean letting it have the reins. It's compassionate accommodation of what *is*. It takes a certain trust in the Refuge – that capacity of heart that can trust, open, ease out a bit, and know things for what they are. Remember, this stuff *is* the stuff of Awakening – with the right relationship to it, it can lead us to freedom.

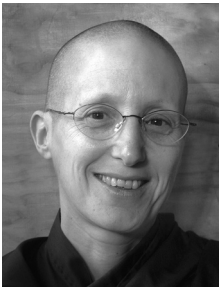
EVAM

Note:
[1]Jitindriyā decided to take leave of the training in December 2004, after this collection of teachings was compiled.

Come from the Shadows

Ajahn 'Ma' Medhānandī

from a Dhamma talk given
in New Zealand (January 2003)



Ajahn 'Ma' Medhānandī was born in 1949 in Canada. She began to meditate daily at the age of twenty-one and studied some of the great mystical scriptures. She trained and worked in social services for the elderly and disabled and, after completing a postgraduate degree in nutrition, served in international aid programmes for malnourished women and children in Thailand, Senegal, Ecuador and Nepal.

In India, she lived as a nun for several years under the guidance of an Advaita sage who remained her teacher until his death thirteen years later. Deeply moved by his example, she eventually traveled to Myanmar and while on retreat, took ordination with Sayadaw U Pandita. In 1990, she joined the Amaravati Nuns' Community. Currently resident in New Zealand, she is active in counselling, interfaith dialogue, teaching retreats and meditation in the community. She also works with the sick and disabled.

'The poison of ignorance is spread through desire, passion and ill-will. One who abandons the arrow of craving and expels the poison of ignorance is one rightly intent on Nibbāna.'

Majjhima Nikāya, 105

It is hard to think of fighting the forces of greed, hatred and delusion 'out there' when they are very much within us. We march for peace and attend rallies and vigils but true peace in the world must begin with personal disarmament. It is an interior work that each of us can nurture through moral vigilance and spiritual discipleship and its hiddenness does not make it any less powerful.

We can see how this inner turmoil is ever present, how the world assaults us day by day, bombarding the six sense

media from all directions. We are pierced by the arrow of craving and wounded with the poison of ignorance. Māra's well-disguised messengers continue to crowd into our consciousness. Beguiled, we welcome them. 'Come in, take over, it's okay.' As always, they fail to keep their promises.

We thirst and cling and grasp, trying to prop up the body, succumbing again and again to the tyranny of the senses, to desire and aversion, the lust for things and the escape from them. We live on the precipice of fear, in dread of waking up, of seeing how, repeatedly, we make ourselves ill or empower other people to make us ill, or how an insidious unrest touches everything around us.

Still we are ignorant about the nature of our suffering, oblivious to the cause of the poison in our hearts. We try many kinds of remedies and antidotes, making choices and organising our lives in futile attempts to gain control. We may become addicted to pills and outside therapies, even retreats, to calm down. There is nothing wrong with these. But they are just placebos. They give temporary relief from our pain or disquiet without ministering to the illness itself.

Under the veneer of contentment, we are too busy to see what we are doing, too restless to stop or to keep our minds still. It isn't just a shifting around so that we can find the right posture or the right set of conditions in life; it's a deep inner angst.

At first this sense of disquiet manifests as nascent feelings that we would never have allowed ourselves to feel before and that expose how wounded we are, how tired, how ill.

We begin to recognise our entanglement, the stress we are holding, how disappointed or angry we are – at ourselves or our friends; at our children or our parents; our loved ones or our ex-loved ones; the world; our jobs; our bodies; our lives.

Actually, this restlessness is a cry of urgency, of *samvega*. It is the first glimmering, an unconscious step towards waking up to our vulnerability and the imminent danger we are in. Intuitively, we realise that if we carry on in this way, we are like ghosts, robots. We may be very busy, rushing from one important activity to another, but we are not really living our lives – we are not consciously in our bodies, nor can we authentically connect to what we are feeling.

This is living like a cardboard cut-out of a human being, swaddled in cotton wool and well-concealed and disguised so that we don't have to feel our fear, or acknowledge how angry we are, or touch our grief. We cope. And the more unskilful the ways of coping we adopt, the worse our condition becomes – until the mind gives up, or wakes up.

This is a rare and redemptive insight. It is a gift of intuitive wisdom revealed in the most simple act – contemplating or sitting quietly in the forest, listening to the birds, feeling a sense of wonder and stillness. Unexpectedly, the whirlwind of mental passions and habitual thoughts that spin us around on the ferris wheel of *samsāra* – the desires, craving and unrest, the opinions we have about ourselves and others – falls silent. For a moment, we are not thinking.

At that moment, what is it that we experience for the first time? Maybe we notice the delightful song of a bell-bird

dissolving all the incessant chatter in the mind. Or we stop to witness, with rapt awe, the setting of the sun or rejoice at the sight of a butterfly poised on a leaf. In these acts of pure listening or pure seeing, we relinquish all thoughts of past and future and we enter the silence of the heart.

That silence protects the *cittaviveka* or seclusion of the mind. We are able to see or hear and know what truly is seen, heard and known with unsullied attention, curiosity and reverence. Such a moment may be recaptured in the exquisite purity of a mother tenderly gazing at her newborn child. It is to approach Kuan Yin, Mother of Compassion herself, and light the flame on her shrine. When it doesn't light, we don't grab it and say, 'Come on, you, light, hurry up!'

Pure unconditional love is not like that. It has an attitude of caring for the moment. We sit with the interior candle. We devote ourselves to it patiently. All the resources that we need, all the ingredients for illumination are already there – the wax, the wick and the match; mindfulness and discernment; our experience of the world and clear perception of it in sense-consciousness. When these come together in the right way, the flame of wisdom ignites.

Each of us can manifest this quality, but we have to sit very still and be so patient, mindful and all forgiving as the moment unfolds. The Buddha sits in our own hearts – the true, uncontaminated, untainted energy of enlightenment that is available to each of us if we are able to rest in it, open to it, feel it, taste it, offer ourselves to it, surrender to it.

But even as we experience this quality of mind, disquiet, discomfort and dis-ease can easily compel us yet again to wander in pursuit and even worship of pleasant experience; and to run from and resist what is true. We find ourselves caught in the snare of samsāra – not feeling, not daring to see what we really need to see in order to extract the poison of ignorance from our hearts.

We resolve to be vigilant and hugely compassionate to ourselves – applying our mental skills, the power of mindfulness and clear seeing, and the ability to navigate with them, especially in difficult moments. We return again and again to simplicity and stillness. And with faith and courage, we undertake to study ourselves, to let go the identification with 'self' as we look at, investigate and feel our stuff. We invite it in without resistance. We make it welcome.

This is our mandate – to be disciples of the moment, to approach our pain with compassionate honesty, to sit with patient resolution facing whatever destructive emotions may arise – self-pity, regret, negativity, boredom, anxiety. We won't die of any of these. But they can destroy us and they do – each time we are driven out of present-moment awareness, prised away from a direct experience of truth by our 'need' to get up and go somewhere; do something else; talk to someone; start a project; surf the net; have a cup of tea.

Each time, we return and begin again. We reaffirm our willingness to remain attentive, with pure intention and mindfulness, close to the silence and solitude long enough to

enter deeply into the moment. We tenderly approach and touch what is present – fear or despair or restlessness or joy and excitement – and we begin to see the peril of the corrosive mind that keeps toppling into the past and spilling into the future. Even the joy is dissolving, and disappointment follows on its heels. Until we see this, we remain disconnected from what is true, believing that what is impermanent and disintegrating almost imperceptibly within and all around us is stable, that the festering wound will heal by itself.

We have the power to meditate and observe the seasons of our hearts until right view matures enough for us to see that we are not our thoughts. We can develop a calm abiding through the worst tempests of fear or despair until light illumines our consciousness and enables us to come face to face with all the internal monsters. We can feel them, not in our heads – but here, in the body, and, in this way, reach the very centre of that burning. We sit in the flames and burn!

Being still enough to witness the origin of our suffering helps us to understand how each one of us is its very architect, and how we serve the unwholesome energies of the mind. At first, we are so afraid of that burning – until we discover that it is actually the fire of enlightenment, unveiling the truth of our own purity, our true nature.

We dare to peel away the layers of perception, to see the instability of everything of this world and its inherent emptiness. We watch the relentless currents of empty phenomena arising and ceasing in a river of impermanence, the memories and projections, fantasies and moods, judgements and

obsessions, and how our habitual reactions to them – grasping, clinging, denial or rejection – overwhelm us. Giving way to them brings us greater harm and undermines the possibility of purifying the mind. Giving way to anxiety takes us to more anxiety, anger to more anger, grief to more grief and so on.

But when we feel distress or rage and consciously experience the quality of its energy without judgement, we disempower it, we tame and transform it with compassion. When we allow ourselves to open and be with it, penetrating through to the pure experience of it, perseveringly, and resolve to see it for what it really is, then we awaken.

We can ask: 'How can I heal? How can I extract the poison arrow?' To avoid getting caught again, we can let go the wanting to know why it is there, let go the 'because', let go the blaming mind, the guilty mind, all those aimless or negative thoughts and self-obsessed habits of mind. They will never free us. They are the chains that imprison us and keep us from experiencing true happiness and wisdom.

Knowing the thoughts and moods of the mind enables us to extract the arrow, apply the antidote to the poison within us with compassionate understanding, and face whatever demon arises in the heart and say, 'I know what you are.' We witness it without hostility or negativity, and name it: anger, aggression, loneliness, despair, depression, resentment, bitterness, jealousy, fear, blame, self-disparagement, excitement. We allow it to be and wait without waiting, without wanting or demanding it to be other than it is. Finally, each

form of the mind's energy, in its turn, will change or dissolve. It *is* empty. The only power it has is our belief in it.

But this process hurts. Why? Because we are seeing the impostors – what we know or think we know – begin to collapse. What is familiar is no longer secure and must be given up. But to allow ourselves to sit with what is unknown, risk uncertainty and enter into those dark unexplored caverns of the heart – we would rather die in the ruins of our fear than brave the refining fire of truth.

Viktor Frankl wrote: 'What is to give light must endure burning.' We want to give light but we're afraid to suffer. We're afraid of pain when our very freedom lies in the middle of that pain. Our very quenching of thirst lies in the middle of thirst – just like the very healing of our wound lies in probing into the wound itself and removing the arrow. Mindfulness is the probe, but the awakened surgeon of our wisdom mind must also take urgent action. We can't remove the arrow simply by looking at it and saying, 'What a nice wound, what a deep wound, oh look at my wonderful wound!'

We can't light the candle of discernment on the altar of life until we burn through to clear insight of the way things are. This is radical simplicity. It is an act of pure love, pure awareness. It is gratitude itself and great compassion. This is caring for ourselves, tending to *dukkha.*

With assiduous mindfulness and right view, we see clearly how suffering arises in this moment and how we perpetuate

that suffering through fear of change and our unwillingness to trust, to accept what is real. Faith summons us to go towards what we fear, to turn away from the craving mind, to create the conditions for the heart to grow still and powerful, even to hold pain of impossible depth and remain unshaken.

Such one-pointedness leads to the energy of illumination. In that awakening, there is a holocaust. It is that refining fire that liberates us from the poisons of the internal media of the senses as well as the external media "out there" – the attractions and addictions of samsāra. It is a heroic disarmament that takes us to the emptiness of transcendent knowledge.

Let us consider this our entry into the lineage of the Noble Ones, to understand the truth of impermanence, suffering and not-self. It is the pure knowing of our natural energy with the eye of Dhamma. We are that energy, not separate from it. And as our vision is purified, we are no longer ransomed to the aggressions of lust or anger or fear or neurotic thought that excite and exhaust the helpless mind.

Such clear seeing is the catalyst for rescue, an operation to remove the poison arrow, a commitment to transformation. It compels us to make dramatic changes in our lives and that can be terrifying in itself. Our ways of seeing life, our fundamental values, lifestyle, work and friendships may change. Change is frightening because it is unknown. But what can really be known beyond this moment?

Why live in darkness? If we want to be true and to know truth, we have to come from the shadows and live in truth.

And to live in Truth, we have to light that candle. We light it and we endure the burning, the holocaust that will purify our hearts from the poisons that have infected us for lifetimes.

Until we do this work, we are stooped from the weight of misery, bent by the burdens of our mind, collapsing in upon ourselves. That's not old age. That is the physical dimension of mental suffering. We may be young but we are already defeated by worry, stress, frustration and guilt.

Look at the cramped tightness around your heart area – this chakra. Just *feel* what that feels like. How much armour are we carrying? It is not an armour of patience and strength but an impenetrable wall to keep feelings out, a shield that we hold over our hearts. 'Don't come near me, gulp!' This is a natural outcome of having learned to respond to pain from unwholesome mental habit and spiritual malnutrition. Any time the truth gets too close, we revert to a posture of defendedness to separate or freeze ourselves and, at some level, we unconsciously shut down. We feed the inner violence.

This is my process too. I am resolved to live in kindness, to live in purity, to surrender to this holocaust. It's not the Holocaust my parents lived through, but the cleansing fire in the midst of my own heart. I am willing to endure that burning because I see the results in myself, in the bright quality of my being and energy shaped through the bearing of pain, humiliation and surrender.

It's not as if we take ordination and renounce and that's the end of it. Every day is a profound renunciation that is

unknown. I don't know what's going to come up, I don't know where I'm going to have to let go pride, let go this security that I hang on to, (which is unreal anyway), let go unconscious living and wake up; let go defending myself from my own fear and anger and illusion and the desire to be somebody, to be something when I know it's just a deception. So the holocaust here in my own heart must happen if I am to learn to see what is true – and if I am to live in truth.

The fruit of this practice is an invisible growing, a deep interior ripening, a gradual unfurling as our eyes open and the dust of lifetimes begins to clear. It may seem as if nothing significant is happening, but that doesn't matter – we keep going. The more we train our minds and retrain our habits, the more we go to the places that terrify us, the more we disarm the terrorist who dwells in there. Finally, we stand alone, free from fear, free from danger.

No longer are we dazzled and intoxicated by the sense media, the sights, tastes, distractions and exotic pleasures, the riches, power, fame and success of society – all the false delights of samsāra. We give them up for a simple, humble diet of clear pure presence, compassionate wisdom and patient endurance. We are radiant, serene, able to live in joy, gratitude, harmlessness and inner peace.

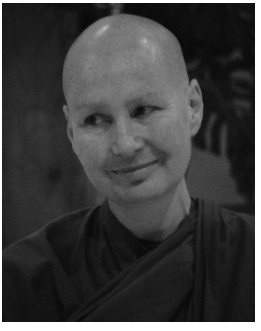
Lighting the candle of discernment is not just for us. It's for the whole world. As long as our asylum is cowardice, complacency and mediocrity, we live only for ourselves. The quality of our life is cheapened and we carry on as slaves to death and decay.

It's time to abandon poverty, time to walk out of the ghetto of illusion and artifice and take refuge in fearlessness. This is the way of the Buddhas: to know the diamond purity of our Buddha nature – not through fear and self-effacement, nor desire and arrogance, nor through the plundering of and flight from the samsaric rounds of pleasure and pain, but to know it in silent witness to, and awareness of, their inherent emptiness – in the flame of no flame, in the cooling of the last ember. This is right refuge, this is freedom.

"To All as to Myself"

Ajahn Candasirī

from a Dhamma talk given during
a retreat at Amaravati (December 2002)



Ajahn Candasirī is Scottish by birth. She was one of the first four women to receive the Eight Precept (*anagārikā*) and Ten Precept (*sīladhara*) ordinations at Cittaviveka Monastery in 1979 and 1983, with Ajahn Sumedho as preceptor. Currently, she lives in community at Amaravati Monastery, where she continues to be involved in evolving a way of training that enables a wide variety of characters and nationalities to live together and practise according to the Buddha's guidelines for liberation

'I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind
imbued with loving kindness, (compassion…;
gladness…; equanimity…;)
Likewise the second, likewise the third,
likewise the fourth;
So above and below, around and everywhere;
and to all as to myself.
I will abide pervading the all-encompassing
world with a mind imbued with loving kindness;
Abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without
hostility and without ill will.'

This evening I would like to talk about the *Brahma Vihāras* (divine abidings). These are states that arise quite naturally, when the mind is free from self-interest. They are the lovely boundless qualities of *mettā*

– kindliness; *karunā* – compassion; *muditā* – sympathetic joy, or gladness at the beauty, the good fortune of others and *upekkhā* – equanimity, or serenity.

I really like this teaching because even though, for the most part, we are nowhere near that level of pure radiance, they are qualities that we can bring forth in smaller ways. Over the years my understanding of them has altered quite radically. I used to try radiating kindness out to others, having compassion for others, delighting in the good fortune of others and finding equanimity in the midst of suffering – but I could never really do it, it never seemed to work very well. When I was trying to be glad at the good fortune of others, all I could feel was jealous. When I was trying to feel equanimous about the suffering around me, all I could feel was disturbed and upset. When I tried to feel compassion, all I could feel was anxiety: 'What can I do to make it all right?' When I was trying to feel kindness towards people I didn't like very much and it didn't work, I used to just hate myself. I became thoroughly confused. So I realised that I had to try a different approach.

I remember when I first told people that I was going to be a nun, one immediate response was, 'Well, how selfish! Isn't that awfully self-centred?' My reply was, 'Yes. It's *completely* self-centred… but until I can understand my own suffering, my own difficulty, I'm not going to be able to help anybody else very much.' Although I wanted to help, I saw that my capacity for serving others was very limited and that, really, I had to begin here.

We can easily talk about world peace and about caring for others, but actually cultivating loving-kindness demands a lot. It demands a broadening of the heart and our view of the world. For example, I've noticed that I can be very picky about things. There are some things that I can feel boundless kindness and love for – but only as long as they are agreeable and behaving in the way that I want them to behave. Even with people I love dearly, if they say something that is upsetting, a bit jarring, the channel of limitless, boundless love can close immediately – not to mention with the people that I don't like, or who might have different views from my own. So it does take a bit of reflection to begin to broaden that sphere of mettā, loving-kindness.

We may manage to do it in an idealistic, intellectual way; we may find we can spread mettā to people we don't know or don't have to associate with, but that is very different from doing it with those we live with all the time. Then it's not always so easy, much as we may want to. This can be a source of anguish: 'I really want to like this person, but they drive me nuts!' I'm sure you have all experienced this with certain people. Maybe you feel sorry for them, but they *still* drive you nuts. Or maybe you feel that you *should* love them, but somehow you just can't. Ajahn Sumedho's interpretation of mettā is interesting; he says, 'Well, to expect to *love* somebody is maybe asking too much, but at least refrain from nurturing thoughts of negativity about them.'

So, for me, the starting point for cultivating mettā has been simply the recognition of its absence, or even the presence

of its opposite. For many years I had a kind of subliminal negativity going on; quietly grumbling away, usually about myself: 'You're not good enough….' 'You've been meditating all these years, and still your mind wanders and you fall asleep. You're *never* going to be any good….' Those kinds of voices – are they familiar? Just quietly there, mumbling away, undermining any sense of well-being. It took me a long time to recognise how much negativity there was.

Then there can be grumbling about other people: 'Look at the way she sits!' 'Good heavens, he eats an awful lot!' 'I really don't like the routine of this retreat. Why do we have to get up so early?' You'll all have your own niggles. The important thing is not *not* to have them, but to recognise them – to allow ourselves to be fully conscious of this grumbling, negative mind. And then, to be *very* careful not to add to the negativity by being negative about it: 'I never realised what a terribly negative person I am. I'm a hopeless case.' That's not very helpful. Instead, we can begin to take a kindly interest: 'Well, that's interesting... fancy thinking like that; I never realised how much that mattered to me...', rather than hating ourselves for having such thoughts.

One thing I've discovered is that often the things I find hardest to accept in others are those I actually do myself. It can be quite humbling, but incredibly helpful to notice what others do or say that is upsetting; then to ask inwardly: 'Is that something that I do?' Sometimes it takes a bit of doing, but it can be a private process – we don't have to tell anyone else. Then, as we begin to soften and find that capacity

for accepting ourselves – including all the foolishness, the inadequacy and the shyness – the heart expands and we are able to extend kindness and forgiveness to a much greater range of people and situations.

So this quality of mettā, of kindliness, has to begin here with this being. We don't have to manufacture it; it's something that arises naturally as we cultivate more kindliness and acceptance of ourselves. This may seem strange, if our conditioning has always been to think of others before ourselves, but I found that trying to do it the other way round never worked. I might be able to do and say the right kinds of things, but often there'd be some quite harsh underlying judgement. For example, prior to getting sick myself, I used to feel critical of people who couldn't work as hard as I could, so I'd say to them, 'Yes, do be careful; do rest if you need to.' But I'd be thinking, 'You're just so feeble; if you were practising correctly you'd be able to do it.' It was only after experiencing a state myself where, after ten minutes of work I'd need to rest for half an hour, that I really knew what that was like. Only then was I able to feel genuine kindness towards those in difficulty, or physically limited in some way.

As monastics, we make a commitment to harmlessness. However, the way our training works is to allow us to see those energies that maybe aren't so harmless, and aren't so beautiful: the powerful lust, and sensuality, and rage – they all come bubbling up. It can be rather alarming at first, but now, having experienced those energies within my own heart, I can understand much better the state of the world and the

things that happen in it. Of course, I don't approve of the things I hear about, but there is much less tendency to judge or to blame.

Karunā – compassion, is the second brahmavihāra. Looking at the word, 'compassion': passion means 'to feel', and 'com' is 'with', so it's a 'feeling with', or entering into suffering. Now one response, when confronted with a situation of pain or difficulty, can be to distance oneself. It may come from fear – a feeling of: 'I'm glad that's not happening to me.' So we do and say the right kinds of things, but actually there's a standing back and a sense of awkwardness about what we are feeling. This is what can happen. It reminds me again of when I broke my back. There was one person who was very uncomfortable about it, and when we met there was a definite feeling of shock, and of not wanting to get too close. But for me, that response brought quite a lonely feeling. It didn't really hit the spot.

So karunā implies a willingness to actually take on board the suffering of another, to enter into it with them. It's a much fuller kind of engagement, which demands an attunement with one's own heart, one's own fear or awkwardness around another person's situation. Sometimes we feel awkward because we don't know what to say. If someone is terminally ill, what do you say to them? We might be afraid of saying the wrong thing. However, when we are willing to be with our own sense of discomfort with the situation – to bear with our own pain or suffering in relation to it – we begin to

sense the possibility of responding in a spontaneous, natural way.

This ability to be fully present with another person in their difficulty is something that I trust now – much more than any *ideas* about a compassionate response. It's not about giving advice, or explaining about our aunt who had the same difficulty or anything else, but simply a willingness to be with the discomfort of the situation, to be with our own struggle. When we are fully present with suffering we find a place of ease, of non-suffering, and somehow we just know what is needed. It may be that nothing is needed, other than to be there; or perhaps something needs to be said, and suddenly we find ourselves saying just the right thing; or there may be some practical assistance we can offer. But none of this can happen until we have fully acknowledged our own struggle with what's happening. It needn't take more than a microsecond; we simply begin with tuning in to our own suffering, attending to that. From this arises the compassionate response to another.

Muditā is the quality of sympathetic joy. This one has always interested me greatly – mostly because it was something that I often seemed to lack. I used to suffer enormously from jealousy, and there seemed to be nothing I could do about it. It would just come, and the more I tried to disguise it the worse it would get. I could really spoil things for people, just through this horrible thing that used to happen when I had a sense that somebody was in some way more fortunate or better than I was.

Considering the Three Characteristics of existence[1] was what brought a glimmer of hope – to realise that jealousy is impermanent. Before, it would feel very, very permanent – as though I would have to do something extremely major to get rid of it, to make it go away. It also felt like a very personal flaw. So this teaching enabled me to recognise that this was just a passing condition and I didn't have to identify with it – it came and it went. Certainly, it was extremely unpleasant – but when I could let go of the struggle for things to be otherwise, it actually didn't stay very long. It would come and it would go, and that would be it.

People used to tell me about their muditā practice. They'd say: 'Well, if I see somebody who has something better than me, I just feel really glad they have it.' I hadn't quite got to that point, I must say – I didn't have such generosity of heart. I realised that there was still something missing. Eventually, I realised that what was lacking was muditā for myself. I realised that it was no good trying to have muditā for somebody else if what they had was something that I really wanted – and thought I hadn't got!

So I saw that, rather than lamenting my own lack, (which is basically what jealousy is and which I used to find so painful to acknowledge), I had to begin to look at what I had – to count my own blessings. This may sound a little strange in a context where many of us have been encouraged to rejoice in the goodness and beauty of others, and where it seemed the last thing we were supposed to do is to count our *own*

blessings, or to think of how good *we* are. But I saw that this was actually what I needed to do.

I'm sure that everyone here can find some things to feel glad about. Even if there aren't a huge number of things, we can make much of the few, rather than pushing them to one side, saying: 'No, they don't really count, that's nothing really – but look at all these terrible faults I have!' We are very good at doing that, but how good are we at looking at the goodness, the beauty of our lives? Everyone here can count the fact that they've chosen to come to the monastery, that there is a sincere interest in cultivating peace, as something to feel very glad about – particularly seeing the way many people are living their lives. We can also make much of the things we do well. Instead of, 'Oh no, that wasn't very good,' we can try saying, 'Well, actually, that was rather a beautiful thing that I did – I did do that well.'

One person I know keeps a special diary. Whenever he does something good, he notes it in his diary. Then, when he is feeling a bit miserable, he reads it through – then he feels much better. That struck me as really skilful – a way of making much of goodness. Why not? Generally, we make so much of our misery and our inadequacy; why not instead try making much of the goodness of our lives? I began practising with this some time ago, and the more I've done it, the more naturally and spontaneously I can really feel happy when I hear of somebody's success. Interesting, isn't it, how it works?

So this is something I encourage you to contemplate: filling the heart with a sense of the beauty and goodness of

your life, as well as that of others. Then, when people are having a really joyful time together, instead of sort of sneering and looking down on them, or feeling a bit lonely and isolated, we can join in with appreciation, sharing in their delight. That is muditā.

Upekkhā, equanimity, is the fourth brahmavihāra. Sometimes this is translated as 'indifference'. It's considered to be one of the highest spiritual states. To me, it seems significant that the Buddha made so much of this quality. Personally, I can't imagine that he would make much of 'indifference', in the way we often use this word – a kind of not wanting to be bothered. So it's helpful to consider what this quality of equanimity or serenity actually feels like. What does it involve, in terms of the heart?

One of the ways that I reflect now on upekkhā is to see it as a grandness of heart that is willing to touch and be in contact with it all – from the most delightful state, to the most utterly wretched state. Having taken this human form, we are subject to wonderful, sublime experiences and, equally, to horrible, hellish, miserable states. As a human being, we can experience every realm of existence.

It's said that when the Buddha was dying, along with human beings there were a great many *devadās* (angels) gathered around as well. Those who weren't enlightened were tearing their hair, weeping, in a state of great anguish: 'Oh no, he's dying, he's leaving us....' The enlightened ones, however, maintained perfect equanimity. They simply said: 'It's in the nature of things to arise and cease.' They

acknowledged that things were happening according to their nature: having been born, things die. I think we've still got a bit of work to do there!

Upekkhā implies an ability to stay steady amid the highs and lows of our existence – amid the Eight Worldly Winds: praise and blame, fame and insignificance, happiness and suffering, gain and loss – these things that can affect us so much. When we contemplate life we see that sometimes things are good, and we feel great – sometimes they're horrible. This is normal – we all have horrible times. Knowing that things change deepens our capacity to stay steady with them, instead of being completely thrown when they don't work out so well.

In our community, as in any family, there are times when it's wonderful; we all get along really well together – which is just fine, we can enjoy those times. But there are also days when it's horrible. In an international community it's easy for people to misunderstand each other, and sometimes there can be a tiff. Having experienced a great number of difficult times over the years, I'm now usually able to stay much more steady. It's still unpleasant, but there isn't such a strong reaction – I don't feel that anything has gone terribly wrong. I've noticed too that somehow that capacity to stay steady helps everybody else to not be so badly thrown by what's happening. Whereas, when everybody is thrown, the whole thing escalates. Then, it really does get out of control!

Reflecting on the law of *kamma*, we see that everything happens as the result of what has gone before. So instead of

blaming ourselves or looking around for someone else to blame when things seem to go wrong, we can simply ask, 'What is the lesson here? How can I work with this?' We can reflect that this is the result of *kamma*, and determine to maintain mindfulness; holding steady, rather than making the situation worse by some unskilful reaction. In this way we bring balance, not just into our own lives but for everyone else too. It's not such an easy thing, but again, it comes back to acknowledging and making peace with our own sense of agitation, our own lack of equanimity.

Sometimes we come into contact with suffering that seems almost unbearable. When this happens I've noticed a tendency to try to protect myself, to try to shut out such impressions. But upekkhā implies a willingness to expand the heart and to listen – even when things seem unbearable. As we practise, what seems to happen is that, far from becoming indifferent, we become able to encompass an ever-increasing range of experience – to be touched by life, as by a rich tapestry of infinite colour and texture. So it's not a dumbing down or deadening, but rather an attunement to the totality of this human predicament. At the same time, we find an increasing capacity to hold steady with it: the balance of upekkhā. Through establishing ourselves in the present, and holding steady – whatever we might be experiencing – we find the resources for dealing with *whatever* we may encounter in this adventure we call 'life'.

EVAM

Note:
[1] The Three Characteristics of all conditioned phenomena: *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* – transience, unsatisfactoriness, and absence of any permanent selfhood.

Glossary

The following words are mostly in Pali, the language of the Theravadan Buddhist scriptures. They are brief translations for quick reference, rather than exhaustive or refined definitions. Not all of the foreign words found in the talks are listed here, as many are defined as they are used.

ajahn (Thai): 'teacher', a title given to a monastic who has been ordained for ten or more years.

anagārika/anagārikā (male/female forms): lit. 'homeless one'; a novice, still technically a lay person, who wears white, shaves her or his head, lives in a monastery and follows the Eight Precepts.

anattā: 'not self', i.e. impersonal, without individual essence (one of the three characteristics of all conditioned existence).

anicca: impermanent, transient, having the nature to arise and pass away (one of the three characteristics of all conditioned existence).

bhikkhu: in Buddhism, a monk who lives on alms and abides by the training precepts which define a life of renunciation and simplicity.

bhikkhuni: the female counterpart, a fully ordained nun. While strong in Mahayāna traditions, the Theravāda Bhikkhuni

ordination is beginning to be revived in some places, having been absent for almost 1000 years.

brahmavihāra: lit. 'divine abiding'; emanation from the heart when it is not obstructed by greed, hatred or delusion.

dāna: generosity. Hence, often used to refer to an offering to a monastic community

dhamma: This word is used in several ways. It can refer to the Buddha's Teaching, as contained in the scriptures, or to the Ultimate Truth towards which the teaching points (and is generally written, 'Dhamma'); or to a discrete 'moment' of life, seen as it really is (and is written, 'dhamma').

dukkha: lit. 'hard to bear'; dis-ease, restlessness of mind, discontent or suffering, anguish, conflict, unsatisfactoriness (one of the three characteristics of all conditioned existence).

kamma: action or cause (and by extension, the result or effect) which is created or recreated by habitual impulse, volition, natural energies. (Sanskrit: karma.)

karunā: compassion (one of the four brahmavihāras).

khanda: 'heap'; the term the Buddha used to refer to each of the five components of human psycho-physical existence.

maechee (Thai): lit. 'white mother' – a term used for nuns in Thailand. They wear white, shave their heads and live under the Eight Precepts.

Māra: the tempter; one who tries to lead us off the Path, away from the goal.

mettā: 'loving-kindness' (one of the four brahmavihāras).

muditā: sympathetic joy or gladness at the good fortune of others (one of the four brahmavihāras).

Nibbāna: freedom from attachments. The basis for the enlightened vision of things as they are. (Sanskrit: Nirvana.)

Pāli: the scriptural language of Theravada Buddhism.

precepts (sīla): training guidelines. Five for lay Buddhists; eight for anagārika/ās and those lay people staying in the monastery; ten followed by sīladharā and sāmaneras.

samana: one who has entered the Holy Life.

sāmanera: The novice stage for a monastic. (Thai: samanen.)

samsāra: the unenlightened, unsatisfactory experience of life.

Sangha: the community of those who practise the Buddha's Way. Often, more specifically, those who have formally committed themselves to the lifestyle of a mendicant monk or nun.

sīla: precepts/moral training guidelines.

sīladhara: In our community this constitutes the higher ordination (there being no bhikkhuni ordination at present).

Nuns live according to the Ten Precepts and numerous other training guidelines that are, in part, a refinement of these precepts but with additional guidelines for fostering communal harmony.

sutta: a Buddhist scripture.

Theravada: lit. 'The Way of the Elders'; the name of the tradition followed by our community. It claims to follow most closely the language and style of practice established originally by the Buddha. Currently, it is most practised in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma, Laos and Cambodia.

tudong (Thai): a mendicant's wandering practice, dating back to the Buddha's time. Hence the phrase 'to wander (or 'go') tudong.'

uppekhā: equanimity or serenity (one of the four brahma-vihāras).

vinaya: the monastic discipline, or the scriptural collection of its rules and commentaries.

vipassanā: the penetrative insight of meditation, as distinguished from simple mental tranquility (samatha).