

# Intuitive Awareness

Ajahn Sumedho



## Dedications

Dedicated to Ajahn Sumedho on his seventieth birthday with love and respect.

In loving memory of my parents, David and Sheila Miles. And my son Riccardo Cattabiani, with gratitude for everything they have taught me.

With gratitude for the life of Sritorn Hagyard. May she know the peace of Nirvana.

# **Intuitive Awareness**

**Ajahn Sumedho**

**Amaravati Buddhist Monastery**

*Awareness is your refuge:  
Awareness of the changingness of feelings,  
of attitudes, of moods, of material change  
and emotional change:  
Stay with that, because it's a refuge that is  
indestructible.*

*It's not something that changes.  
It's a refuge you can trust in.  
This refuge is not something that you create.  
It's not a creation. It's not an ideal.  
It's very practical and very simple, but  
easily overlooked or not noticed.  
When you're mindful,  
you're beginning to notice,  
it's like this.*

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Amaravati Publications  
Amaravati Buddhist Monastery  
Great Gaddesden  
Hemel Hempstead  
Hertfordshire  
HP1 3BZ  
England

ISBN 1 870205 17 0

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[www.amaravati.org](http://www.amaravati.org)  
[www.forestsangha.org](http://www.forestsangha.org)  
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# Contents

Editor's Preface	1
Introduction	3
Intuitive Awareness	19
Identity	37
When You're an Emotional Wreck	51
Suffering Should be Welcomed	65
Sound of Silence	85
The End of Suffering is Now	97
Don't Take it Personally	111
Consciousness	133
Trusting in Simplicity	147
Observing Attachment	161
Not Looking for Answers, Not asking Favours	169
Glossary	175
Biography	181





# Editor's Preface

This book is compiled from talks given mostly in 2001 by Ajahn Sumedho; they convey an intuitive understanding of the Buddha's teaching which has arisen from over 35 years of practice as a Buddhist monk.

This approach starts with accepting ourselves as we are, not as some ideal of whom we think we should be. By doing this a relaxation can take place that creates space for insight to arise. For some people this space arises as the sound of silence, or simply a quiet or empty mind. However it manifests, this points to the unconditioned; beyond body and mind objects.

From this place of spaciousness, social and personal conditioning can be investigated or reflected upon, thus freeing the heart from the delusion of identifying with the personality. This is not a process of rejecting ourselves or of considering certain thoughts and feelings as wrong, but of learning to be a silent witness to all that arises without attaching to that experience or rejecting it.

In essence it's about trust, accepting what arises in experience as "the way it is" or, as Ajahn Sumedho

likes to say a lot, “welcoming the suffering”. It is about listening, being receptive to and fully including everything.

It may seem confusing that the reflections in this volume sometimes contradict each other, one talk suggesting that “suffering should be understood” and then the next cautioning against using the word “should”. But what can be noticed is the all-encompassing point behind the confusion and contradictions. This is the point to trust: mindfulness.

So the refuge is not in a teacher or scriptures but in the heart’s own purity, the point that never changes, which has no views and opinions and is not affected by anything and yet is fully alive, responsive, spontaneous and compassionate – fully here and now.

This book has been transcribed, edited and designed by various Sangha members and lay people. The editor would like to thank them very much for the hours of work put into this. Whilst the talks have been edited to aid clarity, they may not be grammatically flawless. This is to keep the text as close as possible to Ajahn Sumedho’s manner of speaking. Any misunderstandings or errors arising from this rest with the editor. This book is offered as a sharing from the various people who have benefited from Ajahn Sumedho’s teachings, his great devotion to dhamma and his encouragement.

May whatever merit that arises from this book be dedicated to the benefit of all sentient beings.

# Introduction

TWENTY YEARS AGO, in 1984, the germinal monastic community of the newly opened Amaravati Buddhist Centre settled into a cluster of barrack-like buildings on a windy hilltop in Hertfordshire. The name of the new monastery (meaning “The Deathless Realm”) had been chosen both as a resonance of the ancient Buddhist city in Andhra Pradesh, in southern India, and as a counteractive force to the “Mutually Assured Destruction” of the nuclear arms race, then gleefully being pursued by Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and the Soviet Union.

The meditation space that we used at that time was the former school gymnasium and assembly hall. The windows were cracked, patched with plastic and sellotape, drafty or missing completely; gym markings criss-crossed the cold wooden floor; the large golden Buddha image sat up on the old school stage, spotlighted and surrounded by filmy blue curtains that we had introduced in an attempt to beautify the shrine and suggest the quality of infinite space.

Since 1981, when the community was largely based at Cittaviveka Monastery, in Chithurst, West Sussex, it had been our custom to set aside the mid-winter

months, after the New Year, to be a time of communal retreat. At that time of year the English weather does not allow much in the way of building work to go on, visitors are few and the days are short and dark – it is thus a perfect situation to use for turning the attention inward and taking time to cultivate formal meditation practice in a very thorough way.

Amaravati was opened in 1984 in order to provide living space for the burgeoning monastic community (group photos of the time show more than 20 Eight-Precept postulants and 40 nuns and monks), and to be a place where we could hold retreats for the public. So when this move was made it provided an even more expansive situation for the winter retreats and for Ajahn Sumedho to continue to guide the community in his inimitably comprehensive and inspiring way.

The winters of 1984, '85, and '86 were spectacularly icy; winds howled down from Siberia, seemingly uninterrupted by any solid object until they bit into our bones. It was not uncommon to be wearing six or seven layers of clothing through the day and then to climb into our sleeping bags at night with most of it still on. We sat bundled up in thick robes and blankets for meditation and to listen to instructional talks. The air was icy but vibrant as there was a powerful and pervasive sense of community spirit among us.

Sometimes, in those days, it seemed that the main source of energy in the whole system, and certainly what our hearts were warmed and guided by, was

Ajahn Sumedho's apparently limitless capacity to expound on the Dhamma, especially during the winter retreats. Naturally enough in that situation a lot of guidance was needed – the majority of us were fairly new to meditation and monastic training and needed all the help we could get, particularly within a routine of noble silence and walking and sitting meditation all day – thus Ajahn Sumedho gave extensive instruction, often two or three times a day. There would be “morning reflections” during the first sitting of the day before dawn, often more reflections after the breakfast of gruel and tea, sometimes “questions & answers” at afternoon tea-time, and finally a formal Dhamma talk in the evening.

From those early icy times up until the present, in 2004, Ajahn Sumedho has continued to guide the monastic community at Amaravati. Every winter he has explored and expounded on the Dhamma and frequently there have been recordings made of his teachings. The book you hold is a small sample of the talks that he offered during the winter retreat of 2001.



Even though those days now seem a long way off in some respects, and much has changed, there are some elements that have remained stable to the present day, like a constantly returning phrase or rhythm in a musical piece or, more accurately, like the defining style of a master painter that instantly tells you: this is a Monet, that is a Van Gogh.

Now at Amaravati the site of the old Dhamma Hall/ gymnasium is occupied by the Temple, the new meditation hall constructed in stages through the 90's. The orientation is slightly different – the building now faces the east rather than the north – and it is a soaring pyramidal structure, rather than a utilitarian rectangular box. The great light open space within is punctuated with a broad ring of solid oak pillars; it is so silent and still it seems to stop the minds of those who visit; the floor is a blanket of warm white rock, and a barn-like lattice of thick trusses and beams laces the high ceiling and the walls. However, the trees across the courtyard are still the same, just a little taller and fuller, and the brown weather-boarding on the remaining older buildings is edged by frost in the winter morning light just as it was before.

In the same way that some elements of the buildings, and the members of the community, have changed and some have continued, the winter retreat teachings Ajahn Sumedho has given in recent years have similarly matured and transformed. They are still built upon a foundation of many classic elements – the Four Noble Truths, reflections on the arising and ceasing of the Five *Khandhas*, teachings on contemplation of mind (*cittānupassanā*) – but the manner of exposition of these and other key elements, as well as his development of particular skilfull means (*upāya*) has evolved and expanded during these last 20 years. Thus, even though the talks gathered in this book can, in some respects, happily stand on their own it might also be helpful to bear in mind that they exist within a context.

First of all, these talks were given to experienced monastics and a few well-seasoned lay-people. Many who were listening knew Ajahn Sumedho's favourite themes very well, and he knew that they knew them well, therefore often explanatory material is left unsaid and much knowledge is assumed. Just as a musician might play a few notes to evoke a familiar piece and know of their audience: They can fill in the rest, they know that old theme! Or a painter might use a trademark motif thinking: Pop in that bowler hat again, they know all the other places it appeared... Similarly here, Ajahn Sumedho is often exploring, describing and extemporising on very familiar themes so that, if the reader occasionally feels a lack of explanation, if the meaning escapes one, the encouragement is to let the music, the balance of tones and colours tide you over.

Secondly, the aim of the editors in compiling this book has been explicitly to maintain the style and spirit of the spoken word. Dhamma talks have strong non-verbal element – the mood in the room, the energetic exchanges between the speaker and the listeners, the season, the hour of the day or night, all that has gone before within the group – so it is wiser to treat a collection of talks such as this as if exploring an art gallery, or listening to a musical piece, rather than as a systematic explanation of a fixed subject. As Ajahn Sumedho himself commented, “The book is meant to be suggestions of ways to investigate conscious experience. It's not meant to be a didactic treatise on Pali Buddhism.”

So, as you make your way through these pages, and you encounter Intuitive Awareness, The End of Suffering is Now, The Sound of Silence, and all the others, the suggestion is to let them be received into the heart, to allow them to resonate, and to let the intuitions and guidance that they spark ripen as they will. Just as, when we progress through an art gallery we don't think, "What's the exact information that this painting is imparting to me?"

Thirdly, ever since the time of the Buddha, his disciples have evinced a wide range of teaching styles and favourite themes when expounding the Dhamma. And this same variety is a striking characteristic of what is known today as the Thai Forest Tradition – the largely non-academic, meditation-centred, rural monastic communities that model their way of practice on the discipline and lifestyle of the Buddha and his earliest monastic disciples.

Over time an individual teacher will tend to take a particular Dhamma theme, or meditation technique, and spend years, sometimes decades exploring and expanding on that topic. For example Luang Por Sim was noted for his emphasis on death contemplations; Ajahn Buddhadasa spent several years discoursing on *idapaccayatā* – the law of conditionality; Ajahn Toon Khippapañño vigorously insists the Path should be represented as *Pañña, Sīla Samādhī*, NOT as *Sīla, Samādhī, Pañña*; Ajahn Fun was known for his infinite extrapolations on the word "*Buddho*" – as a concentration technique, and investigation of awareness or as a devotional practice; Luang Pu Dun



was known for his teachings on “*Citta* (the heart) is Buddha;” and Ajahn Chah was fond of putting conundrums to people, such as “If you can’t go forward, you can’t go back and you can’t stand still – where can you go?” Or “Have you ever seen still, flowing water?”

Over time it is quite usual for such experienced teachers to develop not only their favourite themes but also to cultivate their own, often idiosyncratic usage of scriptural terms. For example, Ajahn Maha-Boowa’s usage of the term “eternal citta,” Ajahn Toon’s insistence on the radical difference between *dassanañāṇa* and *ñāṇadassana*, which can be translated as “vision and knowledge” and “knowledge and vision;” or the word “*sikkhibhuto*” which Ajahn Chah employed to mean “a witness to the truth,” yet Pali scholars continue to wonder exactly where the term came from. In this light it might be useful to take a look at some of the terms that Ajahn Sumedho uses frequently in this collection – particularly “the sound of silence,” “intuitive awareness” and “consciousness” – that have taken on such distinctive meanings over the years.

The first of these, “the sound of silence,” is described in the opening Dhamma talk of the same name in quite some detail. However, as it is not a meditation method found in classical Theravāda handbooks, it might be helpful to provide a little background to the way in which Ajahn Sumedho came to develop it, and to refer to some of the other spiritual traditions that use it as part of a meditation practice.

It was in the winter retreat of January '81, at Chithurst Monastery, that Ajahn Sumedho first started to teach this method to the monastic community. He said that he had begun to notice the high-pitched, ringing tone when he left Thailand in 1977 and spent his first winter in England, in the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara. He pointed out that, as Thailand was such a noisy country, particularly amidst the crickets and cicadas in the forest at night (when one does most formal meditation practice), that he had not noticed this inner sound before. However, when he came to London, despite being a large metropolis, he found that it became very quiet late at night, especially when the air was muffled by the presence of a blanket of snow.

In the silence of those nights he began to perceive the ever-present inner sound, seemingly beginningless and endless, and he soon found that he was able to discern it throughout the day, and in many circumstances, whether quiet or busy. He also realised that he had indeed noticed it once before in his life, when he had been on shore leave from the US Navy in the late '50s and when, during a walk in the hills, his mind had opened into a state of extreme clarity. He remembered that as a wonderfully pure and peaceful state, and he recalled that the sound had been very loud then, so those positive associations encouraged him to experiment and see if it might be a useful meditation object. It also seemed to be an ideal symbol, in the conditioned world of the senses, of those qualities of mind that transcend the sense realm: not subject to personal will; ever-present but only noticed if attended to; apparently beginningless

and endless; formless, to some degree; and spatially unlocated.

When he first taught it to the Sangha at Chithurst that winter, he referred to it as “the sound of silence” and the name stuck. Later, as he began to teach the method on retreats for the lay community, he began to hear about its use from people experienced in Hindu and Sikh meditation practices. He found out that this form of concentration on the inner sound was known as “*nada yoga*” or “the yoga of inner light and sound” in these traditions. It also turned out that books had been written on the subject, commentaries in English as well as ancient scriptural treatises, notable among these being “The Way of Inner Vigilance” by Salim Michael (published by Signet). In 1991, when he taught it as a method on a retreat at a Chinese monastery in the USA, one of the participants was moved to comment that, “I think you have stumbled on the *Shurangama samādhi*; there is a meditation on hearing that is described in that Sutra and the practice you have been teaching us seems to match it perfectly.”

Seeing that it was a practice that was very accessible to a number of people, and as his own explorations of it deepened over the years, Ajahn Sumedho has continued to develop it as a central method of meditation, ranking alongside such classical forms of practice as mindfulness of breathing and investigation of the body. The Buddha’s encouragement for his students was to use skilful means that are effective in freeing the heart. Since this form of meditation seems to be very supportive for that, despite not being

included in lists of meditation practices in the Pali Canon or anthologies such as the Visuddhimagga, it seems wholly appropriate to give it its due. For surely it is the freedom of the heart that is the purpose of all the practices that are done – and that freedom is the final arbiter of what is useful, and therefore good.

The second of the terms that Ajahn Sumedho has given particular meaning to here is “intuitive awareness.” As with the sound of silence there are many places in the talks contained here, particularly in the talk “Intuitive Awareness” itself, where he elucidates the ways in which he is using this term. However, it might be helpful here to reflect a little on its usage, just to clarify that in relation to other ways of employing the same words.

There are numerous places throughout the book where, when the phrase “intuitive awareness” is used, the words “*sati-sampajañña*” are put in parentheses after, meaning that the former is a translation of the latter. The quality of *sati-sampajañña*/intuitive awareness is used to refer to part of a continuum which begins with “*sati*”, the raw mindful cognisance of an object; the second element being “*sati-sampajañña*”, referring to the mindful, intuitive awareness of an object within its context; the final element is “*sati-pañña*” – usually translated as “mindfulness-and-wisdom” – which refers to the appreciation of an object in respect to its essential nature as transitory, unsatisfactory and not-self. Ajahn Chah used to characterise the relationship between these three elements as being like the hand, arm and

body: *sati* is that which picks things up, *sampajañña* is like the arm that enables the hand to get to the required place, *pañña* is the body which provides it with the life force and the directive element.

Throughout these talks Ajahn Sumedho develops the connection between the terms “*sati-sampajañña*” and “intuitive awareness.” In so doing he is endeavouring to clarify and expand the common renderings of “*sampajañña*” as “clear comprehension” or even “self-awareness.” His chief concern is, as he states on p.19, that this phrase does not give a sense of the true broadness of that clarity. Thus he is experimenting with an expression that conveys a deliberately expansive quality and that includes the element of mystery; for it is important for the English wording also to imply an attunement of the heart to experiences that the thinking mind cannot understand or that, as he says, are “foggy, confused or uncertain.” The word “intuitive” is used because it perfectly conveys the mixture of a genuine apprehension of reality, yet also that the reason why things are the way they are might not be at all apparent.

The final, and perhaps most significant, term to look at in this light is “consciousness.” The Pali word “*viññāṇa*” is almost invariably translated into English as “consciousness.” In Buddhist psychology “*viññāṇa*” generally means a discriminative consciousness that acts via one of the six sense-doors: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind. It means the act of cognising a knowable object. However, this is not the only way that the Buddha uses the term.

As Ajahn Sumedho mentions on p.134 there are two places in the discourses where a substantially different set of qualities are associated with the term. The phrase that he quotes (*viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato pabhaṃ*) Diga Nikāya 11.85, in the Kevaddha Sutta and, in part, at Majjhima Nikāya 49.25. The former passage comes at the end of a colourful and lengthy teaching tale recounted by the Buddha. He tells of a monk in the mind of whom the question arises: “I wonder where it is that the four great elements – Earth, Water, Fire and Wind – cease without remainder?” Being a skilled meditator, the bhikkhu in question enters a state of absorption and “the path to the gods becomes open to him.” He begins by putting his question to the first gods he meets, the retinue of the Four Heavenly Kings, the guardians of the world; they demur, saying that they do not know the answer, but that the Four Kings themselves probably do: he should ask them. He does, they do not and the search continues.

Onward and upward through successive heavens he travels, continually being met with the same reply: “We do not know but you should try asking...” and is referred to the next higher level of the celestial hierarchy. Patiently enduring the protracted process of this cosmic chain of command, he finally arrives in the presence of the retinue of Maha-Brahmā, he puts the question to them; once again they fail to produce an answer but they assure him that The Great Brahmā Himself, should He deign to manifest, is certain to provide him with the resolution he seeks. Sure enough, before too long, Maha-Brahmā appears but

he too does not know the answer, and he chides the monk for being a disciple of the Buddha yet not going to his own teacher with such a question.

When he finally meets the Buddha and asks him, he receives the reply: “But, monk, you should not ask your question in this way: ‘Where do the four great elements – Earth, Water, Fire and Wind – cease without remainder?’ Instead, this is how the question should have been put:

‘Where do earth, water, fire and wind,  
And long and short, and fine and coarse,  
Pure and impure no footing find?  
Where is it that both *nāma* (name) and *rūpa*  
(form) fade out,  
Leaving no trace behind?’

“And the answer is:

‘In the awakened consciousness –  
the invisible, the limitless, radiant.  
*[viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbaṭṭa  
pabhaṃ]*  
There it is that earth, water, fire and wind,  
And long and short, and fine and coarse,  
Pure and impure no footing find.

‘There it is that both *nāma* and *rūpa* fade out,  
Leaving no trace behind.  
When discriminative consciousness comes to  
its limit,  
They are held in check therein.’”

The term *anidassana-viññāṇa* has been translated in various other ways: “where consciousness is signless” (Walshe) “the consciousness that makes no showing” (Ñānamoli) and, most helpfully, by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda, in his book *Concept and Reality* (p 59), as “non-manifestative consciousness.” It is unlikely that the English language has a single term that can accurately convey the constellation of meanings that *anidassana-viññāṇa* possesses, however it is generally this set of qualities that Ajahn Sumedho is referring to when he uses the simple term “consciousness.”

As he says, also on p 134, it is “a mouthful of words that point to this state of natural consciousness, this reality.” So it should be borne in mind by the reader that, most of the time, he is quite deliberately using the single word “consciousness” as a shorthand for “*anidassana-viññāṇa*.” Naturally, the word is also used in various places with its customary scriptural meaning of discriminative cognising, as well as in the sense of “re-birth consciousness” (*patisandhi-viññāṇa*), for example, on p138, “When we are born into a physical birth, we have consciousness within this form...”. In addition, Ajahn Sumedho also occasionally uses the word in the ordinary English sense, i.e. describing the state of not being *unconscious*, being awake and aware of one’s surroundings and identity.

An obvious parallel to Ajahn Sumedho’s usage of the word “consciousness” is the Thai phrase “*poo roo*” as employed by many of the Forest Ajahns. The literal



translation is: “poo” = “person” + “roo” = “knowing.” It has been variously rendered as “knowing” “the one who knows” “awareness” or even “Buddha wisdom.” It is also a term that can be used to convey a large spectrum of meanings from, at one end, the simple act of the mind cognising an object (as in classical definitions of *viññāṇa*), through varying levels of refinement (as in being the witness of phenomena arising and passing away), up to the utterly unobstructed awareness of the fully awakened heart.

So it can mean everything from simple “cognition” to “the wisdom of a fully enlightened Buddha.” And, just as with Ajahn Sumedho’s employment of the word “consciousness,” it is necessary with the term “poo roo” to look at the context, *and* to take into account the favourite expressions of the Ajahn in question, in order to discern the intended nuances of meaning – *ergo, caveat lector!*

Since there are such a variety of meanings contingent upon the one word “consciousness” in this book, it would thus be wise for the reader always to reflect on the circumstance that the word is being used in. In this light, it might be felt by some that it would have been more helpful not to have used “consciousness” in such a broad range of ways, that perhaps sticking to more familiar terminology might have been easier on the listeners and readers – perhaps using a word like “citta,” the heart, as defining the agent of pure awareness, instead of “*anidassana viññāṇa*” – however this is not the way that such organic and freestyle methods of teaching usually work.

As said above, it has been the explicit aim of the editor of this book to maintain the spontaneous and informal style of Ajahn Sumedho's spoken words. All of his talks are extemporaneous, taking shape as they are expressed according to the needs of the listeners present. And part of this methodology of instruction is that it often demands that the listener/reader expand their range of view of what the teaching and practice is, and how certain words can and should be used. Furthermore, this spontaneous and direct method of expounding the Dhamma encourages the participants to allow themselves to be changed by what they see and hear, rather than judge it according to whether or not it complies with familiar and favoured patterns of thinking. Are we going to complain to Van Gogh that "A church built like that would never stand up!"? Probably not...

So, as you, the reader, wend your way through these pages and explore this small gallery of Ajahn Sumedho's teachings, it is our fond hope that you find here words and images that help to awaken and free the heart. Whatever is thus meaningful and good, please take it and install it in your life, and whatever is not, please leave it and pass it by in peace.

Amaro Bhikkhu,  
Abhayagiri Monastery  
*Dec 10<sup>th</sup> 2003*

# Intuitive Awareness

In contemplating right understanding (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) I like to emphasise seeing it as an intuitive understanding and not a conceptual one. I have found it very helpful just contemplating the difference between analytical thinking and intuitive awareness, just to make it clear what that is, because there is a huge difference between the use of the mind to think, to analyse, reason, criticise, to have ideas, perceptions, views and opinions, and intuitive awareness which is non-critical. It includes criticism; it's an inclusive awareness. It's not that criticism isn't allowed in it, criticism is included; so the critical mind is seen as an object. This is the tendency to criticise or compare, to hold one view, to say that this is better than that, this is right and that is wrong, criticism of yourself or others or whatever — all of which can be justified and valid on that level. We're not interested in just developing our critical faculty, because usually in countries like this it's highly developed already, but to trust in intuitive awareness (*sati-sampajañña*).

*Sampajañña* is a word that is translated into English as 'clear-comprehension', which is so vague and even though it says 'clear', it doesn't give me a sense of

the broadness of that clarity. When you have clear definitions of everything, then you think you have clear comprehension. So that's why we don't like confusion, isn't it? We don't like to feel foggy, confused or uncertain. These kind of states we really dislike, but we spend a lot of time trying to have clear comprehension and certainty. But *sati-sampajañña* includes fogginess, includes confusion, it includes uncertainty and insecurity. It's a clear comprehension or the apperception of confusion — recognising it's like *this*. Uncertainty and insecurity are like *this*. So it's a clear comprehension or apprehension of even the most vague, amorphous or nebulous mental conditions.

Some people find this approach frustrating because it's easier to be told exactly what to do, to have a more methodical approach. But many of us have done that and even though it can be very skilful, it can also become addictive. We never get to the root of the cause, which is "I am this person that needs something in order to become enlightened." This intuitive approach does not exclude methodical meditations. It's not that I'm against the methods of meditation that exist in our tradition of Theravāda Buddhism — *not at all* — but in saying this I am trying to put them into perspective. If you do go to these different meditation retreats, courses or whatever, intuitive awareness will help you to do the method in a much more skilful way than if you just start from faith in a method and never question or see beyond the ignorant perceptions of yourself. This encourages you really to question, really to look into these perceptions you have of yourself,

whatever they might be: If you think you're the best, greatest, God's gift to the world, or you think you're the absolute bottom of the stack; if you don't know who you are and what you want; or sometimes you think you're superior but sometimes you feel that you're inferior — these things change.

The personality view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*) with *sīlabbataparāmāsa* (attachment to rituals and techniques) and *vicikicchā* (doubt) are the first three fetters that hide the path and keep us from seeing the way of non-suffering. Trying to figure out how to be aware is an impossible task. “What is he talking about, anyway?” “Wake up, be aware” — and then trying to figure it out and think about it, you just go around in circles, it's frustrating. Intuitive awareness is frustrating to an analytical person whose faith is in thought, reason and logic. Awareness is right now. It's not a matter of thinking about it, but being aware of thinking about it. “How do you do that?”

My insight came when I was a *sāmaṇera* (novice monk). “How do you stop thinking? Just stop thinking. Well, how do you stop? Just stop. How do you just stop?” The mind would always come back with “How? How can you do it?”, wanting to figure it out rather than trusting in the immanence of it. Trusting is relaxing into it, it's just attentiveness, which is an act of faith, it's a ‘trustingness’ (*saddhā*). It gives you perspective on anything you want to do, including other styles of meditation. Even training the physical body with these various mindful practices — Yoga, Tai Chi, Chi Kung and things like that — can fit well

into the intuitive approach. Ultimately, when we develop these techniques, it ends up that one has to trust in the mindfulness rather than in just “me and my wilful efforts” trying to do all these things.

I remember when I started Hatha Yoga years ago, I'd see these pictures of yogis doing all these fantastic postures and I wanted to do them, the really impressive ones. I had a big ego and didn't want to do the boring kind of things that you start out with, but really aimed at the fantastic. Of course you're going to damage yourself trying to make your body do what you want before it's ready; it's pretty dangerous! Intuition is also knowing the limits of your own body, what it can take. It's not just wilfully making it do this and do that according to your ideas or ideals of what you want it to do, because, as many of you know, you can damage the body quite badly through tyrannically forcing it to do something. Yet mindfulness (*sati-sampajañña*) includes the body and includes its limitations, its disabilities, its sicknesses as well as its health and its pleasures.

In Theravāda Buddhism, as celibate alms-mendicants especially, we can easily see sensual pleasure in terms of something we shouldn't enjoy. The Western mind will easily see it in terms of denying pleasure, happiness and joy. We do the *asubha* practices; we say the body is foul, loathsome, filled with excrement, pus and slime and things like that. If you're a monk you should never look at a woman, keep your eyes down, and you shouldn't indulge in the pleasures of beauty — of anything. I remember in Thailand hearing

that I shouldn't even look at a flower, because its beauty would capture me and make me think worldly thoughts. Because I'm from a Christian background which has a strong puritanical ethic to it, it's easy to assume that sense-pleasure is bad and that it's dangerous, you've got to try to deny it and avoid it at all costs. But then that's another opinion and view that comes out of an analytical mind, isn't it?

From my cultural background, the logic in seeing the foulness and loathsomeness of the body (the *asubha* practices) is easy to see in terms of being repelled and seeing the body in terms of something absolutely disgusting. Sometimes you even look at yourself when you're fairly healthy and you feel disgusted — at least I can. It's a natural way to feel about yourself if you identify with the body and you dwell on its less appealing aspects. But for the word *asubha*, 'loathsome' is not a very good translation, because to me 'loathsome' is feeling really repelled and averse. If something is loathsome, it's dirty and foul, bad and nasty; you just develop aversion and want to get rid of it. But *asubha* means 'the non-beautiful'. *Subha* is beautiful; *asubha* is non-beautiful. That puts it in a better context — of looking at what is not beautiful and noticing it, usually we don't notice this. We tend to give our attention to the beautiful in the worldly life, and the non-beautiful we either ignore, we reject or we don't pay any attention to. We dismiss it because it's just not very attractive. So the vowel 'a' in *asubha* is a negation, like *Amarāvātī*: 'the deathless'. *Mara* is death; *amara* is deathless. I found that a better way of looking at *asubha* practice.

Some of you have seen autopsies. I do not find that these lead to depression or aversion. Contemplating a dead human body at an autopsy when they're cutting it up, if you've never seen it before, it can be pretty shocking. The smells and the appearance — you can feel averse to it at first. But if you can stay beyond the initial reaction of shock and aversion, and with *sati-sampajañña* be open to all of this, then what I find is a sense of dispassion, which is a cool feeling. It's very clear, very cool and very pleasant to be dispassionate. It's not dispassion through dullness or just through intellectual cynicism: it's just a feeling of non-aversion. Dispassion arises when we no longer see the human body in such a standard way as being either very attractive and beautiful or ugly and foul, but of being able to relate to it, whether our own, somebody else's or a corpse, in terms of *sati-sampajañña*. *Sati-sampajañña* opens the way to the experience of dispassion (*virāga*).

Lust, on the other hand, is a lack of discrimination. The experience of sexual lust is a strong passion that takes you over and you lose your discriminative abilities. The more you absorb into it, the less discriminatory you get. It's interesting that critical people (the *dosacarita* or anger/aversion types) usually like the *asubha* practises. They like very methodical meditations: "You do this and then you do that," very intellectually well presented "Stage one, stage two", in a nice little outline. If you're critical, it's easy to see the body as foul and disgusting. A *kāmarāgacarita*, a lustful, greedy type person, they like *mettā* meditation the best. You teach *mettā*



(loving-kindness meditation) and they go “Ooh!” with delight because *mettā* is not critical, is it? With *mettā* you are not being critical about anything.

So these are *upāyas* (skilful means) to get perspective. If one is a lustful type, then the *asubha* practises can be very balancing. They can be very skilfully used for developing a more discriminative awareness of the unpleasantness, of the non-beautiful. For the *dosacarita*, then, *mettā*: being able to accept what you don't like without indulging in being critical, rejecting and being averse to it. *Mettā* meditation is a real willingness. It can be done in a kind of stylised way, but basically it's *sati-sampajañña*. *Sati-sampajañña* accepts, it includes. *Mettā* is one of those inclusive things, much more intuitive than conceptual.

When you try to conceive *mettā* as “love”, loving something in terms of liking it, it makes it impossible to sustain *mettā* when you get to things you can't stand, people you hate and things like that. *Mettā* is very hard to come to terms with on a conceptual level. To love your enemies, to love people you hate, who you can't stand is, on the conceptual level, an impossible dilemma. But in terms of *sati-sampajañña*, it's accepting, because it includes everything you like and dislike. *Mettā* is not analytical; it's not dwelling on why you hate somebody. It's not trying to figure out why I hate this person, but it includes the whole thing — the feeling, the person, myself — all in the same moment. So it's embracing, a point that includes and is non-critical. You're not trying to figure out anything, but just to open and accept, being patient with it.



With food, for instance, we eat here in the *dhutanga* tradition — that is, eating from alms bowls — I, at least, can no longer convince myself that I'm only eating one meal a day any more because of this breakfast thing! But however many meals a day you eat, there's a limitation. Not because there's anything wrong with enjoying a meal; it's not that food is dangerous and that any kind of pleasure you receive from eating will bind you to rebirth again in the *samsāra-vaṭṭa* (the circle of birth and death) — that's another view and opinion — but is a matter of recognising the simplicity of the life that we have. It's simplifying everything. This is why I like this way.

Just notice your attitude towards food. The greed, the aversion or the guilt about eating or enjoying good food — include it all. There's no attitude that you have to have toward it other than an attitude of *sati-sampajañña*. So it's not making eating into any hassle. When I used to go on fasts, Luang Por Chah would point out that I was making a hassle out of my food. I couldn't just eat; I was making it more difficult than it needed to be. Then there is the guilt that comes up if you eat too much or you find yourself trying to get the good bits. I remember trying to get the good pieces for myself and then feeling guilty about that. There's a greed that really wants the tasty bits and then feels guilty about it. Then it gets complicated. I couldn't just be greedy and shameless, I also had to have a strong sense of guilt around it and hope that nobody would notice. I had to keep it a secret, because I didn't want to look greedy, I wanted to look as if I wasn't.

I remember that whilst staying with Luang Por Jun, I was trying to be a really strict vegetarian then, really strict. At the monastery (Wat Bung Khao Luang) they had certain kinds of dishes that didn't have any kind of fish sauce in them, or any kind of meat or fish. But, as most of you know, in Thailand most of the food has fish sauce in it or some kind of animal mixtures in it. So it was difficult because I had very little choice and people would always have to make special things for me. I always had to be special. It had to be Phra Sumedho's food and then the rest. That was hard to deal with — to be a foreigner, a “Phra Farang”, and then to have a special diet and special privileges. That was hard for me to impose on the group, as I was helping to pass out the food, I'd get very possessive. The vegetable dishes they did have, I felt I had a right to have a lot of, because the other monks were eating all the fish, chicken and things like that. I found myself aiming for the vegetarian dishes first so that I could pass them out according to my own needs. It brought up a really childish tendency in me. Then one day another monk saw me doing this, so he grabbed the vegetarian dish first and only gave me a little spoonful. I was so angry when I saw that. I took this fermented fish sauce, this *really* strong stuff and when I went past his bowl, I splattered it all over his food! Fortunately, we were forbidden to hit each other. This is an absolute necessity for men — to have rules against physical violence!

I was trying to live up to an ideal of vegetarian purity, and yet in the process having these really violent feelings towards other monks. What's this about? It

was a vindictive act to splatter all that strong chili sauce with rotten fish in it over some monk's food. It was a violent act in order for me to keep a sense that I'm a pure vegetarian. So I began to question whether I wanted to make food into such a big deal in my life. Was I wanting to live my life as a vegetarian or what? Was that the main focus that I was aiming at? Just contemplating this, I began to see the suffering I created around my idealism. I noticed Luang Por Chah certainly enjoyed his food and he had a joyful presence. It wasn't like an ascetic trip where you're eating nettle soup and rejecting the good bits; that's the other extreme.

*Sati-sampajañña*, then, includes, and that's the attitude of a *samaṇa* (monastic), rather than the ascetic, which is "sensual temptations, the sensual world, sensual pleasures are bad and dangerous. You've got to fight against them and resist them at all costs in order to become pure. Once you get rid of sexual desire, greed for food, all these other kind of greedy sense things, these coarse, gross things, you don't have any more bad thoughts, you don't have any more greed, hatred and delusion in your mind. You're absolutely sterilised from any of those things. It's eradicated, totally wiped out like these toilet cleansers that kill every germ in sight — then you're pure." Then you've managed to kill everything — including yourself! Is that the aim? That's taking asceticism to the *attakilamathānuyoga* position of annihilation.

Or is the opposite extreme the aim the *kāmasukhallikānuyoga* one of "Eat, drink and be merry, for

tomorrow you may die? Enjoy life. Life is a banquet and most of the suckers are starving to death”. This is a quote from a fifties movie called *Auntie May*. Auntie May managed really to enjoy life to the hilt, in the movie anyway. She’s a kind of icon, not a real woman but an icon of intelligence and beauty, one who just lives life to the hilt and enjoys everything. That’s a very attractive idol: to see this life is meant to be full of pleasure, happiness and love. So grasping that is the *kāmasukhallikānuyoga*.

For the *samaṇa* (monastic), it’s a matter of awakening to these; it includes both. It’s not like taking sides: that we’re rejecting or condemning Auntie May and “Life is a banquet”, or the extreme ascetic, the life-denying annihilator. But we can see that these are conditions that we create in our minds. Always wanting life to be at its best, just a party, a banquet, one pleasure after another, just assuming that is where it’s at, or thinking that to have any pleasure or enjoyment is wrong and bad, that it’s lesser and dangerous, these are conditions that we create. But the *samaṇa* life is right now; it’s like *this*. It’s opening to what we tend not to notice when we’re seeking these two extremes as our goal.

Life is like *this*. You can’t say it’s a banquet all the time. Breath going in... I wouldn’t describe it as a banquet, or that the sound of silence is life at its best, where it’s just one laugh after another. It’s just like *this*. Most of our experience is neither one extreme nor another; it’s like *this*. Most of one’s life is not peak moments, either in the heights or the depths, but it’s

neither/nor, it's that which we don't notice if we're primed to the extremes.

I find it helpful in terms of beauty, for example, to come from *sati-sampajañña* rather than from personal attachment. So with beautiful objects, beautiful things, beautiful people or whatever — coming from personal habits is dangerous — because of the desire to possess them, to have them for yourself or be attracted and get overwhelmed by the desires that arise through seeing beauty through ignorance. Then with experiencing beauty from *sati-sampajañña* one can just be aware of the beauty as beauty. It also includes one's own tendencies to want to own it, take it, touch it or fear it; it includes that. But when you're letting go of that, then beauty itself is joy.

We live on a planet that is quite beautiful. Nature is quite beautiful to the eye. So seeing it from *sati-sampajañña* I experience joy from that. When we speak from personal habits — then it can get complicated. It's complicated, no doubt, with wanting and not wanting, with guilt, or just not even noticing. If you get too involved with what's in your head, after while you don't even notice, anything outside. You can be in the most beautiful place in the world and not see it, not notice it. So then beauty as experience, or sense-pleasure, is seeing something for what it is. It is pleasurable; good food does taste good; tasting a good, delicious flavour is like *this*; it's purely enjoyable. That's the way it is. So you may contemplate "Oh, I shouldn't" — then you're adding more to it. But from *sati-sampajañña* it is what it is. It's experiencing the

flow of life from this centre-point, from the still point that includes rather than from the point that excludes, the extreme where we want only the beautiful and the good, just to have one banquet after another. When we can't sustain that delusion we get depressed. We go to the opposite, wanting to kill ourselves or annihilate ourselves in some way.

Just like this weather we've been having, it's the kind that people think England is like all the time: cold, wet, damp, drizzly and grey! This is the worldwide perception of England. I decided to open to these conditions with *sati-sampajañña*. It is what it is, but I'm not creating aversion to it. It's all right, and isn't like this very often. I've lived in this country for twenty-four years. Some of the most beautiful weather I have ever experienced has been here in this country. Perfect days, so beautiful, the greenness, the beautiful flowers and hills and things like this. So *sati-sampajañña* includes the cold, wet, drizzly and grey weather. There's no aversion created in it. In fact, I find I like it in a way, because I don't feel compelled to go out in it. I can sit in my *kuṭi* and keep warm. I quite enjoy feeling that I don't have to go out anywhere just because the weather is so good. I can just stay in my room, which I quite like; it has a nice feeling to it. When the weather gets really good I always feel I should be out. These are ways of just noticing even within what can be physically unpleasant, like cold, dampness and things like this that we find unpleasant as sensory experiences, that the suffering really is the aversion. "I don't like this. I don't want life to be like this. I want





to be where there are blue skies and sunshine all the time.”

With the body-sweeping practice, I found paying attention to neutral sensation very helpful, because it was so easily ignored. When I first started doing it, years ago I found it difficult to find, because I’d never paid attention to neutral sensations, even though it’s quite obvious. My experience of sensation was always through the extremes of either pleasure or pain. But noticing just how the robe touches the skin, just one hand touching the other, the tongue in the mouth touching the palate or the teeth, or the upper lip resting on the lower, investigating little details of sensation that are there when you open to them. They are there but you don’t notice them unless you’re determined to. If your lips are painful you notice. If you’re getting a lot of pleasure from your lips, you notice. But when it’s neither pleasure nor pain, there’s still sensation but it’s neutral. So you’re allowing neutrality to be conscious.

Consciousness is like a mirror; it reflects. A mirror reflects — it doesn’t just reflect the beautiful or the ugly. If you really look into a mirror, it’s reflecting whatever: the space, the neutrality, everything that is in front of it. Usually you can only notice the outstanding ones, the extremes of beauty or ugliness. But to awaken to the way it is, you’re not looking at the obvious, but recognising the subtlety behind the extremes of beauty and ugliness. The sound of silence is like a subtlety behind everything that you awaken to, because you don’t notice it usually if you’re

seeking the extremes.

When you're seeking happiness and trying to get away from pain and misery, then you're caught in always trying to get something or hold on to happiness — like tranquillity. We want tranquillity; we want *samatha* and *jhānas* (meditative absorptions) because we like tranquillity. We don't want confusion, chaos or cacophony, abrasive sensory experiences or human contacts; we don't want that. So we come into the temple and sit down, close our eyes and give off the signs: "Don't bother me", "Leave me alone" and "I'm going to get my *samādhi*." That can be the very basis for our practice — "Getting my *samādhi* so I can feel good, because I want that". That leads to an extreme again — wanting, always grasping after the ideal of some refined conscious experience. Then there's the others who say "You don't need to do that. Daily life is good enough. Just in-the-market-place practice — that's where it's at. Where you're not doing anything extreme like sitting, closing your eyes, but you're just living life as an ordinary person and being mindful of everything." That also can be another ideal that we attach to.

These are ideals; positions that we might take. They are the 'true but not right; right but not true' predicament that we create with our dualistic mind; not that they're wrong. In George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* there is a slogan: "Everyone is equal but some are more equal than others". In the conditioned realm, this is how we think. We all think all human beings are equal, ideally. All human beings are equal, but with the

practicalities of life, some are more equal than others. You won't find the affluent Western World willing to give up much for the sake of equality in the Third World.

Reflect on the monastic form. It's a convention, and its aim is connected to the world through its alms-mendicancy. We need the society, we need the world around us, we need the lay-community for our survival. They are a part. Monasticism is not an attack on or a rejection of lay life. If we're living in the right way, then the lay community bring forth their good qualities: generosity, gratitude and things like this. We can also move towards silence — this is encouraged — towards meditation and reflection. We can combine both *samatha* and *vipassanā* (insight meditation); the life of solitude with the worldly life. It's not to reject one and hold on to the other as the ideal, but to recognize this is the way it is; it's like *this*. The world we live in, the society we live in — we're not rejecting it, turning against it or away from it, but including it. So we can include it in the silence and the solitude.

# Identity

Is there anyone, any person or any condition that is absolutely right — or absolutely wrong? Can right and wrong or good and bad, be absolute? When you dissect it, when you really look at it in terms of the way it is now, there is nothing to it; it's foam on the sea, it's soap bubbles. Yet this is how we can get ourselves completely caught up in illusions.

We'll sacrifice our life for an illusion, to try to protect our identities, our positions, our territories. We're very territorial. We think this England here belongs to the English. When we take that apart, does this plot of land here say it's England? When I do *jongrom* (walking meditation) outside, does the earth come up and say, "You're walking on me — England." It's never said that, never! But I say I'm walking here in England. I'm the one who's calling it England, and that is an identity, a conventional identity. We all agree to call this plot of land here 'England', but it's not really that; it is what it is. Yet we'll fight, torture and commit the most atrocious acts over territory, quibbling about just one inch of property on a border. The land doesn't belong to anybody; even if I own land legally — "This belongs to Ajahn Sumedho" — it doesn't really; that's just a convention.

When we bind ourselves to these conventions and these illusions, then of course we're troubled because these are so unstable and not in line with Dhamma. We end up wasting our lives around trying to increase this sense of identification, the sense of, "It's mine, it belongs to me and I want to protect it. I want to hand it down to future generations." On and on like this, into future lives and the generations that follow. We create a whole realm of illusion, personality and identity with the perceptions that we create in our minds, which arise and cease, which have no real core to them, no essence.

We can be very threatened when these illusions are threatened. I remember first questioning the reality of my personality. It scared me to death. When I started questioning, even though I didn't have particularly over-confident, high self-esteem (I have never been prone towards seeing myself in megalomaniac perceptions; usually the opposite, very self-critical), even then, I felt very threatened when that security, that confidence in being this screwed-up personality was being threatened. There is a sense of stability even with people who are identified with illnesses or negative things, like alcoholics. Being identified with some sort of mental disease like paranoia, schizophrenia or whatever gives us a sense that we know what we are and we can justify the way that we are. We can say, "I can't help the way I am. I'm a schizophrenia." That gives us a sense of allowing us to be a certain way. It may be a sense of confidence or stability in the fact that our identities are labelled and we all agree to look at each other in this way, with

this label, with this perception.

So you realise the kind of courage it takes to question, to allow the illusory world that we have created to fall apart, such as with a nervous breakdown, where the world falls apart. When the security that is offered, the safety and confidence that we gain from that illusion starts cracking and falling apart, it's very frightening. Yet within us there's something that guides us through it. What brings us into this monastic life? It's some intuitive sense, a sense behind the sense, an intelligence behind all the knowledge and the cleverness of our minds. Yet we can't claim it on a personal level. We always have to let go of the personal perceptions, because as soon as we claim them, we're creating another illusion again. Instead of claiming, identifying or attaching, we begin to realise or recognise the way it is. This is the practice of awareness (*sati-sampajañña*), paying attention. In other words, it's going to the centre point, to the *Buddho* (the one who knows) position. This Buddha image in the temple: it's the still point. If you look at this Buddha-rūpa, it's a symbol, an image representing the human form at the still point.

Then there is this encouragement to what we call 'meditation'. This word 'meditation' can mean all kinds of things. It's a word that includes any kind of mental practices, good or bad. But when I use this word, what I'm mainly using it for is that sense of centring, that sense of establishing, resting in the centre. The only way that one can really do that is not to try and think about it and analyse it; you have to trust in just a simple

act of attention, of awareness. It's so simple and so direct that our complicated minds get very confused. "What's he talking about? I've never seen any still point. I've never found a still point in me. When I sit and meditate, there's nothing still about it." But there's an awareness of that. Even if you think you've never had a still point or you're a confused, messed-up character that really can't meditate, trust in the awareness of that very perception. That's why I encourage, whatever you think you are, to think it deliberately; really explore the kind of perceptions you have of yourself, so that they're not just habitually going through your mind and you're either believing them or trying to get rid of them. The more we try to get rid of personalities, the more confused we get. If you assume that you've got to get rid of your personality in some way because it's an illusion, then you're caught in another illusion, that "I'm someone that has a personality that I've got to get rid of; I'm the personality that's got to get rid of my personality." It doesn't get anywhere — ridiculous. It's not a matter of getting rid of, but of knowing.

Be a personality then; really intentionally be one; take it to absurdity. That's a lot of fun. Take your personality to where it's totally absurd and listen to it. Your relationship is not one of identity but of recognising that one is creating this personality, this changing condition. I can't create any kind of personal perception that lingers, that stays. There's nothing that I can create through my mental powers that has any staying power on a personal level. It's all very illusory, very changing, very ephemeral.



However, there is that which can be aware of the personality as a construction. I deliberately think, “I am a screwed-up person that needs to meditate in order to become enlightened in the future.” I think that, but I’m listening to it; I’m deliberately thinking it and I’m investigating it. I have created that perception. I have chosen to think that and I can hear myself thinking it. That which is aware and listens to that perception I don’t create. It’s not a creation, is it? I create this perception, but that which is aware of the perception... You can investigate, begin to know the difference between awareness and thinking. What is the still point, the centre, the point that includes? This kind of thinking is reflective, isn’t it? I’m just asking myself this question to bring attention to this. I’m not looking for an answer in terms of somebody to give me an answer to that question, but that’s a reflective question that clarifies my attention; it helps me to focus, to be aware.

The more I pay attention and I’m aware, the more I recognise that in this still point there’s this resounding sound of silence. I didn’t create that; it’s not a creation of mine. I can’t claim that the sound of silence is some personal creation of mine, that it belongs to Ajahn Sumedho. It’s like trying to claim the air, the space: “All the space in the world belongs to me,” that kind of ridiculous thing. You can’t create a person around it, you can only *be* — this sense of *being* this still point, resting, opening to and allowing the personality, the body, the emotional habits that arise and the thoughts that we have. Our relationship to them now is understanding or embracing rather than identifying.

As soon as we identify with it, we have a negative thought and it hooks us. I feel some negative feeling: “Oh, here I go again, being critical and negative about somebody and I shouldn’t do that. I’ve been a monk all these years and how can I stop doing that? I’ve lost it.” I’ve identified with a negative thought and it triggers off all kinds of feelings of despair. Or “I shouldn’t be like this, I shouldn’t think like this. A good monk should love everybody..”, then, with awareness, you suddenly stop that and you’re back in the centre again.

So just to recognise, no matter how many times you go out on the wheel, it’s just a very simple act of attention to be back in the centre. It’s not that difficult, remote or precious; we’re just not used to it. We’re used to being on the turning wheel; we’re used to going around and around and becoming all kinds of things. We’re used to that; we’re used to delusions, fantasies, dreams. We’re used to extremes. What we’re used to we incline to do if we’re not attentive, if we’re not vigilant. Then we easily fall back into the turning wheel because we’re used to that. Even though we suffer in that turning wheel, we’re used to it. When we aren’t aware, when we aren’t vigilant and attentive then we easily fall back into the realm of suffering. The good side of it is that the more we develop awareness, cultivate awareness, then those habits, the things that we’re used to, we start deprogramming. We’re not feeding these illusions anymore. We’re not believing, we’re not following, we’re not resisting. We’re not making any problem about the body as it is, the memories, the thoughts,

the habits or the personality that we have. We're not judging or condemning, praising, adulating or exaggerating anything. It is what it is. As we do that, our identity with it begins to slip away. We no longer seek identity with our illusions; we've broken through that. When we've seen through that illusion of self, what we think we are. Then our inclination is towards this centre point, this *Buddho* position.

This is something you can really trust. That's why I keep saying this, just as a way of encouraging you. If you think about it, you don't trust it. You can get very confused because other people will say other things and you'll hear all kinds of views and opinions about meditation, Buddhism and all that. Within this Sangha there are so many monks and nuns, so many views and opinions. So it's a matter of learning to trust yourself, the ability to be aware rather than think, "I'm not good enough to trust myself. I've got to develop the *jhānas* (absorptions) first. I've got to purify my *sīla* (morality) first. I've got to get rid of my neurotic problems and my traumas first before I can *really* meditate." If you believe that, then that is what you'll have to do. But if you begin to see what you're doing, that very illusion, then you can trust in that simple recognition. It's not even condemning the illusion. It's not saying you shouldn't do those things. I'm not saying you shouldn't purify your *sīla* or resolve your emotional problems, go to therapy or develop the *jhānas*. I'm not making any statement about "should" or "shouldn't", but rather I'm pointing to something that you can trust — this awareness (*sati-sampajañña*) here and now.

If one of you should come to me and say, “Ajahn Sumedho, I’m really screwed up. I was very badly treated when I was a child. I’ve got so many neurotic problems and fears. I really need to go to therapy and get these things straightened up in some way because I can’t really meditate the way I am,” and I say, “Well, yeah, you should. You’re really screwed up! I think you should go to a therapist and straighten yourself out first, then meditate after that.” Would that be very helpful? Would I be pointing to the still point or would I be perpetuating your own self-view? That view might even be right on a worldly level, I’m not saying you shouldn’t. This is best: not to tell you, saying you are this way or that way, not to give you some kind of identity to attach to, but to empower or encourage you to trust in your own ability to wake up, to pay attention. The result of that I don’t know. I hope it will be a good one. But it’s true: your true identity isn’t dependent upon any condition.

Pointing to the present, the *paccuppanna-dhamma*, we can grasp that idea, so then we think we don’t need to do all those things. “We don’t need to be monks or nuns; we don’t need therapy. We can just meditate. Pure mediation will solve all our problems.” Then we grasp that and become anti-religion: “All religion is a waste of time. Psychotherapy is a waste of time. You don’t need that. All you need to do is be mindful and meditate.” That’s another viewpoint, isn’t it? Those kinds of opinions are not pointing to the centre, they’re judging the conditions or the conventions. “You don’t need religion; it’s all a bunch of rubbish.” And even though you can say that it is true that ultimately all

that you need to do is to wake up — simple as that— that is in itself a convention of language. This is where this empowerment or encouragement is pointing to an immanent act of awakening, not to tell you that you are some kind of person, you're asleep and you should wake up or that you should grasp that idea, but that sense of actually being that.

In the Western world we get very complicated because we don't have a lot of *saddhā* (faith) usually. The Asian Buddhists tend to be more culturally attuned to this. They have a lot of faith in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, a teacher or something. Most of us come to Buddhism or become *samaṇas* (monastics) when we're adults — and we're sceptical. Usually we've gone through a lot of sceptical doubts and strong self-images, a hard, strong sense of individuality. Speaking for myself, my personality was a doubting, sceptical one. This doubt (*vicikicchā*) was one of my greatest obstructions. That's why I couldn't be Christian, because I couldn't believe what I was supposed to believe in. It was just totally impossible for me to believe in the kind of doctrines that you have to believe in to be a Christian. I was a sceptical, doubting character, and also, at the age of thirty-two, quite cynical. I'd been through a lot and had quite a lot of bitterness about life, disappointments. I was not pleased with my life at thirty-two. I was disappointed with myself and a lot of others. There was a kind of despair, bitterness and doubt and yet the faint light at the end of the tunnel was in Buddhism. There was one thing I still had some hope for and that was my interest in Buddhism.

That was a sign to of me where I had something, it was a kind of sign that drew me into this life. But then the good thing about being highly individualistic, sceptical and doubtful is that you do tend to question everything. That which is sacred and never questioned often times in religions was allowed to be questioned. One thing I appreciated with Luang Por Chah was that everything was up for questioning. He was never one for a peremptory approach of “You have to believe in this and you have to believe in that.” There was never that hard, heavy-handed, dictatorial style; it was much more this reflective questioning and inquiry. One of the problems with Westerners is that we’re complicated because of the lack of faith. Our identities get so complicated in so many ways and highly personal, we take everything personally. Sexual desire and the sexual forces in the body are regarded as very personal. The same is true with hunger and thirst, we identify with hunger in a very personal way. The basic forces that are just natural we take on and judge them personally: “We shouldn’t be cowardly and weak, pusillanimous.” We get very complicated because we judge ourselves endlessly, criticise ourselves according to very high standards, very ideal, noble standards that we can never live up to. We get very self-disparaging, neurotic and depressed because we’re not in touch with nature. We’ve come from the world of ideas rather than from realising the natural law.

So in meditation it is a matter of recognising the way it is, the Dhamma or the natural law, the way things are — that sexual desire is like *this*, it’s not mine. The

body is like *this*; it's a sexual body so it's going to have these energies. It has sexual organs, it's made like this, this is the way it is, so it's not personal. I didn't create it. We begin to look at the most obvious things, the basics, the human body, in terms of the way it is rather than identifying with it personally. Hunger and thirst are like *this* — we investigate the instinctual energies, the urge for survival. We have strong survival and procreative instincts: hunger and thirst, the urge to protect ourselves, the need for safety. We all need to feel some kind of physical safety, which is a survival instinct; these are basic to the animal kingdom, not just the human. It gets more complicated because we identify with it and judge it according to very high standards and ideals. Then we become neurotic, it gets all over the place, we can't do anything right. This is the complicated mess that we create in our lives — very confusing.

So now it is the time to see that it needn't be seen in this way. No matter how complicated it is, the practice is very simple. This is where we need a lot of patience, because when we're very complicated, we often times lack patience with ourselves. We've got clever minds, we think very quickly and we have strong passions and it's easy to get lost in all of this. It's very confusing for us because we don't know how, we don't have any way out of it, we don't know a way to transcend or to see it in perspective. So in pointing to this centre point, to this still point, to the here-and-now, I'm pointing to the way of transcendence or the escape from it. Not escape by running away out of fear, but the escape hatch that allows us to get perspective on the mess, on the confusion, on

the complicated self that we have created and identify with.

It's very simple and it's not complicated, but if you start thinking about it, then you can make it very complicated, with such thoughts as, "Oh, I don't know if I can do that..." But that's where this trust comes in: if you're aware that "Oh, I don't know..." is a perception in the present; "I don't think I could ever realise *Nibbāna* (freedom from attachments)," is a perception in the present — trust in that awareness. That's all you need to know. It is what it is. We're not even judging that perception. We're not saying, "What a stupid perception." We're not adding anything. And that awareness of it, that's what I'm pointing to, the awareness. Learn to trust in that awareness rather than in what the perception is saying. The perception might even be common sense in a way, but the attachment to it is where you get lost in it. "We should practise meditation. We should not be selfish and we should learn to be more disciplined and more responsible for our lives." That's very good advice, but if I attach to that, what happens? I go back to thinking: "I'm not responsible enough, I've got to become more responsible and I shouldn't be selfish. I'm too selfish and I shouldn't be," and I'm back onto the turning wheel again. One gets intimidated even by the best advice. What to do? Trust in the awareness of it. "I should be responsible" — it is seen and one's relationship to it is no longer that of grasping it. Maybe if that resonates as something to do, then be more responsible. It's not a matter of denying, blotting out, condemning or believing but of trusting in the attitude





of attention and awareness rather than endlessly trying to sort it out on the turning wheel with all its complicated thoughts and habits, where you just get dizzy and totally confused.

The still point gives you perspective on the conditions, on the turning wheel, on the confusion, on the mess. It puts you into a relationship to it, that is knowing it for what it is, rather than some kind of personal identity with it. Then you can see that your true nature is this knowing, this pure state, pure consciousness, pure awareness. You are learning to remember that, to be that — your real home — what you really are rather than what you think you are according to the conditioning of your mind.

# When You're an Emotional Wreck

Although right now were in a perfect retreat situation where we've got everything under control and perfect for what we regard as a proper, formal retreat. In contrast to this next week there will be a lot of comings and goings, and things happening that we can't control. Just be aware of expectation, a view about what a proper, formal retreat should be. Whatever views or opinions you may have, just know the way they are. Whatever kind of irritation, frustration or aversion you might feel, you can use all of that for meditation. The important thing is the awareness that "it is the way it is" — rather than trying just to suppress your feelings, to ignore, or just get very upset and angry about things not going the way you want, and then not looking at that, not taking the opportunity to observe the way it is. If one is upset about the way it is, one can use that, that is a part of the meditation.

Unwanted things happen in any retreat. Like the window in the Temple, the electric motor that opens and closes it doesn't work. High-tech, isn't it? We could use a long pole, or we could get knotted ropes and hang them from the beams and learn to climb them to open and close the windows. It would be good physical exercise! Then the spotlight went out. I notice

in my own mind that when things go wrong, things break or things are going in a way feel that make me frustration or maybe irritation, then I like to use those situations. If the window doesn't close, and the spotlight doesn't go on, I can feel a certain way. I'm aware of that feeling of not wanting the spotlight to be broken or the window or whatever. This feeling of wanting to get it fixed right away: "We can just get somebody in to do it right now between breaks so it doesn't interfere with my practice." But notice in all of this that mindfulness is the important factor, because concentration can get disrupted but mindfulness, if you trust it, opens to the flow of life as an experience, with its pleasure and pain.

So *sati-sampajañña* (awareness, apperception or intuitive awareness): I keep reiterating this so that you can really appreciate the difference between intuitive awareness and thinking and analysis, coming from trying to get something or get rid of something with a controlling mind. With the thinking process — if you're caught into that, then you'll end up always thinking, "Well, it should be like this and it shouldn't be like that", and "This is right and that is wrong," and we can even say, "Buddhism is right, the Buddha's teachings are right." We then get attached to the idea that Buddhist teachings are right and then the result of that, if we don't have enough *sati-sampajañña* along with it, is that we become Buddhists who feel *we are right* because *we're* following the *right* teaching. Thus as a consequence of attachment and the way we perceive the Buddha's teaching, we can become self-righteous Buddhists. We can feel that any other form

of Buddhism that doesn't fit into what we consider *right* is then wrong, or that other religions are wrong. That's the thinking behind self-righteous views, and notice how limiting it is. You're often then stuck with these thoughts and perceptions and often times very inferior perceptions of yourself. We can be attached to very negative perceptions of ourselves and think that's right. Apperception means being aware of perception. Perceptions of myself, or that Buddhism is right, is like *this*. "Buddha's teachings are right" — that all rises and ceases, and what's left is *this*. There's still consciousness, awareness, intelligence. It's pure, but it's not *my* purity as a personal achievement, it's naturally pure.

Notice that this includes the body, the emotions and the intellect. This is like the Noble Eightfold Path — *sīla, samādhi, paññā* (morality, concentration, wisdom). *Sati-sampajañña* includes everything, so the body is included now. It's not dismissing the physical condition that we're experiencing, it includes the emotional state and whatever state your body is in, whether it's healthy or sickly, strong or weak, male or female, young or old, whatever. The quality is not the issue, it's not saying how your body should be, but the body is included in this moment. Apperception is the ability to embrace that which is, so the body *is* right now. This is my experience, the body is right here — I can certainly feel it. Awareness includes emotional states, no matter they are. Whether you're happy or sad, elated or depressed, confused or clear, confident or doubtful, jealous or frightened, greedy or lustful, it includes all those, but just by noticing in a

way that is not critical. We're not saying, "You shouldn't have lustful emotions" or anything like that. We're not making moral judgments, because we're using *sati-sampajañña*. If you get caught up in your brain, your intellect, then it says, "Oh! You're having lustful thoughts in the Shrine Room! You shouldn't do that. You're not a very good monk if you do things like that. You're impure!" We're very attached to these judgments, this judgmental, critical function that we have, but *sati-sampajañña* includes that, it includes the judgement. It doesn't judge judgement; it's just noticing the kind of tyrannical, self-righteous super-ego that says, "You shouldn't be the way you are. You shouldn't be selfish. You should be compassionate and loving," all that kind of thing. "Buddhism is right... I'm getting nowhere in my practice," *sati-sampajañña* embraces that. It's just noticing the way it is. I can listen to my intellect, my super-ego — "I know that, I know you," emotional states and the body. It's a matter of being patient with all this. It's not trying to control or make any problem out of it, but just as we relax and open to these things, then we allow them to change on their own. They have their own karmic force, and we're giving them that opportunity. Our refuge is not in thinking or emotions or the physical body. So just see this refuge as this simple ability to listen to be attentive to this moment.

I always use the practice of listening to the sound of silence — that subtle, continuous inner ringing tone in the background of experience — because every time I open the mind, that's what I hear. Its presence contains and embraces the body, the emotional quality

or the thinking mind all at once. It's not like A-B-C or anything in tandem or sequence, but in just the way it is, as a whole, it includes, it doesn't pick and choose, "I want this but I don't want that". Just noticing, trusting and valuing this ability that each one of us has. It's something to really treasure and cultivate.

You can reflect on intuition as the point that includes or embraces. We have both this intuitive ability, and the thinking ability that excludes, the single pointedness you get through concentrating on an object. With a single point for concentration you focus on it in order to exclude distractions, but when you're using intuitive awareness then it includes all that is there. The single point you get through concentration is just a preception, isn't it? When you take it literally, it means one naturally excludes anything that's not in that point. That's the rational, logical way of looking at it. One-pointedness can be seen in terms of the one point that excludes everything, because that's the logic of thought. Intuition is non-verbal and non-thinking; so the point is everywhere, it includes. This is *sati-sampajañña*, *sati-paññā*; these are the words that the Buddha used to describe the path to the Deathless. That's why you can't do it through thinking or analysis, defining or acquiring all the knowledge in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*\*, *suttas* (discourses) and all this, just becoming an expert on Buddhism, because you might know a lot *about* it, but you won't know it. It's like knowing all about honey without tasting it — chemical formulae, different qualities, which is rated the highest, the best and the sweetest,

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\* analytical teachings of the Buddhist canon

which is considered common and vulgar, lower-realm honey — you might know all that but not know the flavour of any of it. You can have pictures and portraits of it, the whole lot. The taste of honey in terms of intuition is like *this*. If you just taste honey, then you are intuitively aware that it tastes like *this*.

*Paññā* (wisdom) comes from intuition, not from analysis. You can know all about Buddhism and still not use any wisdom in your life. The word combinations *sati-paññā*, *sati-sampajañña* — I really like these words actually — you might have noticed! *Sati-sampajañña* is not something that you learn through acquiring it, but rather it's awakening, it's learning to trust this awakening, paying attention to life. It's not that you can acquire *sati-sampajañña* just through studying about it, or throughn trying to pursue it by will alone, it's an immanent act of trust in the unknown, because you can't get hold of it. People like to ask, "define it for me, describe it to me, tell me if I have it," that kind of thing. Nobody can tell you, "Well, I think you have it, you look like you're mindful right now". A lot of people who look mindful are not necessarily mindful at all. It's not a matter of someone telling you or acquiring all the right definitions for the words, but in recognising and realising the reality of it and trusting it.

I used to experiment with this, because of my background. I spent so many years studying in university and was so conditioned by that to want to define and understand everything through the intellect. I was always in a state of doubt, because



the more I tried to figure everything out (I'm quite good at figuring things out) I still wasn't certain whether I had got it right or not, because the thinking process has no certainty to it. It's clean and neat and tidy, but it is not liberating in itself. Emotional things are a bit messy. With emotions you can cry, you can feel sad, you can feel sorry, you can feel angry and feel jealous and all kinds of messy feelings, but a nice intellectual frame of reference is so pleasurable because it's so tidy and neat. It isn't messy, doesn't get sticky, wet and soggy — but it doesn't feel anything either. When you're caught in the intellect, it sucks you away from your feelings, because your emotional life doesn't work anymore, so you suppress it because you're attached to thought, reason and logic. It has its pleasure and its gifts, but also makes you very insensitive. Thoughts do not have any sensitive capability, do they? Thoughts are not sensitive conditions.

One of the ideals we might talk about is 'all is love,' or the concept of universal compassion but the words themselves have no ability to feel that emotion, compassion or anything like that. When we attach to the ideals, we might attach to the most beautiful, perfect ideals, but attachment blinds us. We can talk about how we must all love each other, have compassion for all sentient beings, and not be able, in any practical way, to do that, to feel it or notice it. Then going into the heart, where often times it's amorphous, where it's not clean, neat and tidy, like the intellect - emotions can be all over the place. Then the intellect says, "Oh, emotional things are so messy.

You can't trust them," and feel embarrassed. "It's embarrassing! I don't want to be considered emotional. Ajahn Sumedho is very emotional." Woh — I don't want anyone to think that. "I'm reasonable." Now I like that. "Intelligent, reasonable, kind..." But say, "Ajahn Sumedho is emotional," it makes me sound like I'm weak and wet, doesn't it? "Ajahn Sumedho is emotional. He cries, he weeps and he's wet. He's all over the place. Ugh!" So maybe you think of Ajahn Sumedho as mindful. *That's nice!* Emotions then are often times just ignored or rejected and not appreciated, we don't learn from them, because we're always rejecting or denying them. At least I found this easy to do myself. So in this, *sati-sampajañña* is like opening and being willing to be a mess. Let a mess be a mess; a mess is like *this*. Wet, weak, all over the place, being foolish and silly, stupid and all that, it's like *this*. *Sati-sampajañña* embraces all that, it's not passing judgement or trying to control, to pick or choose, but is just the act of noticing that it's like *this*. If this is the emotion that is present, this is the way it is, it's like *this*.

So the point that includes — notice that it's the here-and-now (*paccuppanna-dhamma*), just switching on this immanent kind of attention. It's a slight shift, it isn't very much, just relaxing and opening to this present, listening, being attentive. It's not going into some kind of real super-duper *samādhi* (concentration) at all, it's just like *this*, it doesn't seem that much at all. As you relax, trust and rest in it, you find it sustains itself. It's natural, it's not created by you, you are not creating it. In this openness, in this

one point that includes, then you can be aware of emotions that you don't usually bother with, like feeling lonely or sad, or subtleties such as resentment or disappointment. Extreme ones are quite easy because they force themselves into attention, but as you open, you can be aware of subtle emotions. Not judging this, just embracing it, so that it's not making a problem about the way it is, it's just knowing the way it is. It's like *this*, at this moment the feeling, the *vedanā-saññā-saṅkhārā* (feeling, perception, mental formations) are like *this*, the body (*rūpa*) is like *this*.

Notice what it's like when you open to emotional feeling, to moods, without judging it, not making any problem out of it, whatever its quality is, whether it's emotional or physical, by learning to embrace it, to sustain your attention by holding it without trying to get rid of it, change it or think about it. Just totally accept the mood you're in, the emotional state, or the physical sensations like pain, itching or whatever tensions, with this sense of well-being, of embracing. When I do this, I notice the 'changingness'. When you are willing to let something be the way it is, it changes. Then you begin to recognise or realise non-attachment. We say 'embracing': in this way *sati-sampajañña* is not attaching (*upādāna*) to them, it's embracing. This sense of widening, it includes; it's not picky-choosy, it's not saying, "Pick only the good things but the bad ones I won't," it takes the bad along with the good, the whole thing, the worm and the apple, the snake and the garden. It allows things to be what they are, it's not approving. It's not saying that you have to love worms and want them in your apples, to

like them as much as you like apples. It's not asking you to be silly, ridiculous or impossible, but it's encouraging you to allow things to exist, even the things we don't like to exist, because if they exist, that's what they do, they're existing. The whole thing, the good and the bad, belongs. *Sati-sampajañña* is our ability to realise that, to know that, in a direct way, and then the processes take care of themselves. It's not a case of Ajahn Sumedho trying to get his act together, trying to cleanse his mind, free himself from defilements, deal with his immature emotions, straighten out his wrong, crooked views, trying to make himself into a better monk and become enlightened in the future. That doesn't work, I guarantee — I've tried it!

From this perspective you can use *upāyas* (skilful means) for particular conditions that come up. One could say, "Just be mindful of everything;" that's true, that's not wrong, but some things are quite obsessive or threatening to us, so we can develop skilful means with that. I got a lot of encouragement from Ajahn Chah to develop skilful means, and that takes *paññā*, doesn't it? It's using *paññā* just to see how I would deal with things, emotional states especially, difficult emotional habits. You can experiment, don't be afraid to experiment. See what comes up using catharsis, or talking it out with somebody who will listen to you, or thinking it out deliberately.

One of my skilful means was listening to my thoughts as if they were neighbours talking on the other side of the fence. I'm just an innocent bystander listening



whilst they carry on these conversations. All the gossip, opinions and views I'm actually producing in my own mind, but I'm listening to it. I'm not involved, not getting interested in the subject matter, but just listening as it goes on and on about what it likes and doesn't like, and what's wrong with this person and what's wrong with that person, and why I like this better than that, and if you want my opinion about this... I just kept listening to these inner voices, these opinionated, arrogant, conceited, foolish voices that go on. Be aware of that which is aware and notice, make a note of that which is aware. The awareness is my refuge, not these gossips, these arrogant voices or opinions and views. That's a skilful means, I found.

We can learn to help each other by just listening. Learning to listen to somebody is about developing relationship rather than preaching and trying to tell somebody how to practise and what to do. Sometimes all we need to do is learn how to listen with our own *sati-sampajañña* to somebody else, so that they have the opportunity to verbalise their own fears or desires without being condemned or given all kinds of advice about it. These can be very skilful means. Some kinds of therapy can be considered skilful means that help us to deal with what is usually an emotional problem. Where we tend to be most blind and most undeveloped is in the emotional realm.

*Upāya* (skilful means) is learning that you do have the wisdom to do it. If you consider that "I'm not wise enough to do *that*," don't believe that! But also don't be afraid to ask for help. It's not that one is better than

the other, just trust by your own experience of suffering. If you find you obsess, suddenly things will obsess your consciousness, memories will come up, certain emotions or really silly things can just pursue you, foolish thoughts or whatever. We can say, “I don’t want to bother with that stupidity, I’m trying to get my *samādhi* (concentration) and be filled with loving-kindness and do all the right things” — and not see what we are doing. We’re trying to become, we’re trying to make ourselves fit into an image that is unreal, it’s imagined, it’s an idealised image. The Buddha certainly did not expect that. Whatever way it is for you is the way it is, that’s what you learn from, that’s where enlightenment is — right there — when you’re an emotional wreck.





# Suffering Should Be Welcomed

One of the epithets for the Buddha we chant is *lokavidū* (knower of the world). Of course we can see that this is a quality of the Buddha, but something much more practical than just chanting the positive qualities of somebody called 'Buddha' is to reflect on what is the world, the situation that we are experiencing now. This entails contemplating or reflecting on life as we experience it rather than describing how life should be. If we're rationalists, then we have theories about how things *should* be. But in reflective awareness we're noticing how things are.

Breathing is like *this* when we become aware of the breath. We're not saying you should breathe a certain way, that there's some standard of breathing that is ideal, that we must all strive for. We contemplate the experience of "sensitivity is like *this*." When we begin to notice the fact that the human body, this body that we're in with its eyes, ears, nose and tongue, is sensitive and that sensitivity is like *this*, then we look inward. What is it to be sensitive? We're looking at and noticing what it is to feel, to see, to hear, to smell, to taste or touch, to think, to remember. We can have ideas about being sensitive, 'our' sensitivity, or we can try and make ourselves insensitive because we might

see it as a weakness. To be too sensitive to some people is a sign of weakness. We're not placing any judgement on sensitivity, but just noticing that it's like this.

As we notice the world that we live in, the environment — the way it is — we find that it leads towards just recognising the impermanent nature of our conscious experience, how things rise and cease, begin and end. This is 'knowing the world', not judging the world according to some standard, but seeing that the world is like *this*: it is sensitive. The world is about birth and death, about meeting and parting, coming and going, good and bad, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, and all the various gradations of experience and qualities that we are subject to in this form.

Even though this seems to be an obvious reality when you recognise it, how many people really are aware of the world in terms of experience? We interpret it usually in a personal way. The habitual pattern is to interpret it all in terms of personal limitations, personal feelings or personal ideas. In noticing the world as it is, we're seeing that it is not a personal thing. A person is a creation of the mind, to which we are bound if we don't awaken. If we just operate within the emotional conditioning that we have, then we see it in terms of "This is happening to me," or "I am good, bad ..."

It is very important to recognise and to know that the world is the world. It's a very strong experience, for having a human body is a continuous experience of being irritated. Contemplate what consciousness is

in such a form as a human body which is made up from the four elements of earth, water, fire and air. From birth to death, from the time you are born, the moment you cry when you're out of your mother's womb, you start screaming. Then the sensitivity, impingement and the irritations come through this sensitive form until it dies. I encourage you to contemplate what birth into this world is, rather than to judge it according to any ideals or ideas that you might have. This is called the state of awakened awareness. To "wake up" means to know the world as it is; it's not judging the world. If we have ideas about how the world should be, then the way it is often seen through our critical mind is "It shouldn't be...". When you see how countries should be, governments should be, parents, partners or whatever, then we are coming from ideals, usually quite high standards of "If everything were perfect...". But this realm's perfection doesn't lie in taking conditioned experience to some kind of peak moment. Peak moments are just that; they're wonderful in their way, but they're not sustainable. The flow and movement of our life is around the 'changingness' of the conditioned realm that impinges on us, that we're involved in, that we're immersed in, in this conscious form.

Notice how irritating it is just to be able to see, hear, taste, smell and touch. There's always something that isn't quite right. It's too cold or too hot, we have a headache or backache, unwanted noises, odours and such like impinge or come into contact with this form — and as a result of this we experience its beauty, its ugliness, pleasure and pain. But even pleasure is

irritating when you think about it. We like pleasure, but having a lot of pleasure is also very exhausting and irritating. This is not a criticism; it's just noticing that having a human body is like this; breathing is like this; consciousness is like this.

Just consider how sensitive we are in relation to words and thoughts. One can say things and upset everybody just through a certain tone of voice. Using certain words can be very distressing. We remember things of the past that are pleasant or unpleasant. We can obsess our minds about things we shouldn't have done in the past. We get a lot of guilt and remorse or self-aversion because of mistakes, failures or unskilful acts in the past that we remember. We can get really neurotic, because in the present moment we can be totally obsessed with something we shouldn't have done twenty years ago. We can drop ourselves into real states of depression and despair.

Being born as a human being is a real challenge in terms of how to use this experience of birth, human experience, this sensitive state that we're living in. Some people think about committing suicide: "just get it over with" — it's just too hard to bear, too much to stand, a lifetime of this continuous irritation and guilt, remorse and fear of the unknown. It can be so utterly depressing that we think it's better to kill ourselves. Or, as the Buddha encouraged us, we can wake up to it, learn from it, see it as an opportunity, as a challenge, as something to learn from. We can develop wisdom in terms of the conditions and the experiences that we have in this life — which are not guaranteed

always to be the best. Many of us have had to experience all kinds of frustrations, disappointments, disillusionments and failures. Of course if we take that personally, we want to end it all very quickly. But if we put it in the context of knowing the world as the world, we can take anything. We have incredible abilities to learn from even the most unfair and miserable, painful and nasty conditions. These are not obstructions to enlightenment; this issue is whether we use them to awaken or not.

Some people think that it's good *kamma* just to have an easy ride, to be born with wealthy parents and high status, beautiful appearance, intelligence, an easy life, all the benefits, all the blessings, all the good things. It is good merit, good *pāramī* (virtues) and all that. But when I look at my own life, incredible challenges have come to me that have shaken me, have really upset me, disappointed me to the point where I have contemplated suicide — “I just want to get this over with. I don't want to spend more and more years in this realm. I can't take it.” But awakening to that, I realised that I'm quite willing to take what life presents and to learn from it. That's the challenge: seeing this as an opportunity that we have as human beings, as conscious beings.

Now the teachings of the Lord Buddha are teachings pointing to this. They're to awaken you rather than to condition you. It's not a matter of trying to grasp them as doctrinal positions to take hold of, but as expedient means to use to develop and to encourage awakened awareness, mindfulness, intuition. Rather than fear

sensitivity, really open to it: be fully sensitive rather than trying to protect yourself endlessly from possible pain or misfortune.

Knowing the world as the world is not a resignation in a negative way — “Oh, you know how the world is!” — as if it is bad, that there’s something wrong with it. That’s not knowing the world as the world. “Knowing” is a matter of studying and taking an interest, investigating, examining experience, and really being willing to look at and feel the negative side of experience. It’s not about seeking sensory pleasures, pleasurable experiences, but about seeing even your most disappointing ones, your worst failures as opportunities to learn, as a chance to awaken: one can say that they’re *devadūtas* or ‘messengers’ that tap us on the shoulder and say, “Wake up!” That’s why in Buddhism ageing, sickness, disabilities and loss are not seen as things to fear and despise, but as *devadūtas* or ‘heavenly messengers’. This word *devadūta* is a Pāli word; *dūta* means a messenger of some sort, *deva* is ‘angelic’ or ‘heavenly’; so they’re heavenly messengers sent to warn us. A Christian asked me once if we had angels in Buddhism. “We have angels in Christianity; all kinds of white and beautiful beings that play harps; they’re very radiant, light beings.” I replied, “Well, Buddhist angels are not that way. They’re old age, sickness and death!” The fourth *devadūta* is the *samaṇa* (contemplative), the human being who is having the spiritual realisations.

It always interested me, because I thought that it was quite amusing seeing an old person as an angel, the

sick, the mentally sick, corpses or monks and nuns as *devadūtas*. Look at each other as *devadūtas*, otherwise we become personalities, don't we? In looking at the shaven heads and the saffron robes, this is seeing them in terms of *devadūtas* rather than when you put it into terms of monks and nuns, senior and junior and all that; it gets into personality view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*). Do we see each other actually helping each other to awaken, or do we see each other as a person? "This monk is like this, and that nun is like that." We can either see it in a very worldly way or just change the perspective to seeing others as *devadūta*.

You can see old people as *devadūtas*. Like me: I'll be sixty-seven in a few days. Not only a *devadūta* on the level of a *samaṇa*, but an old man too! As I get sick and senile, I'll be even more of a *devadūta*; and when I'm dead, I'll be four all in one! Just reflecting in this way we can see how to use life — the malleability of our human mind is endless. We can be so set and conditioned by dualistic thinking, which we get from our cultural background. For example, I was brought up with a very dualistic way of looking at everything as result of coming from a Christian background. Things were *absolutely* right or wrong, good or evil. These were very fixed ways of looking at everything. You had a very limited use of your mind, because it tended not to move very much; it just moved between these two extremes.

Notice in some of the Buddhist meditational exercises, the ways of visualising, of using your mind to create

visions of things, to contemplate the thirty-two parts of the body. I remember that when I was first faced with this in Thailand, I kept wanting to think of the thirty-two parts of the body as being physiologically accurate according to Western science. Contemplating my own thirty-two parts, it was easier for me to find a book on anatomy and look at a picture. But to contemplate the reality of those organs and conditions existing here and now in this form that I call myself, the thing I assume to be me. It is a different use of learning, it requires us to flex the mind a bit.

I was talking to a monk last week about how difficult it sometimes is to see yourself in terms of positive qualities, because we're so used to seeing ourselves in terms of the negative, what's wrong, what the faults are. I notice especially with Western people, Europeans and Americans, that we spend so much time criticising ourselves and dwelling on what we feel is wrong with us, not good, or weak. Then we think it's even wrong to admit our good qualities. I used to feel like that: I was being honest when I was admitting my weaknesses and faults, but if I admitted my virtues that would be bragging. Here in Britain, it's very bad taste to brag and tell people how wonderful you are, how much money you make, how many important degrees or titles you have. In Thailand, some monks have these name-cards which have all their titles on them — BA, MA, Ph.D., Chao Khun, Head of Province, Vice-President of the World Fellowship of Buddhists and World Congress of Buddhists, Trustee to this and that — it's quite all right there to present yourself in terms of your accomplishments. But here we think that



it is very bad taste; it's embarrassing. You never see in an English home people putting their framed University degrees up on the walls, do you? They would be too embarrassed because it's like boasting. There is a sense of modesty here in Britain which is also quite lovely in many ways. But it can be taken to the extreme where you have no way of acknowledging any goodness in yourself or to appreciate your own successes, virtues and good qualities.

Are we going to become inflated egotistical monsters if we admit that we love good things? Why did I become a *bhikkhu* (Buddhist monk)? Why would I choose to live a celibate life in this monastic order? I could give you reasons like, "I've got to get myself together, shape up and get my act together. I can't do it any other way. I have to do something in order to my make myself do it." I can look at it in terms of weakness and inability, that I need the support from external conditions because I can't do it by myself. But I can also look at it in terms of being attracted to what is good, virtuous and beautiful. Both perspectives can have their points to make. Even though I can be fascinated by lower things and the darker side of life, it's not that I'm so good that I just gravitate to everything that's light and beautiful, I've certainly had my fascinations for that which isn't. I would say that it's something of a character tendency that my preference leans towards the light and the good, the true and the beautiful. This is the movement that I'm interested in, moving in this direction. That's something very good, something to respect. I see that this is something very good in my character.

Putting it in terms of personal qualities, it's learning to be honest, to admit to and make a conscious appreciation of your own humanity and your individuality. It helps to give you a confidence that you don't have if you're too obsessed, over-interested or too committed to being critical and seeing yourself through negative perceptions. This is being able to use our critical mind, our discriminative abilities and our thoughts not just to analyse and compare one thing with another, but to examine and investigate in terms of experience. We awaken to the breath — "It's like this" — awaken to the sensitive state that we're in — "It's like this" — awaken to the irritations that we experience as conditions that contact and irritate our senses, to our own obsessions and emotional habits, whatever they might be, putting them in perspective rather than seeing them as something to get rid of. It's something to awaken to, a change from pushing away, resisting and denying, towards awakening, accepting and welcoming.

In the First Noble Truth, the Buddha proclaimed that there is *dukkha* (suffering). It is put into the context of a 'Noble Truth' rather than a dismal reality. If we look at it as a dismal reality, what happens? "Life is just suffering, it's all just suffering. You get old; you get sick and then die. You have to lose all your friends. 'All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.' That's all it's about; it's just *dukkha* from beginning to end". There's nothing noble in that, is there? It's just pessimistic and depressing seeing it in terms of "I don't like it. I don't want suffering. What a bad joke,

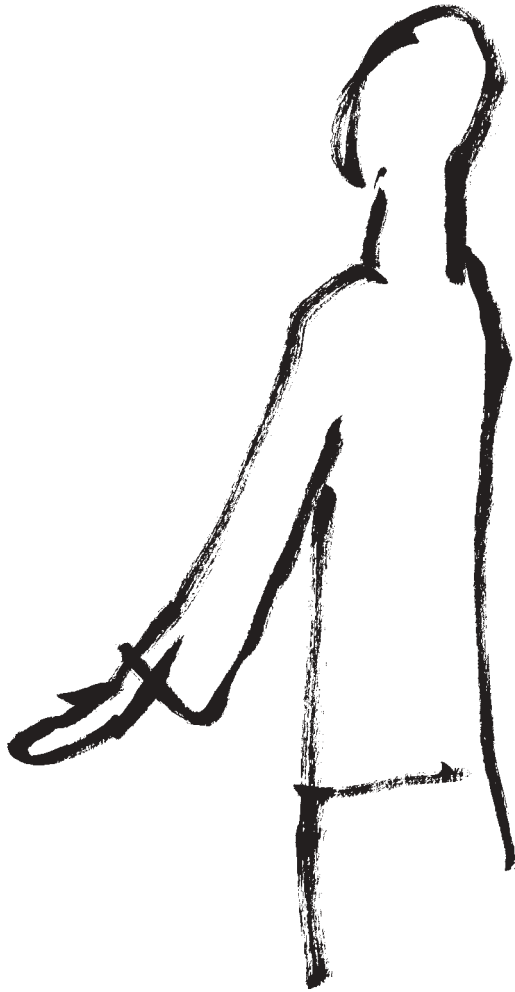
what a lousy joke God played on us creating this mess, and me being born in this mess, to live just to get old. What am I living for? Just to get old, get sick and die". Of course, that's very depressing. That's not a Noble Truth. You're creating a problem around the way things are. With a Noble Truth "there is suffering." And the advice, the prescription to deal with this suffering, is to welcome it, to understand it, to open to it, to admit it, to begin to notice and accept it. This gives rise to the willingness to embrace and learn from that which we don't like and don't want: the pain, the frustration and the irritation, whether it's physical, mental or emotional.

To understand suffering is to open to it. We say, "We understand suffering because it's...". We rationalise it, but that's not understanding. It's welcoming and embracing the suffering that we are experiencing — our frustration, our despair, our pain, the irritation, the boredom, fear and desires — just welcoming, opening, accepting. Then this is a Noble Truth, isn't it? Our humanity then is being noble; it's an *ariyan* truth. This word *ariya* means 'noble'. What is this English word 'noble'? It's a kind of grand quality; it rises up. If you're noble, you rise up to things. You don't just say, "Oh, life is misery and I want to hide away from it. I can't bear it." There's nothing noble in that. If you're brought up as Christian, you find yourself blaming suffering on God: "God, why did you create this mess? It's your fault." I used to feel furious with God. "If I were God, I would have created a much better situation than this one." I remember as a child thinking that if I were God I wouldn't have created pain. You fall down and hurt

yourself and you think, “Why does God allow this? Why did He create a realm where there is so much pain? If I were God and I created the world, I wouldn’t have created pain.” My mother could never answer that question very well, because the pain is something that shouldn’t be, there’s something wrong. Or is pain a Noble Truth? Is old age a Noble Truth? Is loss, separation and all these experiences that we all have to have in this form, in this human realm? Seeing it in terms of complaining and blaming, or in terms of a Noble Truth — this is what I’m pointing to.

We can look at things in different ways. We can choose. We’re not just stuck with one programme and being its victim. If we’ve only got the programme from the culture and the family that we’re born into, it might not be a very good programme, actually. Sometimes it is, sometimes it’s fairly alright. But still, why should we consider ourselves as just limited to that experience alone, when we have this opportunity to explore, to investigate reality and know in a direct way. Enlightenment is not something remote and impossible. You can see it in terms of some very abstract state that you hold up and aim for but that you don’t think you’ll ever achieve. That way of thinking is based on what? It’s when you think of yourself as *this* kind of person.

If I depended on my personality, I couldn’t do anything. I’d never hope to get enlightened because my personality can’t possibly conceive of myself as a person that could be enlightened. My personality is conditioned to think of myself in terms of what’s wrong



with me, coming from a competitive society where you are very much aware of who's better and who's worse, who's above and who's below. So I can't trust that. My personal habits are conditioned things, so they're not flexible in themselves. If you just attach to or interpret experience through those perceptions and never learn to look at things in any other way, then you are stuck with a limited view and that can be a very depressing way to live your life.

If we begin to wake up and we see beyond the rigid dualism, the puritanical dualism, or the initial programme that we acquire through our family and social background. Trust in your own intuitive awakened sense. Don't trust in your views and opinions about anything: about yourself, about Buddhism or the world, for these views are often times very biased. We get very biased views about each other: we have racial prejudices, class identities, ethnic biases and feelings of social superiority. These are not to be trusted.

We can look at things in different ways. We don't have to look at something always from the conditioning that we have acquired. So when the Buddha talks about the Buddha-mind, it's very flexible and malleable; it's universal. We can see things in so many different ways. The mind has a radiant quality to it. Consciousness has a radiance; it has a light itself. So when we begin to let go of always limiting ourselves through the distortions of our conditioned mental states, then we begin to understand, see things as they really are, know the Dhamma — enlightenment. This is not

something distant, remote and impossible — unless you want to hold to those views from a personal attitude about them. You can be holding these perceptions so high that it's way beyond your personal ability to achieve them. This then is because you haven't awakened to what you're doing. You're merely operating from a conditioned view of everything.

There is *dukkha* (suffering), and *dukkha* should be welcomed. This is my new interpretation! The usual translation is, “*dukkha* should be understood” and my new rendering of it is, “*dukkha* should be welcomed”. How's that? Try that one. You can experiment with these different words. You don't have to think, “Pāli scriptures say ‘understand’, they don't say ‘welcome’!” Pāli scriptures don't say ‘understand’, they use a Pāli word that we translate as ‘understand’. Maybe we don't understand what ‘understand’ means. Did you ever think about that? Maybe we don't understand our own language. We're so limited to a particular narrow view of the word ‘understand’ that we can't really expand it. If we have a broader view then we can experiment with the words. Just observe the effect.

“So I say ‘welcoming’ now because I found the *real* translation for this, and anyone who goes back to using ‘understand’ is somehow not right. My view, my particular translation is...” Then that is getting into another rigid, arrogant approach. I'm not interested in proving that I'm right, that my translations are the best, but just seeing how they work, what the effect is in the here-and-now. I am sharing this with you as a way of encouraging you to have that right and that freedom

to know yourself. You don't always have to try and fit yourself into the views and opinions even of our tradition with its orthodox forms or definitions, which are our particular group's way of looking at things.

"There is *dukkha*, and *dukkha* should be welcomed. *Dukkha* has been welcomed." What is that like? Try that one. I don't know if it works for you, but it does for me, because my character tendency is to push *dukkha* away. That's my conditioning, my personality. "Suffering? Push it away; don't want it." Somebody else's suffering — I see somebody suffering and I don't want to go near them, I want to push away from them. There's a problem — "Ajahn Sumedho, I've got a problem" — push away; I don't want a problem. This is my character tendency, to resist. I don't want to know about the suffering. Tell me about the good things. How are you today? "I'm fine, Ajahn Sumedho. I just love it here at Amarāvati. I love being a monk. I just adore the Dhamma and the Theravāda form and the Vinaya (monastic discipline). I love the whole thing." Oh, that makes me feel so good. Tell me more. And I go to somebody else: How are *you* this morning? "Ugh! This life is such a dreary, miserable thing. I'm fed up. I want to disrobe." I don't want to hear that; don't tell me that.

We can go around trying to make people make us feel good. Tell me the good things, because that makes me feel good. Don't tell me the bad stuff, because that makes me feel bad. I don't want to feel bad. I don't want suffering; I don't welcome it, I want to get rid of it. Therefore, I'm going to try and live my life so that I can get as much of the good stuff as I can and push away



the bad stuff. But in this new translation of “There’s suffering and suffering should be welcomed,” it changes, doesn’t it? You see the suffering — your own, or others’ problems, difficulties and so forth — as things to welcome rather than as things to run away from or to push away.

We have been on retreat for the past week. I really like formal practice, I like to sit here and face the shrine. I like the temple; it’s a very pleasant place to sit. I sit on this triangular cushion that just supports the spine, so I can sit very comfortably for long periods of time. I look at the shrine and the mind goes very still and quiet. Then when I look around and face you... What happens when I’m looking at all of you? This is just a way of contemplating. When I look at the shrine, all the things on the shrine bring peace and calm. There are candles and incense and the Buddha image, things that aren’t *dukkha* for me. They inspire, they’re pleasing, they aren’t irritating and they do not cause me any kind of unpleasant feelings. If I don’t particularly want to look at them, I can just close my eyes and not look at anything. But then turning around and you’re all here — what happens? It brings up a sense of there being so many possibilities. All these different people, some of whom I don’t even know, some others who I think I know. I’ve got views about some of you — you’re like this and you’re like that. I’ve got memories and each person will bring up certain memories, some pleasant, some unpleasant. Some people have different ways of moving and acting and saying things that bring up different feelings in my mind, in my consciousness. If I think, “Oh, I can’t

bear this”, then the world is like that. I have to immediately turn around again and look at the shrine. If, on the other hand, when I’m looking at the shrine, I begin to allow the awareness to take me to non-grasping, to the reality of non-attachment. If I really know this, rather than merely depend on the lack of stimulation for it, then rather than having to turn away from the community in order to get it, I can turn toward the community. It’s not dependent on facing the shrine. In this way we’re beginning to awaken to reality rather than toward a conditioned experience that we become very dependent upon.

We talk of taking refuge in Sangha, we can define Sangha in terms of the four pairs, the eight kinds of noble beings. How many fit into that description? How many of your egos can think of yourself as *sotāpanna-magga*, *sotāpanna-phala*, *sakadāgāmi-magga*, *sakadāgāmi-phala*, *anāgāmi-magga*, *anāgāmi-phala*, *arahatta-magga*, *arahattā-phala*\*? Which one are you? How can I take refuge in four pairs and eight kinds of noble beings? It’s very abstract. These sages, ideal beings somewhere — maybe? Or are they here? This monk, or that nun? What’s the refuge in Sangha then? Do we want to make it abstract? Is it up to me to decide who’s a *sotāpanna*, *sakadāgāmi* and so forth, to figure out who I can take refuge with?

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\*These are the 8 kinds of noble beings: one realising the path of stream-entry, one realising the fruition of stream-entry; one realising the path of once-return, one realising the fruition of once-return; one realising the path of non-return, one realising the fruition of non-return; one realising the path of arahantship, one realising the fruition of arahantship.

Then it's just a matter of my ego again. Here I am — this person, trying to decide what somebody else is.

It's taking these words like Sangha and making them work for you. Make it practical. We have the same refuge; we're the Sangha. Our refuge is in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, not in personal attitudes or preferences, habits or views and opinions. When we see each other in terms of Sangha or as *devadūtas*, it's a way of looking at each other that is beginning to appreciate, respect and get beyond personal preference, personal views, personal reactivity. But we're not trying to annihilate that, because the *dukkha* we welcome is all this personal reactivity. Why I feel angry, why I feel jealous, why I feel rejected or such like — it's not trying to dismiss it. But as we trust in this awakened state, then we can welcome our own feelings — foolish feelings or neurotic habits — we can welcome these things in terms of a Noble Truth rather than as personal faults.



# The Sound of Silence

Somebody referred to the sound of silence as a cosmic hum, a scintillating almost electric background sound. Even though it's going on all the time we don't generally notice it, but when your mind is open and relaxed you begin to hear it. I found this a very useful reference because in order to hear it, to notice it, you have to be in a relaxed state of awareness. People try to find this on a descriptive level. They go on a ten day retreat trying to find the sound of silence and then they say "I can't hear it, what's wrong with me?" They are trying to find something. But it's not something you have to find — rather you just open to it: it's the ability to listen, with your mind in a receptive state, which makes it possible to hear the sound of silence. You're not trying to solve any problems but just listening. You're putting your mind into a state of receptive awareness. It's awareness that is willing to receive whatever is, and one of the things you begin to recognise in that, is the sound of silence.

Some people become averse to the sound of silence. One woman started hearing it and she wanted it to stop, so she resisted it. She said, "I used to have peaceful meditations. Now all I hear is that blasted sound and I'm trying to stop it. Before I never heard it, now I sit down and immediately I hear zzzz." She was

creating aversion toward the way it is: “I don’t want that”. She was creating suffering around the sound of silence. Rather than creating suffering, the sound of silence can help to focus the mind, because when aware of it, the mind is in a very expanded state. This state of mind is one which welcomes whatever arises in consciousness; it’s not a state where you are excluding anything. The sound of silence is like infinite space because it includes all other sounds, everything, it gives a sense of expansion, unlimitedness, infinity. Other sounds come and go, change and move accordingly but it is like a continuum, a stream.

I was once giving a retreat in Chang Mai, Northern Thailand, in a lovely mountain resort with a waterfall and stream. The meditation hall had been built right by the stream and the sound of the waterfall was continuous and quite loud. Somebody on the retreat became very averse to the sound of the stream, “I can’t meditate here, it’s too noisy; the sound of the stream is just too much, I can’t bear it”. You can either listen to and open your mind to the sound, or resist it, in which case you are fighting and resisting, and that creates suffering.

I noticed the sound of the waterfall and the stream. The sound of silence was in the background as well. In fact the sound of silence became the stronger and more obvious sound but it did not obliterate the sound of the stream, they worked together. The sound of the stream did not obliterate or cover up the sound of silence.



So it's like a radar. The mind is in a very wide, expansive state of awareness: including open to and receptive, rather than shut off, closed and controlled. So notice this and contemplate this experience and then just concentrate your attention on the sound of silence. If you think about it, think of it in terms of being like a blessing, grace, or a lovely kind of feeling, of being opened, rather than as a buzz in the ear, in which case you think that its tinnitus or some diseases. If you start contemplating it as the sound of angels, a cosmic or primordial sound, blessing every moment as we open to it, we then feel this sense of being blessed. So reflecting in this way, in a positive way toward it, helps us to take an interest in it and get a good feeling from it.

Listening to the sound of silence you can begin to contemplate non-thinking, because when you are just listening to the cosmic sound, there is no thought, it's like this — emptiness, no-self. When you're just with the cosmic sound alone, there is pure attention, there is no sense of a person or personality, of me and mine. This points to *anattā* (not-self).

Relax into the sound, don't try to force attention onto it. Just have a sense of relaxing and resting, peacefulness. Try counting to say, ten to sustain listening to the sound of silence. 'one, two, three ... nine, ten.' The mind is not used to resting in that way, it's used to thinking and to restless mental activities. It takes a while to calm, to relax and to rest in this silence of the mind.



In the silence, you can also be aware of any emotions that arise. It's not an annihilating emptiness, it's not a sterile nothingness, it's full and embracing. You can be aware of the movements of emotions, doubts, memories or feelings that start to become conscious. It embraces them, it's not judging them, resisting or even being fascinated with them. It's just recognizing and realizing the way it is.

We tend to use the word 'sound' in terms of how the mind has been perceptually conditioned. We connect sound with the ears. That's why the sound of silence is heard as if it were a buzzing in the ears, because the impression of sound is always connected with the ears. But you can plug your ears up and you can still hear it. When you're swimming under water you can still hear it. So what is it?

Then you start to realize that it's everywhere and not just in the ears. That perception of the sound of silence being heard in the ears is the same misperception as thinking that the mind is in the brain. You're changing from that very conditioned way of experiencing life, which arises through this sense of self and the culturally conditioned attitudes we hold, to a much wider understanding of the way it is.

It's like the perception of the mind as being in the body. Through intuitive awareness we can see that the body is in the mind. Right now you are in my mind; all of you in this hall, you're in the mind. On the conventional level, for each one of us our mind is in our head — you're sitting over there with a mind in your head —

all these different heads with minds in them. But then in terms of mind, I'm sitting here on the high seat, I can see you with my eyes, and you're in the mind, you're not in my head. I can't say you're all in my brain. The mind has no limit to it.

So then one can see that the body is more like a radio, more like a conscious entity in the universe that picks up things. Being born as a separate entity in the universe, we are a point of light, we are a conscious being in a separate form. We tend to assume we are a fixed person, a solid physical person but are we something greater than that — not so limited, heavy and fixed as our cultural conditioning makes it sound, or as we tend to perceive it.

The sound of silence isn't mine, nor is it in my head, but this form is able to recognize it and know things as they are. This knowing is not a cultural knowing, it's not like interpreting everything from my cultural conditioning; it's seeing things as they are, in a direct way, which is not dependent on cultural attitudes. So we really begin to understand *anattā* (not-self), which enables us to see that we are all connected, we are one. We are not, as we appear to be, a collection of totally separate entities; if you start contemplating like this, you begin to expand your awareness to include rather than to define.

So in terms of meditation, we are establishing awareness in the present, collecting, recollecting, contemplating one-pointedness in the present — the

body, the breath, the sound of silence. Then we can bring to this an attitude of *mettā* (loving-kindness), which is a way of relating to and recognizing conditioned phenomena without judging them. Without this attitude we tend to make value-judgements about what we experience on a personal level. One person is feeling peace, another person is feeling restless, another person is feeling inspired, another person is feeling bored, another person high, another low; or you're having good or bad thoughts, stupid or useful thoughts, which are judgments about the quality of the experience that each one of us is having. In terms of knowing, we are knowing that thought is a conditioned arising and ceasing. Even bad thoughts or horrible thoughts arise and cease, just like good thoughts. It's not a matter of passing judgement about how bad you are because you are having bad thoughts, it's about the ability to recognise thought, and to see that the nature of thought is impermanent, changing, not-self. So now just use this cosmic hum, this gentle stream of flowing scintillating sound. Just get familiar with it.

Sometimes with emotional experience we can get wound up about something and sometimes have strong emotional feelings such as being indignant or upset — “ I'm not standing for that; I've had enough”. When that happens, go into the sound of silence and count to five, to ten, and see what happens. Experiment with it, right at this moment. “ I'm totally fed up, I've had enough, this is it!” Then go into the silence. I used to like to play with this, when I used to suffer from indignation, exasperation and being fed

up. I like that word 'fed-up', you can say it with such conviction.

This "cosmic" sound, the sound of silence, is really a natural sound. That's why when you learn to rest with it, it's sustainable; it's not created by you. It's not like you're creating a refined state that depends on conditions to support it. To sustain any kind of refined state you have to have very refined conditions supporting it. You can't have coarse, noisy, raucous, nasty things happening and still sustain a sense of refinement in your mind. To have a refined mental state you have to have silence, few demands, no noise, no distractions, no quarrelling, wars, explosions, just a very lovely scene where everything is very precious and controlled. When we get into that state, we can get very precious. Everybody whispers to each other in gentle tones. Then when somebody says "agh" it really shatters us and we get very upset because we have become so sensitive.

With the sound of silence, you begin to hear it wherever you are — in the middle of London, in a traffic jam in Bangkok, in a heated argument with somebody, when the chainsaw is going, when the pneumatic drill, the lawn mower and the chain saw are going at the same time, even when there is music! So learning to detect it and tuning into it is like a challenge. Sometimes people say: "I can't hear it; there's too much noise." If you are resisting the noise you can't hear the sound of silence, but if you open to it then you begin to hear the gentle scintillating hum, even with the pneumatic drill blasting away.

Listening to the sound of silence allows us to integrate mindfulness/meditation into movement, work, business. If you are in the kitchen washing dishes, walking from here back to your room or driving a car, you are able to listen to the sound of silence at the same time. It does not make you heedless. It allows you to be fully with what you are doing. It is not a distracting thing that makes you heedless when you are washing the dishes, it increases your mindfulness. It helps you to wash the dishes fully and really be with the washing of the dishes, rather than just washing the dishes and being with all kinds of other things. When you're walking from here back to your room, you could be thinking about everything else, but using the sound of silence helps you to be with walking, being mindful and with the very action that's happening in the present.

Sometimes this sound of silence will become very loud and quite unpleasant, but it won't stay that way. I remember one time it was incredibly loud, ear-splitting. I thought "something's going wrong." Then it changed and I tried to get it loud again and couldn't. It's not something that is dangerous. It depends how you look at it. If you resist it or are negative to it, you're creating that negativity towards it. If you relax and open, then you feel this gently scintillating background sound that is peaceful, calming and restful. You begin to recognise emptiness — it's not some vague idea that if you practise meditation you might experience emptiness some day. It's not a vague kind of thing, its very direct.

Then in that emptiness contemplate what 'self' is. When you become a personality what happens? You start thinking, grasping your feelings, then you become a monk or nun, man or woman, a personality, Pisces, Aries, an Asian or a European, an American, old man, young woman, or whatever. It's through thinking, grasping at the *khandhas*, that we start getting wound up into that, and then we become something. But in this emptiness there is no nationality. It's a pure intelligence, it does not belong to anybody or any group. So then you start recognising when you've become somebody and nobody, when there is *attā* and *anattā*.

In the emptiness there is no-self, no Ajahn Sumedho right now. "But I want to tell you about my personal history and all my qualifications and my achievements in the holy life over the past thirty-three years. I'm abbot of the monastery, considered a 'VIB', very important *bhikkhu* (monk) and I want you to respect me and treat me properly because you get a lot of merit for being kind to old people! That's Ajahn Sumedho!!" Or, "you don't have to respect me at all, it does not matter to me in the slightest I can take it if you don't like me, or if you criticise me and find fault with me, it's okay, I'm quite willing to bear it because I've sacrificed a lot for all of you," but that's Ajahn Sumedho again. Born again and then gone! — Empty.

Just by exploring this you really get to understand what *attā* (self) is, how you become a personality and also to see that when there is no person there is still awareness. It's an intelligent awareness; it's not an

unconscious dull stupidity, it's a bright, clear, intelligent emptiness. When you become a personality through having thoughts like: feeling sorry for yourself, views and opinions, self-criticism and so forth, and then it stops — there is the silence. But still the silence is bright and clear, intelligent. I prefer this silence rather than this endless proliferating nattering that goes on in the mind.

I used to have what I call an 'inner tyrant', a bad habit that I picked up of always criticising myself. It's a real tyrant — there is nobody in this world that has been more tyrannical, critical or nasty to me than I have. Even the most critical person, however much they have harmed and made me miserable, has never made me relentlessly miserable as much as I have myself, as a result of this inner tyrant. It's a real wet blanket of a tyrant, no matter what I do it's never good enough. Even if everybody says, "Ajahn Sumedho, you gave such a wonderful *desanā* (a dhamma talk)", the inner tyrant says "You shouldn't have said this, you didn't say that right." It goes on, in an endless perpetual tirade of criticism and fault-finding. Yet it's just habit, I freed my mind from this habit, it does not have any footing anymore. I know exactly what it is, I no longer believe in it, or even try to get rid of it, I just know not to pursue it and just to let it dissolve into the silence.

That's a way of breaking a lot of these emotional habits we have that plague us and obsess our minds. You can actually train your mind, not through rejection or denial but through understanding and cultivating this silence. So don't use this silence as away of

annihilating or getting rid of what is arising in experience, but as a way of resolving and liberating your mind from the obsessive thoughts and negative attitudes that can endlessly plague conscious experience.



# The End of Suffering is Now

On a conventional level we easily conceive the conditions which we attach to. With *sati-paññā* and *sati-sampajañña* we begin to awaken ourselves to the way it is, rather than being committed to the conventional realities: just to emphasise the awareness before you become something. I'm trying to get this point across, so I think it needs to be repeated many times, because even though it looks very simple, the mind-set is definitely geared to believe in the personality view as our reality. Most of you are very committed to yourselves as personalities and the reality of yourself as a person is very much ingrained.

The term *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* can be translated as 'personality-view' or 'the ego'. It means that the perceptions that we hold in regard to our identity with the five *khandhas* (groups); the body, the feelings, the perceptions, the conceptions and consciousness, as belonging to this person. In investigating this we are not grasping the perception of 'no person' either. We can take the concept of *anattā* and grasp that, and say, "There's no self because the Buddha said there's *anattā*!" but then we're also grasping a perception. Grasping a perception of yourself as a non-self, gets to be a bit ridiculous! Grasping perceptions is not the

way. If you grasp whatever conditions you create, you'll end up in the same place, suffering, as the result. Don't believe *me* either, this is for you to explore.

Instead of starting with a perception or a conception of anything, the Buddha established a way through awareness, through awakened attention. This is an immanent act in the present. You can grasp the idea of awakened attention and repeat that over and over again, but the simple act of paying attention is all that is necessary. There is this attention, *sati-sampajañña*, an intuitive awareness where the consciousness is with the present moment: "It's *this* way." It's beginning to explore *sakkāya-ditthi* in terms of the perceptions you regard and that you are attached to as yourself. That is why I keep emphasising deliberately to conceive yourself as a person: "I'm this person who has got to practise in order to become enlightened." Just take something like that: "I'm an unenlightened person who has come here to Amarāvātī in order to practise meditation so that I will become an enlightened person in the future." You can have comments about this, form perceptions about these perceptions, but that's not the point. Deliberately think this: "I am an unenlightened person..." Deliberately say that to yourself with attention, listening. This deliberate thinking allows us to listen to ourselves as we think.

When you are caught in the wandering mind, you lose yourself; you just go from one thought to another. One thought connects to another and you just get carried away. But deliberate thinking is not like wandering

thinking, is it? It's intentional, for you are choosing whatever you are going to think. The important thing is not the thought, or even the quality of the thought, whether it's stupid or intelligent, right or wrong, it's the attention, the ability to listen to the thinking that you are deliberately doing. Being aware of thinking in this way, what happens to me (and I assume will happen also to you — I don't know, maybe I'm just an exceptional case!) — is that before I start thinking "I am an unenlightened person..." there is a space, isn't there? There is an empty pause before you deliberately think. So notice that. That is just the way it is; there is no perception in that space, but there is attention to it, there is awareness, you are certainly aware of this before "I am an unenlightened person..." arises. Thinking about this is not wandering thinking, it's not judging or analysing, but just noticing: "It's like *this*." So when you deliberately think, you can also use thought to keep pointing to this, noticing the way it is.

With the pronoun 'I' in a sentence such as, "I am an unenlightened person..." listen to it and the words that follow and you will realise that you are creating this consciousness of yourself through the words that you are deliberately thinking. That which is aware of your thinking — what is that? Is that a person? Is it a person that is aware? Or is it pure awareness? Is this awareness personal, or does the person arise *in* that? This is exploring, investigating. By investigating you are actually getting to notice the way it is, the Dhamma, that there is actually no person who is being aware, but awareness will include what seems personal.

“I am an unenlightened person who needs to practise meditation in order to become an enlightened person in the future.” One assumes that “I am this body, with this past. I have this history. I am so many years old, born in such and such a place, I’ve done all these things and so I have a history to prove that this person exists.” I have a passport and a birth certificate, and people even want me to have a web-site on the Internet! But really there doesn’t seem to be any person in the awareness.

I find the more I am aware, my personal past seems totally unimportant and of no interest whatsoever. It doesn’t mean anything, actually. It’s just a few memories that you can turn up. Yet taking it from the personal view, if I get caught in myself, thinking about myself as a real personality, then suddenly I find my past important. An identity gives me the sense that I am a person. “I *have* a past, I *am* somebody. I am somebody important; somebody that may not be *terribly* important, but at least I feel connected to something in the past. I have a home, I have a heritage.” People talk about losing the sense of their identity now, because they’re refugees, their parents are dead, they’re of mixed race, or they don’t have any real clear identity of themselves as belonging to something in the past. The sense of a personality depends very much on proving that you are somebody, your education, your race, your accomplishments or lack of accomplishments, whether you are an interesting or uninteresting person, important or unimportant, a Very Important Person or a Very

## Unimportant Person!

In meditation we are not trying to deny personality, we are not trying to convince ourselves that we are non-people, grasping ideas that “I have no nationality, I have no sex, I have no class, I have no race, the pure Dhamma is my true identity”. That’s still another identity, isn’t it? Now that’s not it. It’s not about grasping the concepts of no-self. It is in realising, in noting through awakened attention the way things really are. Just in this simple exercise “I am an unenlightened person...” it is quite deliberate. You can say, “I am an enlightened person!” You can choose which you would like to be, enlightened or unenlightened. Most of us don’t dare to go around saying that we are enlightened, do we? It’s safer to go around saying, “I am an unenlightened person” because if you say, “I am an enlightened person”, someone is going to challenge you: “You don’t look very enlightened to me!” Anyway, whatever is fair enough, whether “I am an unenlightened person” or “I am an enlightened person”; “I am an enlightened non-person” or “I am an unenlightened non-person”— the words are not really important, it’s the attention that matters.

I have found this very revealing. When I did this exercise it became very clear what awareness is – *sati-sampajañña*, mindfulness, awareness, apperception. Then the thinking, the perceptions arise. So deliberately thinking, “I am an unenlightened person...” arises in this awareness. This awareness is not a perception, is it? It’s an apperception; it includes perception. Perceptions arise and cease. It’s

not personal, it doesn't have any Ajahn Sumedho-quality to it, it's not male or female, *bhikkhu* or *Sīladharā* (nun), or anything like that; it has no quality on the conventional, conditioned level. It is like nothing, like nothing. This awareness — “I am an unenlightened person...” — and then nothing, there's no person. So you are exploring, you are investigating these gaps before “I” and after “I”. You say “I” — there's *sati-sampajañña*, there's the sound of silence, isn't there? “I am” arises in this awareness, this consciousness. That, as you investigate it, you can question.

This awareness is not a creation, is it? I am creating the “I am...”. What is more real than “I am an unenlightened person” is this awareness, *sati-sampajañña*. That is the continuous one, that's what sustains, and the sense of yourself as a person can go any which way. As you think about yourself and who you are, who you should be, who you would like to be, who you do not want to be, how good or bad, wonderful or horrible you are, all this whirls around, it goes all over the place. One moment you can feel “I am a really wonderful person”, the next moment you can feel “I am an absolutely hopeless, horrible person”. But if you take refuge in awareness, then whatever you are thinking does not make much difference, because your refuge is in this ability of awareness, rather than in the gyrations and fluctuations of the self-view, of your *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* habits.

Just notice how being a person is really like a yo-yo; it goes up and down all the time. With praise you feel

you're wonderful, you *are* wonderful — then you're a hopeless case, you're depressed, a hopeless victim of circumstances. You win the lottery and you're elated; then somebody steals all the money and you're suicidal. This is because the personality is like that; it's very dependent. You can be hurt terribly on a personal level. Or you can be exhilarated: people find you just the most wonderful, thrilling, exciting personality, and you feel happy.

When I was a young monk, I used to pride myself on how well I kept the Vinaya discipline, that I was really, really good with the Vinaya. I really understood it and I was very strict. Then I stayed for a while on this island called Ko Sichang off the coast of Siraja with another monk. Later on this monk told somebody else that I didn't keep very good Vinaya. I wanted to murder him! So even Vinaya can be another form of the self-view — “How good a monk am I?” Then somebody says “Oh, Ajahn Sumedho is exemplary; a top-notch monk!” and that's wonderful. “He's a hopeless case; doesn't keep good Vinaya” and I want to murder. This is how untrustworthy the self is.

We can rise to great altruism and then sink to the most depraved depths in just a second. It's a totally untrustworthy state to put your refuge in, being a person of any kind. Even holding the view that “I am a good monk” is a pretty dodgy refuge. If that is all you know then someone says that you are not a very good monk and you're angry, you're hurt, you're offended. *Sati-sampajañña*, despite all the fluctuations, is constant. This is why I see it as a refuge. As you

recognise it, realise it, know it, and appreciate it, then it's what I call a refuge, because a refuge is not dependent on praise and blame, success and failure.

In learning to stop the thinking mind there are different kinds of methods. For example a Zen koan, or self-inquiry practice like asking "Who am I?" These kinds of techniques or expedient means that we find in Zen and Advaita Vedanta to stop the thinking mind so that you begin to notice the pure state of attention, where you are not caught in thinking and the assumptions of a self, where there is just pure awareness. That's when you hear the sound of silence, because your mind is just in that state of attention; in pure awareness there's no self, it's like *this*. Then to learn to relax into that, to trust it, but not to try and hold onto it. We can't even grasp the idea of that — "I've got to get the sound of silence and I've got to relax into it". This is the dodgy part of any kind of technique or instruction, because it is easy to grasp the idea. *Bhāvanā* (meditation or cultivation) isn't grasping ideas or coming from any position, but in this *paṭipadā*, this practice, it's recognising and realising through awakened awareness, through a direct knowing.

When the self starts to break up, some people find that it becomes very frightening, because it's like everything you have regarded as solid and real starts falling apart. I remember years ago, long before I was even a Buddhist, feeling threatened by certain radical ideas that tended to challenge the security of the world that I lived in. When it seems that somebody is threatening or challenging something that you depend



upon for a sense that everything is alright, you can get very angry and even violent because they are threatening “*my world, my security, my refuge.*” You can see why conservative people get very threatened by foreigners, radical ideas or anything that comes in and challenges the status-quo or what you are used to, because if that’s your world that you are really depending on to make you feel secure, and then when you are threatened you go into panic.

Reading about the horrible earthquake in India recently, they think that maybe a hundred thousand people have been killed. It just happened out of nowhere. Some schoolgirls were practising marching on the school ground for some festive parade they were engaging in, and the merchants were placing their ranges out in their shops. Just an average, normal day. Then suddenly, within five minutes these girls were all dead, killed from falling masonry. The whole town, twenty-five thousand people, were completely demolished within five minutes, just out of nowhere. Think what that would do to your mind! It’s really frightening to think what a dodgy realm we live in. When you explore what’s really going on in this planet, it seems pretty unsafe. Even though it looks solid, just looking around, we take it for granted, yet last week in Gujarat all of these people were killed. It seems like a solid and safe environment, then suddenly out of nowhere there’s an earthquake and the whole lot collapses on top of them. We can recognise that even without earthquakes, how easily we can have a heart attack, a brain haemorrhage, be hit by a car, a plane could crash from the flight path to Luton, or whatever.

In terms of this conditioned realm that we perceive, create and hold to, it is a very unstable, uncertain, undependable and changing condition in itself. That's just the way it is.

The Buddha pointed to the instability of conditioned phenomena, to their impermanence. This is not just a philosophy that he was expecting us to go along with. We explore and see the nature of the conditioned realm in just the way we experience it, the physical, the emotional and the mental. But that which is aware of it — your refuge is in this awakened awareness, rather than in trying to find or create a condition that will give us some sense of security. We are not trying to fool ourselves, to create a false sense of security by positive thinking. The refuge is in awakening to reality, because the unconditioned is reality. This awareness, this awakesness is the gate to the unconditioned. When we awaken, that is the unconditioned, the actual awakesness is that. The conditions are whatever they are — strong or weak, pleasant or painful, whatever.

“I am an unenlightened person who has to practise meditation *hard*. I must really work at it, get rid of my defilements and become an enlightened person some time in the future. I hope to attain stream-entry before I die, but if I don't, I hope that I will be reborn in a better realm.” We go on like that, creating more and more complications. People ask me, “Can we attain stream-entry? Are there any Arahants?” because we still think of stream-entry and Arahantship as a personal quality, don't we? We look at somebody and

say, “That monk over there is an Arahant!” We think that person is an Arahant or stream-enterer. That’s just the way the conditioned mind operates, it can’t help it, it can’t do anything else than that. So you can’t trust it, you can’t take refuge in your thoughts or your perceptions, but in awareness. That doesn’t seem like anything, it’s like nothing — but it’s everything. All the problems are resolved right there!

Your conditioned mind thinks, “It’s nothing, it doesn’t amount to anything. It’s not worth anything, you couldn’t sell it!” This is where we learn to trust in the ability to awaken, because if you think about it you’ll start doubting it all the time. “Am I really awake? Am I awake enough? Maybe I need to be asleep longer so that I can be awake later on. Maybe if I keep practising with ignorance I’ll get so fed up that I’ll give it up.” If you start with ignorance, how could you ever end up with wisdom? That doesn’t make any sense. Hitting your head on a wall, after a while you might give it up if you haven’t damaged your brain. It does feel good when you stop, doesn’t it? But instead of looking at it in that way, trust in this simple act of attention. Then explore and have confidence in your ability to use wisdom.

Many of you may think, “Oh, I don’t have any wisdom. I’m nobody. I haven’t had any real insight”. So you thoroughly convince yourself that you can’t do this. That’s the way it seems on the personal level, maybe you don’t feel that you have anything to offer on that level, but that’s another creation. That’s the same as “I am an unenlightened person...”. Whatever you think

you are, whether it's that you are the best or the worst, it's still a creation; you create that into the present. Whatever assumptions you have about yourself, no matter how reasonable they might be, it's still a creation in the present. By believing it, by thinking and holding to it, then you're continually creating yourself as some kind of personality.

The awakesness is not a creation; it's the immanent act of attention in the present. That is why developing this deliberate thinking "I am an unenlightened person..." is just a skilful means to really notice more carefully and continuously what it's like just to be mindful, to have pure awareness at the same time that you are creating yourself in whatever way you want as a person. You get this sense that your self-view is definitely a mental object; it comes and goes. You can't sustain "I am an unenlightened person...". How do you sustain that one? Think it all the time? If you went around saying "I am an unenlightened person..." all the time they would send you to a mental hospital. It arises and ceases, but the awareness is sustainable. That awareness is not created, it is not personal, but it *is* real.

Also recognise the ending, when "I am an unenlightened person who has got to practise meditation in order to become an enlightened person some time in the future" stops. Then there is the ringing silence; there's awareness. Conditions always arise and cease *now* in the present. The cessation is *now*. The ending of the condition is *now*. The end of the world is *now*. The end of self is *now*. The end of

suffering is *now*. You can see the arising, “I am...”, then the ending; and what remains when something has begun and ended is awareness. It’s like *this*. It’s bright, it’s clear, it’s pure, it’s alive. It’s not like a trance, it’s not dull, it’s not stupid. So this is just an encouragement, an ‘empowerment’ according to modern jargon. Do it! Go for it! Don’t just hang around on the edges thinking “I am an unenlightened person who has to practise really hard in order to become an enlightened person” and then after a while start grumbling, “Oh, I need more time!” and go into the usual plans and plots, views and opinions. If you start with ignorance you will end up with suffering. “*Avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*” in the teachings on dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*): *Avijjā*’ is ignorance, and that conditions (*paccayā*) the *saṅkhāras* (mental formations), that then affects everything and you end up with grief, sorrow, despair and anguish (*soka-parideva-dukkha-domanass-upāyāsā*) as a result. This is encouraging you to start not from *avijjā*, but from awareness (*vijjā*), from wisdom (*paññā*). Be that wisdom itself, rather than a person who isn’t wise, trying to become wise. As long as you hold to the view that “I’m not wise yet, but I hope to become wise”, then you’ll end up with grief, sorrow, despair and anguish. It’s that direct. It’s learning to trust in being the wisdom *now*, being awake.

Even though you may feel totally inadequate emotionally, doubtful or uncertain, frightened or terrified of it — emotions are like that. But be the awareness of the emotions: “Emotion is like *this*”. It’s

a reaction, because emotionally we are conditioned for ignorance. I am emotionally conditioned to be a person. I am emotionally conditioned to be Ajahn Sumedho. “Ajahn Sumedho, you are wonderful!” and the emotions go: “Oh?”, “Ajahn Sumedho, you are a horrible monk with terrible Vinaya!” and the emotions go “Grrrrr!!” Emotions are like that. If my security depends on being praised and loved, respected and appreciated, being successful and healthy, everything going nicely and everyone around me being in harmony, the world around me being so utterly sensitive to my needs, then I feel alright when everything else seems alright. But then it goes the other way — the earthquakes, the persecution, the abuse, the disrobing, the blame, the criticism and then I think “Ugh! Life is horrible. I can’t stand it any more! I’m so hurt, so wounded. I’ve tried so hard and nobody appreciates me, nobody loves me.” That’s the emotional dependency of the person; that’s personal conditioning.

Awareness includes those emotions as mental objects (*ārammaṇa*), rather than subjects. If you don’t know this, you tend to identify with your emotions and your emotions become yourself. You become this emotional thing that has become terribly upset because the world is not respecting you enough. Our refuge is in the deathless reality rather than in the transient and unstable conditions. If you trust in the awareness, then the self and the emotions about oneself, whatever they might be, can be seen in terms of what they are; not judged, not making any problem out of them, but just noticing: “It’s like *this*.”

# Don't Take it Personally

We have just three weeks left of the Vassa (rains retreat). The words in this sentence are perceptions of time and change, in the conditioned realm. 'Vassa' is a convention. The Autumn doesn't say, "I'm Autumn"; we call it Autumn. This is a convention that we use for communicating our cultural attitudes or moral agreements. *Paramattha-sacca* is ultimate reality; this is where we're getting beyond conventions. Conventions are made, they're made up and are dependent on other things. Things that are considered good in one conventional form are not considered appropriate in another. We have various biases or prejudices that we get from our culture and the conventions that we have. Just living in Europe we have the old biases of what the French are like and the Germans, Italians and so forth.

We have cultural attitudes as a way of perceiving things. We form these various opinions and views. That is why it's easy to have ethnic warfare and racial prejudices, class snobbery and so forth, because we never question the conventional reality that we have adopted. We just go along with it. We hold various views about our religion and our race and our culture and then compare it to somebody else's. On that level

we have ideals, say of democracy, equality and all that but we're still very much influenced by the conventional realities that we're conditioned by.

It takes quite a determined effort to get beyond your cultural conditioning. Being American, there was a lot that I just assumed; and I never realized how arrogant I could be until I had to live in another culture. I never saw how American idealism could be another blind spot. It could be like shoving our ideas down everybody's throat, saying that America knows what's good for everybody, how they should run their countries. When you're brought up to think that somehow you're in the most advanced society, that's an assumption. I don't think that I was taught this view in any intentional way. It was assumed. It was an underlying attitude.

It's hard to get beyond these assumptions, these things we pick up. We don't even know we have these attachments until they're reflected in some way and that's why living in different cultures helps. Living in Thailand helped me to see a lot of these things because the culture was so different. There was the whole attitude that came from living in a Buddhist monastery, where the emphasis was on reflection, mindfulness and wisdom. So that I wasn't just becoming a kind of ersatz Thai, "going native" as they say, but was learning to see the subtleties of attitude and assumptions that I was conditioned by, that may not be all that easily seen until one finds oneself suffering about something.



One of the problems that we have in meditation is compulsiveness. In our society we are brought up to be very obsessed and compulsive. There are so many 'shoulds'. When you're coming from ideas and ideals the result is that there are so many 'shoulds' in your vocabulary. This idealism has its beauty and it's not a matter of disregarding it, but of recognizing its limitations. This feeling that there is always something we've got to do, that there's something we haven't done that we should be doing, that we should be working harder than we're working, that we should be practising more than we're practising, that we should be more honest than we are, more open, more devout, better-natured and on and on like that. All of these are true. The 'shoulds' are usually right. If things were perfect, then I would be. Everything would be just perfect. I would be an ideal and my society would be ideal. Amarāvātī would fit the ideal; we would all be perfect. Then there is nothing more you should do because you've already reached the top. But that's not the way life is.

An idea is something we create, isn't it? You take your ideas from what's the best or what's the most beautiful, perfect, fair or just. So the Buddha is pointing to the way life is, which is its changingness. It doesn't stick at the best, does it? You can't hold onto anything. Say for instance that you contemplate some flowers, like roses. Sometimes you get a perfect rose just at its peak, absolutely perfect in its form, its colour, its fragrance, but you can't keep it that way. It lasts that way very briefly before it starts going the other way and then you just want to get rid of it, throw

it out and get another one.

So with mindfulness we're aware of this changingness, the way things change. In terms of our own experience in meditation, we're aware of how things change, like moods and feelings. When we think of how things 'should' be, we get back into ideas again and then compare ourselves to ideas that we have, what good practice is, how many hours a day one should sit in meditation, how one should do this and how one should do that and on and on like this. We can operate from these ideas which are often very good ideas. But the problem with this, even if one performs according to all these 'shoulds', is that there is always something more, always something that could be better than this. It goes on endlessly. You never get to the root of the problem. You just go on and on to where there's always this feeling that there's something more you *should* be doing. When we reach the end of this, we just give up sometimes, thinking "I've had enough of this. To hell with it. I'm just going to enjoy life. I'll disrobe and just go out and have a good time; eat, drink and make merry until I die." Because one can only be driven so far. You can't sustain it and you reach a point where it doesn't work anymore.

To listen to 'should' is a fair enough way to think about something. Some people think we shouldn't even think 'should'! To recognize how things affect us, just notice the feeling that there is something more that I think I have to do. An example of this is the story about a recurring dream that I used to have when I first went to stay with Luang Por Chah. In 1963, I finished my

Master's Degree in Berkeley and that was a year of really compulsive and intense study. I couldn't enjoy anything because every time I went out and tried to enjoy myself I would think, "You've got your exam coming. You've got to pass your Master's Degree". I'd go to a party and try to relax and this voice would say, "You shouldn't be here. You've got to take this exam and you're not ready. You're not good enough for it". So that whole year, I couldn't enjoy myself. I just kept driving myself. After I finished my Master's Degree I couldn't read a book for about six months. My mind just wouldn't concentrate. I went through Peace Corps training in Hawaii after that and they wanted me to read all these things and I couldn't read them. I couldn't even read the instructions. I was overloaded. But that left a kind of intensity; the way I would approach anything would be either to think, "I can't do it" and give up totally or get into the old compulsive mode.

When I went to stay with Luang Por Chah I kept having this recurring dream as a result of putting a lot of effort into my practice. In the dream, I'd be going into this coffee shop. I'd sit down, order a cup of coffee and a nice pastry, and then the voice would say, "You shouldn't be here. You should be studying for the exam". That would be the recurring theme for this dream which I would have quite often. I'd ask myself, "What's it telling me?" And then my compulsive mind kept thinking, "There's something I'm not doing that I should be doing. I should be practising more. I should be more mindful. I shouldn't be sleeping so much." I wasn't actually sleeping very much at all. I kept

thinking this was a message telling me there is something I'm not doing that I should be doing. I kept trying to think, "What could it be?" I couldn't drive myself any more than I was already doing. I couldn't figure it out. Then one morning after I had this dream, I woke up and I had the answer and the answer was that there wasn't any examination!

I just realized that I lived my life as if I was always going to be tested or brought before the authorities and put to the test and that I was never ready or never good enough. There was always more. I could study more. I could read more. I could do things more. I shouldn't be lazy, I shouldn't enjoy life because this would be wasting my time, because the exam is coming and I'm not ready for it. It was a whole kind of emotional conditioning that I had acquired because the school system in the States is very competitive. You start when you're five years old and you just keep going.

So I had the insight that there wasn't any exam, that I just thought there was, and that I had always lived my life with this attitude that there was going to be a big test that I wasn't prepared for. Maybe it was also from my religious background: you're going to be tested when you die, to see whether you've been good enough to go to heaven and if not you'll go to hell. There's always this sense that you've got to do something. You're not good enough. I've got too many faults. I've got to get rid of them. I've got to become something that I'm not. The way I am is not good enough.

When I came into monastic life, I brought this tendency of being driven into how I practised and I could do it for a while but then I realized that if I was going to be a monk that wasn't the purpose of the life. It wasn't meant to be that way. It was just how I was interpreting monasticism from this compulsive viewpoint. So I stopped having the dream once I got the answer to the riddle.

One of first three fetters is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* or 'personality view'. We acquire this after we're born. We're not born with a personality view. It's something we acquire. Of course when you're brought up in a very competitive system you see yourself in comparison with others and with ideals. Your value and worth is very much related to what's considered the best and who's the best. And if you don't fit into the best category, you sometimes see yourself in terms of not being good enough. Even the people whom I used to think of as the best didn't think of themselves in that way. Sometimes we think some people are much happier because we project that onto them. We think they are better off than we are.

When the Buddha emphasized mindfulness as the way, he was pointing to the way things are, rather than to the best. In the morning at Wat Pah Pong they'd have these readings from the *suttas* about what a monk should be and they were all according to the ideal standard. Wondering how to interpret this wanting to live up to such high standards gave rise to a feeling of "Can I really do all that?" One can feel discouraged and despairing because one is looking

at life in terms of ideals. But then the teaching of the Buddha isn't based on ideals but on Dhamma, the way things are.

In *vipassanā* (insight meditation) you're really tuning into impermanence, into tragedy. This isn't a matter of how things should be but of how they are. All conditioned phenomena are impermanent. It's not that one is saying that "All conditioned phenomena should be impermanent". They are. It's a matter of opening to impermanence. It's not trying to project this idea onto life but of using your intuitive mind to open, to watch, to pay attention. Then you're aware of the changingness.

You're aware of even your own compulsive attitude, "There's something I've got to do." You're aware of that compulsive feeling, attitude, or belief that I'm a person with a lot of faults and weaknesses, which is easy to believe is being honest and realistic. Then we think that in order to become an enlightened being we've got to get over these and get rid of them in some way and become an Arahant. One sees that this is how the mind works. This way of thinking is often what we read into the scriptures. But in terms of reflective awareness, you really notice that such a way of thinking is something you've created in your mind: "I am a person with a lot of faults and weaknesses and I've got to practise hard in order to overcome them." That's something I'm creating in my mind. I'm creating that attitude. That's not the truth, that's a creation. That which is aware of all this is the awakened state of being. You start to notice the difference between this



awareness and what you create by habits based on attachments.

We use this word '*Buddho*', the name 'Buddha' itself, the one who knows. It's a significant word because it is pointing to a state of attention, of knowing directly, of intuitive awareness, of wisdom. So there's no person. If I say, "I'm Buddha", then that's coming from personality again, identity. Thinking "I am the Buddha" doesn't work. We have refuge in Buddha: "*Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.*" That's a kind of convention too, but it points to a reality that we can begin to trust in, which is awareness. Because the Buddha is "*Buddho*", the one who knows, that which knows, which is awake and aware. It's awakeness. It's not judgmental or critical. The Buddha is not saying, "You should be like this and you shouldn't be like that". It's knowing that all conditioned phenomena *are like this*. Whereas if you're brought up in a religion like Christianity, God tells you what you should be. At least this is the way I was taught: how you should be a good boy and that every time you're bad you hurt God's feelings. If I told a lie, God would be very disappointed in me. This is a kind of moral training as a child. It's what your parents think, isn't it? It's all mixed up with perceptions of parents and God as a kind of parental figure.

So awakenedness, then, is learning to listen and trust in the most simple state of being. It's not *jhāna* or absorption in anything. It's pure attention. So if you trust in this purity, there are no faults in purity, are there? It's perfect. There's no impurity. This is where



to trust, in this attentiveness to the present. Once you try to find it, then you start going into doubt. Trust it rather than think about it. Just trust in the immanent act of being awake, attentive in this moment. When I do this, my mind relaxes. I hear the sound of silence. There's no self. There's purity. If I start feeling that I should be doing something then I'm aware of it. I'm aware of the *kamma-vipāka* (result of action) of having been through the American education system and having driven myself through this incredibly compulsive way of living life. So the *kamma-vipāka* arises. In this state of purity, it's not personal. It's not saying, "Ajahn Sumedho is pure now." It's beyond that. You're not talking about it in any kind of personal way. It's a recognition, a realization. It's what you truly are, it's not a creation. I'm not creating the purity. I'm not creating an ideal of it and then deluding myself with it.

This is where trusting comes in, because your personality view is not going to trust it. Your personality view is going to say, "There's nothing pure about you. You just had some dirty thoughts. You're really feeling pretty upset and angry about something someone said about you. After all these years, you're still filled with impurities." This is the old inner tyrant. This is the personality view. Personality view is a tyrant. It's the victim and the victimizer. As the victim it says, "Poor me. I'm so impure", whilst as the accuser it says, "You're not good enough, you're impure". It's both. You can't trust it. Don't take refuge in being a victim or in being a victimizer. But you can trust in this awakened awareness. And that trust is humbling. It

isn't like believing in something. It's learning to relax and be. Trust in the ability simply to be here, open and receptive to whatever is happening now. Even if what's happening is nasty or whatever the conditions you're experiencing are, that's not a problem if you trust in this purity.

With the Vinaya, for example, the idea of trying to keep the Vinaya pure, the personality view attaches even to this: "Is my Vinaya as pure as someone else's or not as pure?" Then you're just using this convention to increase the sense of personal worth or worthlessness. If you think you're more pure than the rest, then that's arrogance, holier-than-thou. If you think you're impure, then you're going to feel hopeless. You can't do it. Better to go and get drunk or something, at least forget about it for a while. Relax, have a good time. Better than beating yourself up with your ideals of not being pure enough.

Conventions themselves are limited for their nature is imperfect and changing. Maybe you expect even the convention to be perfect. Then maybe after a while you become critical of the convention because you see flaws in it. It isn't as good as you thought, or some of it doesn't make sense or things like this. But recognize that a convention is like anything else, it is *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* (impermanent, unsatisfactory, non-self). Theravāda Buddhism is a convention based on morality, doing good and refraining from doing evil with action and speech. It's a way of living where we agree to take responsibility for how we live on this planet, in this society. The convention of Theravāda

Buddhism, whether you find it all agreeable to you or not, is a tradition with a lot of power from being so old and ancient and is still useful. It's still a viable tradition that works. It's not a matter of it having to be perfect for us to use it, but of learning to use it for awakened awareness.

Then we get into the old Buddhist camps of the Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna and Hīnayāna. We're considered Hīnayāna or 'lesser vehicle.' So we could think that means it's probably not as good. Mahāyāna is better, says logic. Lesser vehicle and greater vehicle. Then Vajrayāna, that's the absolute best. You can't get any better than Vajrayāna according to the Tibetans. That's the highest vehicle. So then we start thinking in terms of good, better, best. But all of these are conventions. Whether we call it Mahāyāna, Hīnayāna or Vajrayāna, they're still just conventions: they're limited; they're imperfect. They're functional, to be used for mindfulness rather than as some kind of attachment or position that one takes on anything.

These different terms can be very divisive. If we attach to Theravāda and start looking down on every other form of Buddhism, then we think that they're not pure, they're not original! They're higher, but they're not original. We can get arrogant because we've got our own way of justifying our convention. But this is all playing with words. If we look at what is going on in words, we're just creating Mahāyāna, Hīnayāna and Vajrayāna in our minds. The refuge is in Buddha, not in these '*yānas*'. The Buddha knows that every thought is changing and not-self. So trust in that, in

the simplicity of that. Because if you don't, then it is going to arouse your old compulsive habits of thinking "I've got to do more, I've got to develop this, I've got to become a Bodhisattva, I've got to get the higher practice going," and on and on like that.

When you're caught in that conventional realm and that's all you know, then you're easily intimidated and blinded by all the dazzling positions and attitudes and ideas that people can throw at you. So this is where trusting in awareness is not a matter of having the best or feeling that maybe you should have something better than what you have. That's a creation of your mind, isn't it? When you establish what is adequate, it's not based on what is the best but on what is basic for survival and good health.

In Buddhist monasticism the four requisites are an expression of this. You don't have to have the best food and the best robes and all that, but what's adequate in terms of survival. Is there any problem in terms of having a place to stay or medicine for sickness? It doesn't have to be the very best. In fact, the standard is often established at the lowest point, like rag robes rather than silk robes. Then the Dhamma-Vinaya is respected and taught. These give us a sense of a place that we can live. Standards aren't placed at the very best, but if the Dhamma is taught and the Vinaya is respected, the four requisites are adequate, then that's good enough. So go for it! Go for the practice rather than quibble about the rest. It's better to develop one's awareness rather than going along with one's feelings of criticism or doubt in

dealing with the people and the place you are in.

I contemplated this compulsive attitude in myself until I could really see it. It was very insidious, not just a one-off insight. It reminded me of how I approached life in general, full of 'shoulds' and feeling there is something I should or shouldn't be doing. Just notice and listen to this and learn to relax and trust in the refuge. This is very humbling because it doesn't seem like anything. It seems like it's not worth anything. It doesn't seem like anything much, this attention in the present. "So what? I want something I should be doing. Tell me what to do next. How many hours should I be sitting? How many hours should I be walking? What should I be developing? Should I do more *mettā*?" We want something to do and feel very ill-at-ease when there is nothing to do, nowhere to go. So in monastic life we do offer conventions and structures. We have morning and evening *pūjā* (meditation and devotional practices) and fortnightly recitations and so forth, which gives a conventional form to use in order to do something. Then there's chanting and *piṇḍapāta* (alms round) and all these things that are part of our tradition. This structure is to help us, like *sīla* for behaviour and the structure for the community.

When people go on self-retreat, they let go of the structure and are thrown onto their own. What happens when you're on your own and nobody knows what you're doing? You don't have to look around to see if the senior monk is watching you. You're left to your own devices so you could sleep all

day or you could read novels or go for long walks or you could really practise hard. There's a whole range of possibilities and it's left up to you to notice that feeling of what happens when the structure is removed. It's not that one does this in a judgmental way, bringing back the 'shoulds', like "I should practise so many hours a day, sit so many hours, walk so many hours and do this and do that, get my practice, get my *samādhi*, together really get somewhere in my practice." Not that that's wrong, but that may be a very compulsive thing. If you don't live up to it, then what do you feel like? Do you feel guilt-ridden if you don't do what you've determined to do? Notice how the mind works and to awaken to it.

It's easy if there is a strong leader who tells you to do this and do that and everybody comes, everybody leaves and everybody marches in step and so forth. This is good training also. But that also brings up resistance and rebellion in some people who don't like it. In contrast to this, other people don't like it when someone isn't telling them what to do next, because it leaves them uncertain of what to do. They like the security of everything being controlled and held together by a strong leader. But recognize that this monastic life is for the liberation of the heart. Some strong leaders kind of brow-beat you or manipulate you emotionally by saying, "If you really want to please me, you will do this. If you really want my approval... I won't give you my approval if you don't behave properly" and things like this. I can use my emotional power to try to control and manipulate the situation, but that's not something that is skilful. That's

not what we're here for. The onus is on each one of us, isn't it? It's about waking up.

But don't think you have to wake up because Ajahn Sumedho says so. Waking up is just a simple, immanent act of attention: open, relaxed listening, being here and now. It's learning to recognize that, to appreciate that more and more and to trust it. Because you're probably emotionally programmed for the other — either you should or you shouldn't. What we're trying to do here is to give a situation where you are encouraged to trust and to cultivate this. When we say 'cultivate' it's not like having to do anything. It's more like learning to relax and trust in being, the flow of life. Because life is like this. Life changes. You can see this in the past year here at Amarāvātī, the construction and the opening and all the ambience around that. Now that period is over. It has changed. It's like this.

I remember when I first went to Wat Pah Pong, there was such an *esprit de corp*. We were really there with Luang Por Chah. There were only twenty-two monks and we were really getting somewhere, we were really a crack troop, top grade, top guns. Then a few years later, I began seeing things that I didn't like and got very critical of it, thinking it was all falling apart. Then I saw it fall apart, after Luang Por Chah had his stroke. I remember a few years after that, going to Wat Pah Pong. At Wat Pah Pong they had an inner monastery where the monks lived and then the outer part where there was a special *kuṭi* (hut) for Luang Por Chah which allowed for nursing care and all kinds of things.

In addition to this they had an outer *sālā* (hall) where people came to visit.

You'd go to the outer *sālā* and nobody wanted to come to the monastery. All they wanted to do was to see Luang Por Chah who was ill and couldn't talk or do anything. All the emphasis was on his *kuṭi*, and no monks wanted to live at the monastery. I remember going there when there were only three monks in a huge monastery: Ajahn Liam and few others, and the place was looking pretty shabby. Usually it was spic and span and clean. The standards of order were very high there, sweeping the paths and repairing everything. But suddenly it was like a ghost town with all these empty *kuṭis* that needed repairing and were dirty and dusty and the paths not swept and so forth. I remember some people from Bangkok coming to me and saying, "Aah, this place is not good any more. We want you to come back and be the abbot." They were thinking I should go back and take over. It had changed in a way that they felt it shouldn't have — but now it's back with fifty monks and it's all operating to full capacity.

Things change. Now we open to change. We're not demanding that it change in any way that we want it to or that when it's at peak that we can keep it that way. It's impossible. Even in yourself, you can be aware when you're at your best or your worst, when you're feeling really good and inspired and love the life, and when you're feeling down, despairing, lonely, and depressed and disheartened. This awareness is your refuge. Awareness of the changingness of feelings, of



attitudes, of moods, of material change and emotional change: Stay with that, because it's a refuge that is indestructible. It's not something that changes. It's a refuge you can trust in. This refuge is not something that you create. It's not a creation. It's not an ideal. It's very practical and very simple, but easily overlooked or not noticed. When you're mindful, you're beginning to notice: it's like this.

For instance when I remind myself that this is pure, this moment, I really make a note of this. This is the path. This is purity. Not anything that I'm creating, just this state of attention. Not attention like 'achtung!', it's more of a relaxed attention. Listening, open, receptive. When you relax into that, it's a natural state. It's not a created state. It's not dependent on conditions making it that way. It's just that we forget it all the time and get thrown back into the old habits. This is why with mindfulness, we're remembering it more, trusting it more, and cultivating this way of bringing ourselves back into this awareness. Then we get carried away again and come back again. We keep doing that. No matter how recalcitrant, difficult or wild the emotions or thoughts may be, it's all right. This is the refuge.

We can apply this awareness to everything, such as being personally wounded. When somebody says something that is hurtful, ask the question, "What is it that gets hurt?" If somebody insults me or abuses me in some way and I feel hurt or misunderstood, offended, annoyed or even angry, what is it that gets angry and annoyed, that gets offended? Is that my refuge — that personality whose feelings get hurt and

upset? If I have awareness as a refuge, this never gets upset by anything. You can call it anything you want. But as a person, I can be easily upset. Because the personality, the *sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi*, is like that — based on me being worthwhile or worthy, being appreciated or not appreciated, being understood properly or misunderstood, being respected or not respected, and all this kind of thing.

My personality is wide open to be hurt, to be offended, to be upset by anything. But personality is not my refuge. It's not what I would advise as being a refuge, if your personality is anything like mine. I wouldn't for a minute want to recommend anyone taking refuge in my personality. But in awareness, yes. Because awareness is pure. If you trust it more and more, even if you're feeling hurt and upset, disrespected and unloved and unappreciated, the awareness knows that as being *anicca*. It's not judging. It's not making any problems. It's fully accepting the feeling that "nobody loves me, everybody hates me" as feeling. And it goes away naturally. It drops because its nature is change.

*Where do water, earth, fire, & wind  
have no footing?  
Where are long & short,  
coarse & fine,  
fair & foul,  
name & form  
brought to an end?*

*Consciousness which is  
non-manifestative,  
limitless, not becoming anything at all:  
Here water, earth, fire, & wind  
have no footing.  
Here long & short  
coarse & fine  
fair & foul  
name & form  
are all brought to an end.  
With the cessation of consciousness  
each is here brought to an end.*

*(Kevaddha Sutta - Long Discourses)*



# Consciousness

Consciousness is a subject that has become quite important these days. We are all experiencing consciousness; we want to understand it and define it. Some people say that they equate consciousness with thinking or memory. I have heard scientists and psychologists say that animals don't have consciousness, because they don't think or remember. This seems ridiculous. But in terms of this moment, right now, *this* is consciousness. We are just listening — pure consciousness before you start thinking. Just make a note of this: consciousness is like *this*. I am listening, I am with this present moment, being present, being here now. Taking the word 'consciousness' and making a mental note: "consciousness is like *this*." It's where thought, feeling and emotion arise. When we are unconscious we don't feel, we don't think. Consciousness, then, is like the field that allows thought, memory, emotion and feeling to appear and disappear.

Consciousness is not personal. To become personal you have to make a claim to it: "I am a conscious person." But there's just awareness, this entrance into noting the present, and at this moment consciousness is like *this*. Then one can notice the sound of silence, the sense of just sustaining, being able to rest in a

natural state of consciousness that is non-personal and non-attached. Noting this is like informing or educating oneself to the way it is. When we are born, consciousness within this separate form starts operating. A newborn baby is conscious, yet it doesn't have a concept of itself being male or female or anything like that. Those are conditions that one acquires after birth.

This is a conscious realm. We think of a universal consciousness, and consciousness as it is used in the five *khandhas*: *rūpa* (form), *vedanā* (feeling), *saññā* (perception), *saṅkhārā* (mental formations), and *viññāṇa* (sense-consciousness). But there is also this consciousness which is unattached, the unlimited. In two places in the Tipiṭaka, there is reference to *viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato pabham* — a mouthful of words that point to this state of natural consciousness, this reality. I find it very useful to clearly note: “Consciousness is like *this*”. If I start thinking about it, then I want to define it: “Is there an immortal consciousness?” Or we want to make it into a metaphysical doctrine, or deny it, saying, “Consciousness is *anicca, dukkha, anattā*”, (impermanent, unsatisfactory, not-self). We want to pin it down or define it either as impermanent and not-self, or raise it up as something we hold to as a metaphysical positioning. But we are not interested in proclaiming metaphysical doctrines, or in limiting ourselves to an interpretation that we may have acquired through this tradition, but in trying to explore it in terms of experience.

This is Luang Por Chah's "*Pen paccattam*", something that you realise for yourself. So what I am saying now is an exploration, I'm not trying to convince you or convert you to my "viewpoint."

Consciousness is like *this*. Right now there is definitely consciousness. There is alertness and awareness. Then conditions arise and cease. If you just sustain and rest in consciousness, unattached, not trying to do anything, find anything or become anything, but just relax and trust, then things arise. Suddenly you may be aware of a physical feeling, a memory or an emotion. So that memory or sensation becomes conscious, then it ceases. Consciousness is like a vehicle, it's the way things are.

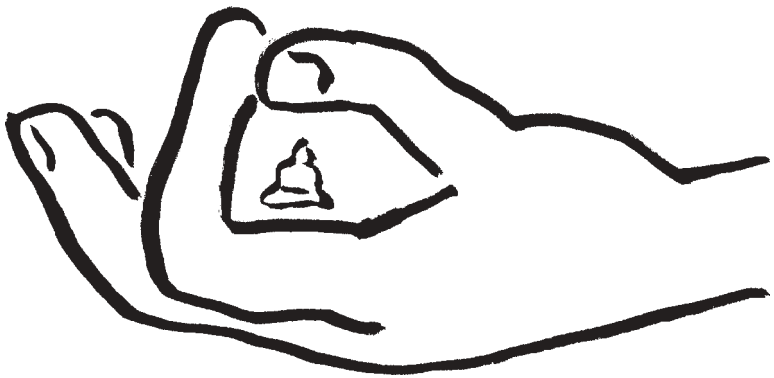
Is consciousness something to do with the brain? We tend to think of it as some kind of mental state that depends on the brain. The attitude of Western scientists is that consciousness is in the brain. But the more you explore it with *sati-sampajañña* and *sati-pañña* you see that the brain, the nervous system, the whole psychophysical formation here arises in this consciousness and it is imbued with this consciousness. That is why we can be aware of the body. Reflecting on the four postures — sitting, standing, walking and lying down. Being aware of sitting as it is being experienced now, you are not limited to something that is in the brain, but the body is in the consciousness, you are aware of the whole body in the experience of sitting.

That consciousness is not personal. It's not

consciousness in *my* head and then consciousness in *your* head. Each of us has our own conscious experience going on. But is this consciousness the thing that unites us? Is it our ‘oneness’? I’m just questioning; there are different ways of looking at it. When we let go of the differences — “I am Ajahn Sumedho and you are this person” — when we let go of these identities and attachments then consciousness is still functioning. It’s pure; it has no quality of being personal, no condition to it of being male or female. You can’t put a quality into it, but it is like *this*. When we begin to recognize that which binds us together, that which is our common ground is consciousness, then we see that this is universal. When we spread *mettā* to a billion Chinese over in China, maybe it’s not just sentimentality and nice thoughts, maybe there is power there. I don’t know myself; I am questioning. I am not going to limit myself to a particular viewpoint that I have been conditioned by from my cultural background, because most of that is pretty flawed anyway. I do not find my cultural conditioning very dependable.

Sometimes Theravāda comes across as annihilationism. You get into this ‘no soul, no God, no self’ fixation, this attachment to a view. Or is the Buddha’s teaching there to be investigated and explored? We are not trying to confirm somebody’s view about the Pāli Canon, but using the Pāli Canon to explore our own experience. It’s a different way of looking at it. If you investigate this a lot, you begin to really see the difference between pure consciousness and when self arises. It’s not hazy or fuzzy — “Is there





self now?” — that kind of thing; it’s a clear knowing.

So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears and desires, and the whole world arises around “Ajahn Sumedho.” It takes off into orbit — my views, my feelings and my opinions. I can get caught into that world, that view of me that arises in consciousness. But if I know that, then my refuge is no longer in being a person, I’m not taking refuge in being a personality, or my views and opinions. Then I can let go, so the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends. What remains when the world ends is the *anidassana viññāṇa* — this primal, non-discriminative consciousness; it’s still operating. It doesn’t mean Ajahn Sumedho dies and the world ends, or that I’m *unconscious*. Talking about the end of the world, I remember somebody getting very frightened by this, saying “Buddhists are just practising meditation to see the end of the world. They really want to destroy the world. They hate the world and they want to see it end” — this kind of panic reaction. To us the world is seen in physical terms — this planet, the world of continents and oceans, north pole and south pole. But in Buddha-Dhamma, the ‘world’ is the world we create in consciousness. That’s why we can be living in different worlds. The world of Ajahn Sumedho is not going to be same as the world *you* create, but that world arises and ceases, and that which is aware of the world arising and ceasing transcends the world. It’s *lokuttara* (transcendental) rather than *lokiya* (worldly).

When we are born into physical birth, we have

consciousness within this form, within a separate form. This point of consciousness starts operating, and then of course we acquire the sense of ourselves through our mothers and fathers and cultural background. So we acquire different values or sense of our self as a person, and that's based on *avijjā* — not Dhamma, but on views, opinions and preferences that cultures have. That's why there can be endless problems around different cultural attitudes. Living in a multi-cultural community like this, it's easy to misunderstand each other, because we're conditioned in different ways of looking at ourselves and the world around us. So remember that cultural conditioning comes out of *avijjā* (ignorance) of Dhamma. What we are doing now is informing consciousness with *paññā*, which is a universal wisdom rather than some cultural philosophy.

Buddha-Dhamma, when you look at it, is not a cultural teaching. It's not about Indian culture or civilisation; it's about the natural laws that we live with, the arising and ceasing of phenomena; it's about the way things are. The Dhamma teachings are pointing to the way things are — that isn't bound in to cultural limitations. We talk about *aniccā*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. That's not Indian philosophy or culture, these are things to be realised. You are not operating from some basic belief system that is cultural. The Buddha's emphasis is on waking up, on paying attention rather than on grasping some doctrinal position that you start with. This is why many of us can relate to it, because we're not trying to become Indians or convert to some religious doctrine that came out of India. The Buddha awakened

to the way it is, to the natural law. So when we are exploring consciousness, these teachings like the five *khandhas* are skilful or expedient means in order to explore and examine our experience. They are not like “You have got to believe in the five *khandhas* and believe that there is no self. You cannot believe in God any more. To be a Buddhist you have to believe that there is no God.” There are Buddhists that do have this mentality. They want to make doctrinal positions about being Buddhist. But to me that teaching is not based on a doctrine, but on this encouragement to awaken. You are starting from here and now, from awakened attention rather than from trying to prove that the Buddha actually lived. Somebody might say, “Maybe there was never any Buddha; maybe it was just a myth.” But it doesn’t matter, because we don’t need to prove that Gotama Buddha actually lived; that’s not the issue, is it? We are not trying to prove historical facts, but to recognize that what we are actually experiencing now is like *this*.

When we allow ourselves just to rest in conscious awareness, this is a natural state; it’s not a created one. It’s not like a refined conditioning that we are after, where you are moving from coarser conditions to increasingly more refined ones, where you experience a kind of bliss and tranquility that comes from refining conscious experience. That is very dependent, because this world, this conscious realm that we are a part of, includes the coarse and the refined. This is not just a refined realm that we are experiencing. In terms of human being or planetary life, this is not a *deva-* or *brahma-loka* (divine or

highest heaven realm), which is more refined. This is a coarse realm where we run the gamut from that which is coarse to that which is refined. We have got to deal with the realities of a physical body, which is quite a coarse condition. In *deva* realms they do not have physical bodies, they have ethereal ones. We would all like ethereal bodies, wouldn't we? Made out of ether rather than all these slimy things that go on inside our bodies — bones, pus and blood, all of these yucky conditions that we have to live with. To defecate every day — *devatās* don't have to do things like that. Sometimes we like to create this illusion that we are *devatās*. We don't like these functions; we like privacy. We don't want people to notice because of the coarseness of the physical conditions that we are living with. But consciousness includes the gradations from the coarse to the most refined.

Another thing to notice is compulsive feelings. This sense of having to do something, compulsive habits of having to do, having to get something that you don't have, having to attain something or get rid of your defilements. When you're trusting in "your real home," then you can have perspective on this conditioning of the emotions. We come from very competitive goal-oriented societies. We are very much programmed always to feel that there is something that we have got to do. You have got to get something. We are always lacking something and we have got to find out what it is. We have got to get it, or we have got to get rid of our weaknesses, faults and bad habits. Notice that this is just an attitude that arises and ceases. It's the competitive world, the world of a self.

We can always see ourselves in terms of what's wrong with us as a person. As a person there are always so many flaws and inadequacies. There is no perfect personality that I have ever noticed. Personality is all over the place. Some of it is kind of all right and some of it is really wacky. There is no personality that you can take refuge in. You are never going to make yourself into a perfect personality. So when you are judging yourself on a personal level, there seems to be so many problems, inadequacies, flaws and weaknesses. Maybe you are comparing yourself to some ideal person, some unselfish and superlative personality. That which is aware of personality is not personal. You can be aware of the personal as a mental object. These personality conditions arise and cease. You find yourself suddenly feeling very insecure or acting very childish because the conditions for that personality have arisen.

I remember when my parents were alive I went to stay with them for about three weeks, because they were really sick. I was abbot of Amarāvati, fifty-five year old Ajahn Sumedho and going home and living in the same little house with my mother and father. It brought up all kinds of childish emotions — because the conditions were there for that. You were born through your parents. Mothers and fathers bring up your memories, your connections of infancy onwards. So a lot of the conditions that arise in families are conditions for feeling like a child again even when you're a fifty-five year old Buddhist monk and abbot of a monastery! My mother and father would easily go back and see me as a child. Rationally they could

see “He’s a middle-aged man,” (*then* I was middle aged!) but they would still sometimes act like I was their child. Then you feel this rebelliousness and adolescent kind of resentment about being treated like a child. So don’t be surprised at some of the emotional states that arise. Throughout your life, as you get old, *kamma* ripens and then these conditions appear in consciousness. Don’t despair if you find yourself at fifty years old feeling very childish. Just be aware of that for what it is. It is what it is. The conditions for that particular emotion are present so then it becomes conscious. Your refuge is in this awareness rather than in trying to make yourself into an ideal man or woman — mature, responsible, capable, successful, ‘normal’ and all the rest — these are the ideals.

Here I am not looked at as a child. I’m the oldest person here! You may see me in terms of a father figure, because an old man like me brings out the sense of authority. I’m an authority figure, a patriarch, a father figure, a male figure — a grandfatherly figure to some of you. It’s interesting just to see this state when the conditions are there. Rationally you can say, “He’s not my father!” but emotionally you may feel like that, acting to me like I’m a father, because it’s an emotional habit. When the conditions for that kind of male authority figure are present, then this is what you are feeling, it’s like *this*. There’s nothing wrong with it, just notice it’s the way it is. Trust your refuge in this awareness, not in some idea that you shouldn’t project fatherly images onto me, or that you shouldn’t feel disempowered by a male authority figure and things like this. If you feel disempowered by me, then

just recognize it as a condition that has arisen, rather than blaming me or blaming yourself, because then you are back into the world you are creating — your personal world, and believing in that as your reality.

I used to get really angry when women would get bossy. When any woman would show any kind of bossiness, I would just feel this rage. I wondered why I would get so upset with even a tone of voice, why I could get so enraged over a bossy attitude. I could see that it was like when I was a boy, trying to get my way against mother. If that's not been fully resolved yet, then if the conditions for that rage are present then this is what will arise. It's through awareness of it that you resolve it. As you understand it and see it in terms of what it is, then you can resolve, or let it go, so that you are not just stuck with the same old reactions all the time.

Our refuge then is in this awareness rather than in trying to sustain refined experiences in consciousness as our refuge, because you can't do it. You can maybe learn, through developing a skilful use, to increase your sense of your experience of refinement, but inevitably you have to allow the coarse to manifest, to be a part of your conscious experience. Resting in this conscious awareness is referred to as "coming home" or "our real home." It's a place to rest, like a home. The idea of a home is a place where you belong, isn't it? You are no longer a foreigner or an alien. You begin to recognize through a sense of relief, of just being home at last, of not being this stranger, this wanderer out in the wilderness. Then the world



of Ajahn Sumedho can arise and it's like you are not at home anymore, because Ajahn Sumedho is an alien, a stranger! He never feels quite at home anywhere. Am I American now? Am I British or am I Thai? Where do I feel at home as Ajahn Sumedho? I don't even know what nationality I am anymore, or where I feel most at home. I feel more at home here than in America because I've lived here for so long. In Thailand I feel at home because it's the paradise for Buddhist monks and they treat you so well, but still you have to get visas and you're always "Phra Farang." Here in England, no matter how many years I am here, I am still, to most people, an American. When I go back to America I don't know what I am — "You don't look like an American anymore. You've got a funny accent, we don't know where you are from!" That's the world that is created. When it drops away, what's left is our real home.



# Trusting in Simplicity

The attitude of 'conviviality' is an attempt to encourage you to see the holy life as something beautiful and enjoyable, and to open to it rather than just shut down. Sometimes we see meditation as a way of shutting ourselves off from things rather than opening. Remember, whatever is said is limited, so when we say 'shut down' these are only words which convey some meaning to you in whatever way you grasp them.

In any religious tradition there is a lot of confusion because what is said at times seems to be contradictory: at one moment you are being told to shut down, close your eyes, concentrate your mind on the breath; and then to open up with *mettā* for all sentient beings! This is just to point out the limitation of words and conventions. When we grasp these conventions, then we tend to bind ourselves to a particular view. We might even be encouraged to do this by teachers and the way we interpret the scriptures. But remember to bring back the awareness that each of us as individuals experiences, which is the center of the universe.

When you see yourself in personal terms as someone who needs to get something or get rid of something, then you limit yourself to being someone who has to

get something they don't yet have or get rid of something they shouldn't have. So we reflect on this and learn to be the witness, *Buddho* — that which is awake and aware, which listens to and knows personality views and emotional states without taking them personally.

Rather than operating from the position that “I’m meditating” or who “must get something that I don’t yet have. I’ve got to attain certain states of concentration in order to get to yet more advanced meditation practices”. It’s not that this belief is wrong, but it limits you to always being someone who has to get or attain something that you feel you don’t yet have. Alternatively, you go into the purification mode. “I’m a sinner and I need to purify myself. I’ve got to get rid of bad thoughts and habits; childish emotions; greed, hatred and delusion; desire...” But in this case you’re assuming that you are somebody who has these negative qualities. That’s why this awareness, this awakensness, is the essence of the Buddhist teaching. *Buddho* simply means awakened awareness.

What I encourage is a moving toward simplicity, rather than complexity. We’re already complicated personalities. Our cultural and social conditioning is usually very complicated. We’re educated and literate, which means that we know a lot and have a lot of experience. This means that we are no longer simple. We’ve lost the simplicity that we had as children and have become rather complicated characters. The monastic form is a move toward simplicity. At times it may look complicated but the

whole thrust of the Dhamma-Vinaya is toward simplifying everything rather than complicating it.

What is most simple is to wake up — Buddha means ‘awake’, it’s as simple as that. The most profound teaching is the phrase “wake up”. Hearing this, one then asks, “what am I supposed to do next?” We complicate it again because we’re not used to being really awake and fully present. We’re used to thinking about things and analyzing them; trying to get something or get rid of something; achieving and attaining. In the scriptures there are occasions where a person is enlightened by just a word or something very simple.

One tends to think that people in the past had more *parami* and ability to awaken and be fully liberated than us. We see ourselves through complicated memories and perceptions. My personality is very complicated: likes and dislikes; it feels happy and sad, it is so changeable that it can alter in just the snap of a finger. My emotions can be triggered off into anger in a moment just by somebody saying something that irritates me. When the conditions arise then the consequent state comes to be: anger, happiness, elation, etc. But with *sati-sampajañña* we’re learning to sustain an awareness that transcends these emotions.

If we couldn’t do this then there would be no hope, no point in even trying to be Buddhist monks or nuns, or anything else at all. We’d just be helpless victims of our habits and no way out of being trapped in the

repetitive patterns would be possible. The way out of it is awakesness, attention. Conviviality is goodwill, happiness, brightness, welcoming, opening. When I'm convivial, I'm open. When I'm in a bad mood then I'm not open! Leave me alone, don't bother me!

How we hold meditation, Theravāda Buddhism, or whatever convention it might be that we are using shows how easy it is to have strong views. People have very strong views and when they hold to any religious convention they tend to form very strong opinions around it. In Theravādan circles you have strong views such as: "We're the original teaching, the pure teaching, you've got to do this in order to get that; *Saṃsāra* and *Nibbāna* are the polar opposites" and so it goes on. These are just some of the viewpoints and ideas that we get from holding to a tradition. But in awakened consciousness there's no convention, instead such consciousness perceives phenomena in terms of Dhamma – the natural way. It's not created or dependent upon conditions supporting it. If you hold to a view then you are bound and limited by that very thing that you are grasping.

In awakened awareness there's no grasping. It's a simple, immanent act of being here, being patient. It takes trust, especially trusting in yourself. No one can make you do it or magically do it for you. Trusting this moment is therefore very important. I am by nature a questioner, a doubter or sceptic. I don't believe easily, I tend to disbelieve, and I'm suspicious of things. This is an unpleasant condition to have to live with, because I would love to believe in something and just

rest in a belief that I am fully committed to.

In contrast, the sceptical approach is a real challenge. One has to use it to learn to trust not in any view, opinion or doctrine but in the simple ability that each of us has to be aware. Awareness includes concentration. When you do concentration practices or put your attention on one thing, you shut out everything else. With *samatha* practise one chooses an object and then sustains and holds one's attention on that object. With awareness, it's broad, like a floodlight, it's wide open and includes everything, whatever it may be.

Learning to trust in this awareness is an act of faith but it is also very much aligned with wisdom. It's something that you have to experiment with to get a feeling for. No matter how well I might describe or expound on this particular subject, it is still something that you have to know for yourself. Doubt is one of your main problems, because you don't trust yourselves. Many of you strongly believe that you are defined by the limitations of your past, your memories, your personality; you're thoroughly convinced of that. But you can't trust that. I can't trust my personality; it will say anything! Nor can I trust my emotions, they flicker around and change constantly. Depending on whether the sun's out or if it is raining, or if things are going well or falling apart, my emotions react accordingly. What I trust is my awareness. It is something for you to find out for yourselves, you can't just trust what I say. Anything I describe now is just an encouragement for you to trust.

This inclusive awareness is very simple and totally natural. The mind stops and you are just open and receptive. Even if you're tense and uptight, just open to it by accepting it and allowing it to be as it is. Tension, despair, pain — you just allow your experience to be exactly as it is rather than try to get rid of it. If you conceive of this openness as a happy state, then you create a mental impression of it as a pleasant state, that you might not be feeling and that you would like to feel. Being in a pleasant state of mind is not a prerequisite for inclusive awareness. One can be in the pits of hell and misery and yet still open to the experience of being aware, and thus allow even the most upsetting states to be just what they are.

I've found this to be a real challenge, for there are so many mental and emotional states that I don't like at all. I've spent my life trying to get rid of them. From childhood onwards one develops the habit of trying to get rid of unpleasant mental states by distracting one's attention, doing anything to try and get away from them. In one's life one develops so many ways of distracting oneself from feelings such as despair, unhappiness, depression and fear that one no longer even does so consciously — it becomes habitual to distract oneself from painful experience. The encouragement now is to begin to notice it, even to notice the way one distracts oneself! It's a matter of opening to the way it is, not the way you think it should be or the way you think it is. It's a state of not really knowing anything in particular.



In this awareness it's not that you know anything. You're just allowing things to be what they are. You don't have to perceive them with thoughts or words, or analyze them; you're just allowing the experience to be, just the way it is. It's more a case of developing an intuitive sense, what I call intuitive awareness. When you can begin to trust in this awareness you can relax a bit. If you're trying to control the mind then you tend to go back to your habits of trying to hold on to some things and get rid of others, rather than just allowing things to be what they are.

With intuitive awareness we are taking our refuge in awakeness, which is expansive, unlimited. Thought and mental conception create boundaries. The body is a boundary; emotional habits are boundaries; language is a boundary; words expressing feelings are also boundaries. Joy, sorrow and neutrality are all conditioned and dependent upon other conditions. What transcends all of this, we begin to recognize through awakening. Even if what I'm saying sounds like rubbish to you, be aware of that. Open to the fact that you don't like what I'm saying. It's like this. It's not that you have to like it: it's starting from the way it is rather than you having to figure out what I'm trying to say.

Just the thought of parting has a certain effect on consciousness. Whatever is happening for you now is that way, it is what it is. Separation and the idea of separation is like *this*. It's a matter of recognizing what it is but of not judging what you see. As soon as you

add to it in any way, it is more than what it is; it becomes personal, emotional, complicated. This sense realm in which we live, this planet Earth, is like this. One's whole life is an endless procession of meeting and separating. We get so used to it that we hardly notice it or reflect on it. Sadness is the natural response to being separated from what one likes, from people one loves. But the awareness of that sadness is not itself sad. The emotion we feel is sadness but when the emotion is held in awareness then the awareness itself is not sad. The same is true when being present with thinking of something that gives rise to excitement or joy. The awareness is not excited, it holds the excitement. Awareness embraces the feeling of excitement or sadness but it does not get excited or sad. So it's a matter of learning to trust in that awareness rather than just endlessly struggling with whatever feelings might be arising.

Have you ever noticed that even when you're in a state of complete confusion there's something that is not lost in that confusion? There's an awareness of the confusion? If you are not clear about this then it is easy to attach to the state of being confused and wind yourself up even more, creating even more complications. If you trust yourself to open to the confusion then you will begin to find a way of liberating yourself from being caught in the conditioned realm, endlessly being propelled into emotional habits arising out of fear and desire.

Desire is natural to this realm. So why shouldn't we have desire? What's wrong with desire anyway? We

struggle to get rid of all our desires. Trying to purify our minds and conquer desire becomes a personal challenge, doesn't it? But can you do it? I can't. I can suppress desires sometimes and convince myself that I don't have any, but I can't sustain it. When you contemplate the way things are, you see that this realm is like this — what is attractive and beautiful one desires to move towards, and to grasp; what is ugly and repulsive gives rise to the impulse to withdraw. That's just the way it is, it's not some kind of personal flaw. In that movement of attraction and aversion there is an awareness that embraces both of them. You can be aware of being attracted and aware of being repelled by something.

This awareness is subtle and simple, but if it is never pointed out we can't learn to trust in it. So we tend to relate to meditation from the mind state of achieving and attaining. It is very easy to go back into this dualistic struggle: trying to get and trying to get rid of. Right and wrong, good and bad — we're very easily intimidated by righteous feelings. When we're dealing with religion it's so easy to get righteous, isn't it? In one way we're right — we should let go of desire and we should take on responsibility for our lives and keep the precepts, and we should strive on with diligence. This is right, this is good.

Some might accuse me of teaching a path where it doesn't matter how you behave, that you can just do anything and just watch it: you could rob a bank and still be mindful of your actions; you could experiment with drinking and taking drugs, or see how mindful

and aware you are when hallucinating on mushrooms! If I *did* teach that, the door would be wide open, wouldn't it? I'm *not* promoting that viewpoint – I'm not actually saying you should disregard the precepts – but you can see how, if you're caught in a righteous view, that you would assume that I'm promoting the opposite – saying that people shouldn't act in the way your righteous viewpoint determines they should.

The precepts are a vehicle that simplifies our lives and limit behaviour. If we don't have boundaries for behaviour then we tend to get lost. If we have no way of knowing limitations, then we can just follow any impulse or idea that we might feel inclined to in the moment. So *Vinaya* and *sīla* is always a form of restriction. It's a vehicle; its purpose is to aid reflection. But if we grasp it we become a person who obeys all of the rules without reflecting on what they're doing. This is the other extreme from the complete hedonistic way: you become institutionalized into the monastic form, keeping the party line and obeying all of the rules, being a good monk or nun, feeling that that is what you are supposed to do — but you're not really open to it and aware of what you're doing. The doubting mind, the thinking mind, the righteous mind, the suspicious mind will always question.

Some of you are probably thinking, "Well I'm not ready for that yet, what you're teaching is for advanced students. I need to just to learn how to be a good monk and a good nun." This is fine, learn how to be a good monk or nun, but also connect with just being aware.

The thing is not to try complicating yourself even more by adopting another role, but to learn to see and observe how the restrictions of this form bring into the open one's resistance, indulgence, attachment and aversion, to see that all of these reactions are '*like this*'. In this way you're going beyond the dualistic structures of thought and conditioned phenomena. You refuge is in the deathless, the unconditioned — in Dhamma itself rather than someone else's view about Dhamma.

Over the years I've developed this awareness so that now I experience consciousness as very expanded; there's a huge spaciousness that I can rest in. The conditions that I'm experiencing both physically and emotionally are reflected in that spaciousness, they're held and supported in it, allowed to be. If I did not develop this awareness then it would be difficult, because I'm always struggling with my feelings. At one time the Sangha will be going well and people will be saying that they love Amarāvātī and want to remain monks and nuns all their lives and that they believe Theravāda Buddhism is the only way, then all of a sudden they change to saying that they're fed up with this joint and want to convert to some other religion. Then one can feel dejected and think one has to convince them that joining some other religion is not the way, getting into one's righteous Buddhist mood about how right we are. We can get into thinking that we've got everything here and that it's wonderful and that people should be grateful.

One can say "don't be selfish, don't be stupid".

Emotionally we are like that. If we're emotionally attached to the way that we do things then we do feel threatened by anyone who questions it. I've found in my own life that whenever I get upset by someone criticizing Theravāda Buddhism, our Sangha, or the way we do things, it is due to my personality and its tendency to attach and identify with these things. You can't trust that at all. But you can trust awareness. As you begin to recognize it and know it, you can rest more in being aware and listening to the sound of silence. As you sustain awareness in this way, consciousness can expand and become infinite. When this occurs you are just present in a conscious moment and you lose the sense of being a self — being a person, this body. It just drops away and can no longer sustain itself.

It is not possible for emotional habits to sustain themselves, because, being impermanent, their nature is to arise and cease. As you do this you begin to recognize the value of this expansiveness, which some people call emptiness. Whatever you choose to name it doesn't really matter, so long as you can recognize it. It's a natural state, it's not created — I don't create this emptiness. It's not that I have to go through a whole process of concentrating my mind on something in order to be able to do this and then, having done so, hold my mind there in order to block out everything else. When I was into concentration practices I was always feeling frustrated because just when I'd be getting somewhere someone would slam the door! This type of practice is all about trying to shut out, control and limit everything. It can be skillful

to do that kind of practice, but if you hold on to it then you are limited by it, you can't take life as it comes and instead you become controlling of everything. The result of this type of practice is that life has to be a certain way: "I have to be at this place, live with these people, not with those type of people, I need these structures and conditions in order to be able to get my *samādhi*." So then you are bound to that way of structuring your life.

You see monks going all over the place trying to find the perfect monastery where they can get their *samādhi* together. But in this expansive awareness everything belongs, so it doesn't demand certain conditions in which it may be cultivated. Intuitive awareness allows you to accept life as a flow, rather than being endlessly frustrated when life seems difficult or unpleasant.

Coming into the temple this evening was very nice indeed. The stillness of the place is fantastic, isn't it? This is the best place in the whole world! That's only an opinion, you know, not a pronouncement! I find the stillness and silence in this place to be palpable as soon as you come in. But then, can I spend the rest of my life sitting in here? Stillness is here in the heart. The stillness is about being present, it's not dependent on a temple or a place. Trusting in your awareness you begin to notice that even in the midst of places like London and Bangkok, in confusing or acrimonious situations, you can always recognize this stillness once you value and appreciate it. It does take determination to be able to do this. Much of the time it

doesn't seem like anything and having goal – orientated practices seems more attractive: “I want something to do, something to get my teeth into!” We're conditioned always to be doing something rather than just trusting and opening to the present. We can even make *this* into a big deal: “I've got to open to the present all of the time!” Then we just grasp the idea of it, which is not what I mean.

'Conviviality' is an attitude of being at ease with life, of openness and ease with being alive and breathing, at ease with being present with what is arising in consciousness. If you grasp the idea, 'I should be convivial,' then you've missed the point – what I'm saying is merely an encouragement towards trusting, relaxing and letting go. Enjoy life here, open to it rather than endlessly trying to perfect it, which can bind us to a critical attitude towards the place. Open to the aversion, let aversion be what it is. I'm not asking you not to be averse to it, but to open to that aversion or restlessness, or whatever positive or negative feelings you have.



# Observing Attachment

Consciousness is what we are all experiencing right now – it is the bonding experience that we all have right at this moment. Consciousness is about the realm of form. We experience consciousness through form. When we contemplate the four elements (*dhātu*): earth, water, fire, air and adding two more give us space and consciousness, this is a totality of experience in terms of an individual human being.

The physical condition of a body and the physical realm which we live in is a combination of these four elements, combined with space and consciousness. We can contemplate the four elements in our own body as a way of looking at the body as a way where one does not see it as a personal identity or as something belonging to oneself. Space and consciousness have no boundaries, they're infinite. Consciousness, then, is what we're using in meditation in order to contemplate the way things are.

We get very confused because consciousness is not something we can get hold of in the way that we can see earth, water, fire and air, or conditions of the mind – emotions. Because we are conscious we can actually be aware of thoughts, and emotions, or the body as it exists and manifests at the present moment. Sometimes we think of consciousness in a very limited

way, just as arising through contact via the eye, ear, nose, etc — just in terms of sensory consciousness. In this case consciousness is very much limited to perceiving through the senses. But it is possible to begin to recognize consciousness that is non-attached to the senses, which is what I point to when I refer to the sound of silence. When you begin to notice that sound, then, there is consciousness that is unattached. As you sustain awareness with the sound of silence then you find you can begin to reflect and get perspective on your thoughts, emotions, feelings, sense activity and experience which all arise in consciousness in the present.

It is important to recognize that this is something really wonderful that we can do. The whole point of the *samaṇa* (renunciant) life, really, is aimed at this kind of realization. Of course obstruction comes with our commitment to the delusions that we create: the strong sense of being a separate self, identification with the body as being who we are; and our emotional habits, thoughts and feelings by which we create ourselves, whereby we derive a sense of having a personality which we tend to identify with and which we allow to push us around. This is why I encourage you to rest and relax into this awareness, that comes when we recognize the sound of silence.

Just rest in this state of openness and receptivity. Don't attach to the idea of it. You can attach to the idea of the sound of silence and of attaining something with it, or keep creating some false illusions around it.

That's not it — it's not a matter of trying to make anything out of it, but of fully opening to this present moment in a way that is unattached. This recognition of non-attachment is something you know through your awareness rather than through a description. All one can say about it is things like: "don't attach to anything," and "let go of everything." But then people attach and say, "we shouldn't be attached to anything" — and so they attach to the idea of non-attachment! We are so committed to thinking and trying to figure everything out in terms of ideas, theory, technique, party line, the Theravāda approach ... and so it goes on and on like this, and we bind ourselves to the conditions, even though the teaching is about letting go or non-attachment. This why I really encourage you to *observe attachment*.

Trust yourself in this awareness. And, rather than holding to the views that one shouldn't be attached, recognize that attachment is like *this*. In the early days I used to practise attaching to things intentionally, just so that I would know what attachment is like, rather than having some idea that I shouldn't be attached to anything and then in some desperate way always trying to be detached — which would have only been self-deception, as the basic delusion that gave rise to the attachment had not been penetrated. Thinking, "I'm someone who is attached and I shouldn't be" is an attachment, isn't it? "I am monk who has all these attachments, these hang-ups, and they're obstructions and I shouldn't be attached to them, I've got to get rid of them, let go of them." The attachment to that results

in you fooling yourself and endlessly disappointing yourself because you can't do it that way — it doesn't work. This is why I emphasize this pure state of consciousness. Now don't just take it for granted. Don't try to figure it out or think about it very much: learn to just *do it*. Just contact this resonating sound or vibration, learn to stay with it for a count of five, or practise so that you get used to it and appreciate it. If you really cultivate it, it gives you this state where you begin to be conscious without being attached, so that the conditions which arise in consciousness may be seen in the perspective of arising and ceasing.

When we let go and just abide in pure, unattached consciousness, that is also the experience of love — unconditioned love. Pure consciousness accepts everything. It is not a divisive function; it doesn't have preferences of any sort. It accepts everything and every condition for what it is — the bad, the good, the demons, anything. So when you begin to trust in it, the *mettā bhāvanā* practise comes alive. Rather than just spreading good thoughts and altruistic ideas, it becomes very practical and very real. For what do we mean by 'love'?

To many people, love is the ultimate attachment: when you love somebody you want to possess them. Often what passes for love in modern consciousness is a very strong attachment to another person, thing or creature. But if you really want to apply this word to that which accepts, then you have *mettā* — love which is unattached, which has no preferences, which accepts everything and sees everything as belonging.

When you begin to trust in the awareness, the conscious moment that is infinite, then everything belongs in it. From the perspective of this conscious being, whatever arises in this consciousness is accepted and welcomed, whether it's through the senses from the outside or from inside — the emotional and physical conditions which become conscious in this present moment. This sense of love, acceptance and non-judgement accepts everything that you are thinking, feeling and experiencing; it allows everything to be what it is. When we don't allow things to be as they are, then we are trying to get something that we don't have or get rid of something that we don't want. So in terms of purifying the mind, consciousness is already pure. You don't need to purify it; you don't have to do anything.

You begin to not identify by not holding on to the conventional view of yourself as being this person, this way, this condition, this body. These views begin to drop away, they are not the way things really are. In terms of meditation, if you trust in awareness then certain things come out into consciousness: some of them are worries, resentments, self-consciousness, memories of various kinds, all kinds of bright ideas or whatever. Our relationship to them is accepting, embracing, allowing. In terms of action and speech — the good we act on when we can and the bad we don't — we accept both, non-critically. That to me is what love is, it's non-critical. That applies most to what arises in my consciousness, my own *kamma*, emotions, feelings and memories which arise in the moment. Behind it all is the sound of silence. It's like

this enormous, vast, infinite space that allows things to be what they are, because everything belongs. The nature of conditions is to arise and cease, that is the way it is. So we don't demand that they are otherwise or complain because we'd like to hold onto the good stuff and annihilate the bad. Our true nature is pure. When we begin to realize and fully trust and appreciate this we see that this is real. It's not theoretical, abstract or an idea – it's reality.

Consciousness is very real. It's not something you create. This is consciousness right now. That you are conscious is a fact, it's just the way it is. The conditions that we might be experiencing may be different. One person may be happy, another sad, confused, tired, depressed, worrying about the future, regretting the past and so on. Who knows all of the various conditions that are going on in all of us at this moment? Only you know what is occurring in your particular experience now. Whatever it is – good or bad, whether you want it or not – it's the way it is. So then your relationship to it may be through this purity of being, rather than identifying with the conditioned. You can never purify the conditioned. You can't make yourself a pure person. That's not where purity is. When you try to purify yourself as a person it's a hopeless task, like trying to polish a brick to make it into a mirror. It's demanding the impossible, which means you will fail and be disappointed. This is where the awakened state is the original purity. In other words, you have always been pure, you have never, ever, for one moment been impure. Even if you're a serial killer, the worst demon in the universe, you're still pure because

that purity is impossible to destroy. The problem lies not in becoming impure but in the attachment to the illusion that we create in our mind: the demon is so attached to being a demon that he forgets his original purity, this presence here and now.





## Not Looking for Answers Not Asking for Favours

I used to hate the feeling of being confused. Instead, I loved having a sense of certainty and mental clarity. Whenever I felt confused by anything, I'd try to find some kind of clear answer, to get rid of the emotional state of confusion. I'd distract myself from it or try to get somebody else to give me the answer. I wanted the authorities, the Ajahns, the big guys, to come and say, "That's right, that's wrong, that's good, that's bad." I wanted to be clear and needed somebody, an authority figure that I trusted and respected, to straighten me out.

Sometimes we think that things like good teachers, meditation retreats, the precepts, the Refuges, or a wonderful Sangha are going to make us really happy and solve all our problems. We reach out for help from outside hoping this or that will do it for us. It's like wanting God to come and help us out of the mess. And then when He doesn't come and solve our problems, we don't believe in God anymore. "I asked Him to help and He didn't." This is a childlike way of looking at life. We get ourselves into trouble and expect mommy and daddy to come and save the day, to clean up the mess we've made.

One time years ago, I became very confused when I found out that one of our American Buddhist nuns had left our community and become a born-again Christian. I had just been saying to another nun, “She’s really wonderful, she’s so wise, she’s so pure-hearted. She’ll be a great inspiration to you in your nun’s life.” I was really embarrassed and confused when I heard the news. I thought, “How could she fall for it?” I remember asking my teacher Ajahn Chah, “How could she do that?” He looked at me with a mischievous smile and said, “Maybe she’s right.” He made me look at what I was doing — feeling defensive and paranoid, wanting a clear explanation, wanting to understand, wanting him to tell me that she’d betrayed the Buddhist religion. So I started looking at the confusion. When I began to embrace it and totally accept it, it dropped away. Through acknowledging the emotional confusion, it ceased being a problem; it seemed to dissolve into thin air. I became aware of how much I resisted confusion as an experience.

In meditation, we can notice these difficult states of mind: not knowing what to do next or feeling confused about practice, ourselves or life. We practise not trying to get rid of these mind states but simply acknowledging what they feel like. This is uncertainty, insecurity, grief, and anguish. This is depression, worry, anxiety, fear, self-aversion, guilt or remorse. We might try to make a case that if we were a healthy, normal person, we wouldn’t have these emotions. But the idea of a normal person is a fantasy of the mind. Do you know any really normal people? I don’t.

The Buddha spoke instead of one who listens, who pays attention, who is awake, who is attentive here and now. One whose mind is open and receptive, trusting in the present moment and in oneself. This is his encouragement to us. Our attitude towards meditation need not be one of striving to get rid of things: our defilements, our *kilesas*, our faults, in order to become something better. It should be one of opening up, paying attention to life, experiencing the here and now, and trusting in our ability to receive life as experience. We don't have to do anything with it. We don't have to straighten out all the crooked parts, solve every problem, justify everything, or make everything better. After all, there will always be something wrong when we're living in the conditioned realm with me, with the people I live with, with the monastery, with the retreat centre, with the country. Conditions are always changing; we will never find any permanent perfection. We may experience a peak moment when everything is wonderful and just what we want it to be, but we can't sustain the conditions of that moment. We can't live at the peak point of inhalation; we have to exhale.

The same applies to all the good things of life — happy times, loving relationships, success, good fortune. These things are certainly enjoyable and not to be despised, but we shouldn't put our faith in something that is in the process of changing. Once it reaches a peak, it can only go in the other direction. We're asked not to take refuge in wealth, other people, countries or political systems, relationships, nice houses or good retreat centres. Instead, we're asked

to take refuge in our own ability to be awake, to pay attention to life no matter what the conditions might be in the present moment. The simple willingness to acknowledge things for what they are — as changing conditions — liberates us from being caught in the power of attachment, in struggling with the emotions or thoughts that we're experiencing.

Notice how difficult it is when you're trying to resist things all the time, trying to get rid of bad thoughts, of emotional states, of pain. What is the result of resisting? When I try to get rid of what I don't like in my mind, I become obsessed by it. What about you? Think of somebody you really can't stand, someone who really hurts your feelings. The very conditions of feeling angry and resentful actually obsess our minds with that particular person. We make a big deal out of it; pushing, pushing, pushing. The more we push, the more obsessed we become.

Try this out in your meditation. Notice what you don't like, don't want, hate, or are frightened of. When you resist these things, you're actually empowering them, giving them tremendous influence and power over your conscious experience of life. But when you welcome and open up to the flow of life in both its good and bad aspects, what happens? I know from my experience that when I'm accepting and welcoming of conditioned experience, things drop away from me. They come in and they go away. We're actually opening the door, letting in all the fear, anxiety, worry, resentment, anger and grief. This doesn't mean that we have to approve of or like what's happening.

It's not about making moral judgments. It's simply about acknowledging the presence of whatever we're experiencing in a welcoming way — not trying to get rid of it by resisting it, and not holding on to it or identifying with it. When we're totally accepting of something as it exists in the present, then we can begin to recognize the cessation of those conditions.

The freedom from suffering that the Buddha talked about isn't in itself an end to pain and stress. Instead it's a matter of creating a choice. I can either get caught up in the pain that comes to me, attach to it, and be overwhelmed by it; or I can embrace it, and through acceptance and understanding, not add more suffering to the existing pain, the unfair experiences, the criticisms or the misery that I face. Even after his enlightenment, the Buddha experienced all kinds of horrendous things. His cousin tried to murder him, people tried to frame him, blame him and criticize him. He experienced severe physical illness. But the Buddha didn't create suffering around those experiences. His response was never one of anger, resentment, hatred or blame, but one of acknowledgment.

This has been a really valuable thing for me to know. It's taught me not to ask for favours in life, or to hope that if I meditate a lot, I can avoid unpleasant experiences. "God, I've been a monk for thirty-three years. Please reward me for being a good boy." I've tried that and it doesn't work. To accept life without making any pleas is very liberating, because I no longer feel a need to control or manipulate conditions for my own benefit. I don't need to worry or feel

anxious about my future. There's a sense of trust and confidence, a fearlessness that comes through learning to trust, to relax, to open to life, and to investigate experience rather than to resist or be frightened by it. If you're willing to learn from the suffering in life, you'll find the unshakability of your own mind.

Adapted from a talk given in April 1999 at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Woodacre, California. Printed with permission from Inquiring Mind.

# Glossary

The following words are mostly Pāli, the language of the Theravāda Buddhist Scriptures (Tipiṭaka). They are brief translations for quick reference, rather than exhaustive or refined definitions.

## **A**

**Ajahn:** (Thai) Teacher; from the Pāli ācariya: in the West a bhikkhu or siladharā who has completed ten rains retreats (Vassa).

**Attā:** Literally, 'self', i.e. the ego, personality.

**Anattā:** Literally, 'not-self', i.e. impersonal, without individual essence; neither a person, nor belonging to a person. One of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena.

**Anicca:** Transient, impermanent, unstable, having the nature to arise and pass away. One of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena.

**Ārammaṇa:** Mental objects; in Thai usage also mood, emotion.

**Ariya:** Noble.

**Asubha:** Non-beautiful. Asubha-kammāṭṭhāna is a practice that involves contemplating the various unattractive parts of the body.

**Attakilamathānuyoga:** Self-mortification, self-torture.

**Avijjā:** Ignorance, not knowing, delusion.

**Avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā:** Ignorance as a condition for mental formations.

## **B**

**Bhāvanā:** Meditation or mental cultivation.

**Bhikkhu:** A fully ordained Buddhist monk.

**Bodhisattva:** Literally, 'one who is intent on full enlightenment'. Enlightenment is delayed so that all the virtues (pāramī) are developed.

## **D**

**Devadūta:** Literally, 'heavenly messenger'. There are four such

messengers: old age, sickness, death and a renunciant.

**Desanā:** A talk on the teachings of the Buddha.

**Dhamma:** The teaching of the Buddha as contained in the scriptures; not dogmatic in character, but more like a raft or vehicle to convey the disciple to deliverance. Also the truth towards which that Teaching points; that which is beyond words, concepts or intellectual understanding.

**Dhamma-Vinaya:** The teachings and monastic discipline.

**Dhutanga:** Special renunciant observances.

**Dukkha:** Literally, 'hard to bear'. Dis-ease, discontent or suffering, anguish, conflict, unsatisfactoriness. One of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena.

## H

**Hīnayāna:** Literally, 'lesser vehicle'. A term coined by Mahayāna Buddhists for a group of earlier Buddhist schools. One of the three major Buddhist traditions: see Theravāda.

## J

**Jhāna:** Meditative absorptions; deep states of rapture, joy and one-pointedness.

## K

**Kāmasukhallikānuyoga:** Sensual indulgence.

**Kāmarāgacarita:** A lustful, greedy type person.

**Kamma:** Action or cause which is created by habitual impulses, volitions, intentions. In popular usage, it often includes the result or effect of the action, although the proper term for this is vipāka.

**Kamma-vipāka:** The 'effect' or result of kamma.

**Khandha:** Group, aggregate, heap — the term the Buddha used to refer to each of the five components of human psycho-physical existence. (Form, feelings, perceptions, sense-consciousness, mental formations.)

**Kilesa:** Defilements; unwholesome qualities that cloud the mind.

**Kuṭi:** hut; typical abode of a forest bhikkhu.



## L

**Lokavidū:** 'Knower of the world.' An epithet of the Buddha.

**Luang Por:** (Thai) Literally means 'revered father'. Title of respect and affection for an elder monk.

## M

**Mahāyāna:** One of the three major Buddhist traditions. It lays particular emphasis on altruism, compassion and realisation of 'emptiness' as essentials for full awakening.

**Mettā:** 'Loving-kindness', is one of the Sublime Abidings.

## N

**Nibbāna:** Literally, 'extinguishing of a fire'; Freedom from attachments, quenching, coolness. The basis for the enlightened vision of things as they are.

## P

**Paññā:** Discriminative wisdom.

**Pūjā:** A devotional offering.

**Pāli:** The ancient Indian language of the Theravāda Canon, akin to Sanskrit. The collection of texts preserved by the Theravāda school and, by extension, the language in which those texts are composed.

**Paṭiccasamuppāda:** 'Dependent origination.' It explains the way psycho-physical phenomena come into being.

**Paṭipadā:** Literally, 'way, path'; putting the teachings into practice.

**Pāramī:** 'Perfection': the ten perfections in Theravāda Buddhism for realising Buddhahood are giving, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness and equanimity.

**Paramattha-sacca:** Ultimate truth.

**Pen paccattam:** (Thai) Something that you realise for yourself.

**Piṇḍapāta:** Alms food; or the alms round on which the food is received.

## R

**Rūpa:** Form or matter. The physical elements that make the body, i.e. earth, water, fire and air (solidity, cohesion, temperature and motion or vibration).

## S

**Sañña:** Perception

**Sañkhārā:** Mental formations.

**Sakkāya-diṭṭhi:** Personality view.

**Sālā:** A hall: usually where the monastics eat their food and other ceremonies are held.

**Sīla:** Moral virtue, also used to refer to the precepts of moral conduct.

**Sīladharā:** ‘One who upholds virtue’, a term used for Buddhist nuns ordained by Ajahn Sumedho.

**Samādhi:** Meditative concentration

**Samaṇa:** Renunciant (termed for ordained monks or nuns).

**Samsāra-vaṭṭa:** The circle of birth and death.

**Sangha:** The community of those who practice the Buddha’s way. More specifically, those who have formally committed themselves to the lifestyle of a mendicant monk or nun.

**Sati-pañña:** Literally, ‘mindfulness and discriminative wisdom’.

**Sati-sampajañña:** Literally, ‘mindfulness and clear understanding’. Also intuitive awareness, apperception.

**Soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsā:** Literally, ‘sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair’.

**Sutta:** Discourse of the Buddha.

## T

**Theravāda:** Literally, ‘The Teaching of the Elders’, is the name of the oldest form of the Buddha’s teachings with texts in the Pāli language. The ‘Southern school’ of Sri Lanka and South-East Asia.

## U

**Upāya:** Skilful means. Using different resources to understand and realise the teachings of the Buddha.

## V

**Vajrayāna:** A Buddhist school that makes extensive use of symbols and mantras to convey teachings. Associated with Tibet primarily.

**Vedanā:** Feelings or sensations, of pleasure, pain or neutrality.

**Viññāṇa:** Sense-consciousness, cognizance.

**Vinaya:** The monastic discipline, or the scriptural collection of its rules and commentaries on them.

**Vipassanā:** Insight meditation, 'looking into things'

**Viveka:** Literally, 'detachment' or 'solitude'.

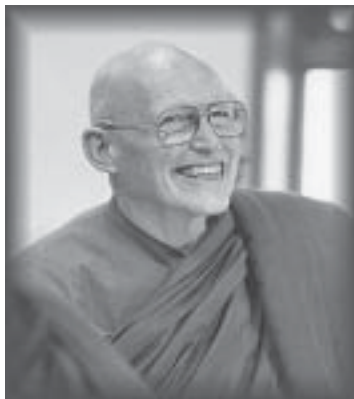
## W

**Wat:** (Thai) Monastery or temple.

## Y

**Yāna:** Literally, 'vehicle'.





## **Ajahn Sumedho**

### **Biography**

Ajahn Sumedho was born in Seattle, Washington, in 1934. After serving four years in the US Navy as a medic, he completed a BA in Far Eastern Studies and a MA in South Asian Studies.

In 1966, he went to Thailand to practice meditation at Wat Mahathat in Bangkok. Not long afterwards he went forth as a novice monk in a remote part of the country, Nong Khai, and year of solitary practice followed; he received full ordination in 1967.

Although fruitful, the solitary practice showed him the need for a teacher who could more actively guide him. A fortuitous encounter with a visiting monk led him to Ubon province, to practice with Venerable Ajahn Chah. He took dependence from Venerable Ajahn Chah and remained under his close guidance for ten years. In 1975, Ajahn Sumedho, established Wat Pah Nanachat, International Forest Monastery where Westerners could be trained in English.

In 1977, he accompanied Ajahn Chah to England and took up residence at the Hampstead Vihara with three other monks.

Ajahn Sumedho has ordained more than a hundred aspirants of many nationalities and has established three monasteries in England, as well as branch monasteries overseas. He is currently resident as senior incumbent at Amarāvātī Buddhist Monastery in Hertfordshire.

...‘Meditation’ can mean all kinds of things. It’s a word that includes any kind of mental practices, good or bad. But when I use this word, what I’m mainly using it for is that sense of centring, that sense of establishing, resting in the centre. The only way that one can really do that is not to try and think about it and analyse it; you have to trust in just a simple act of attention, of awareness. It’s so simple and so direct that our complicated minds get very confused. “What’s he talking about? I’ve never seen any still point. I’ve never found a still point in me. When I sit and meditate, there’s nothing still about it.” But there’s an awareness of that. Even if you think you’ve never had a still point or you’re a confused, messed-up character that really can’t meditate, trust in the awareness of that very perception...

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