

Rain on the Nile

Ajahn Amaro

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Talks & Travels

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This book is dedicated to Luang Por Sumedho.

May his great light burn long and brightly in the world.

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Preface

WHEN *SILENT RAIN* WAS FIRST COMPILED, back in 1993, part of the idea of producing such a varied collection of material – talks, poems, travelogues and artwork – was that it would then provide an easy source for smaller offprints over the years. Things, however, rarely turn out as predicted by foresight and thus, up until now, no smaller booklets had been spawned from it.

This present book, *Rain on the Nile*, is something of a remedy for that, being both an outcome of that original intention as well as an arena for the offering up of some more recent material – to wit, the travelogue of a journey to Egypt made in December of 2006. In truth, without there having been plans to reprint some of the talks from *Silent Rain*, the Egyptian diary would never have been written.

The idea to select some talks from the book and to create this smaller reprint was originally that of Venerable Tenzin Chogyi, an American nun practicing in the Tibetan tradition. She had been the recipient of a bequest from a family member and was of a mind to direct some of it to be used to bring parts of *Silent Rain* back into circulation, the original stock of books having long ago been exhausted. She had found the book very helpful in her own life and wished it to be accessible to others. She thus approached me, in the autumn of 2006, and floated the idea of such an offprint being sponsored by her. I readily agreed and, during the conversation, it was mentioned that I had plans to travel to Egypt with Luang Por Sumedho that December.

“You’re going to *Egypt!*” she exclaimed, “I grew up there! At least that’s where I spent the first four years of my life. What’s taking you there? Are there Buddhist groups? Are you giving teachings?”

“No, nothing like that. There’s a small group of us who have been on little expeditions in recent years – to the Arctic and then to Bhutan – and now there is the plan to visit Egypt; also, one the monks who is going is an amateur Egyptologist, he can even read and write hieroglyphics.”

She was enthralled and inspired by the idea that Luang Por Sumedho and the

rest of us would be making the journey to her “homeland” (she spoke Arabic more fluently than English in her earliest years); accordingly she suggested, “What about including an Egyptian travelogue in the book?” And thus it was.

By the end of our sojourn in Egypt, those nine words of hers had transmogrified into some 26,000 of mine, filling the pages of a thick, soft-bound notebook. Along the way several thousand photographs were also taken – by Edward and Ead Lewis, Richard Smith and I – so it seemed natural to include a number of these along with the Egyptian narrative. In this manner *Rain on the Nile* took shape, to be rounded out with a number of pieces of artwork that had appeared before in *Silent Rain*.

One notable exception amongst these illustrations is the spectacularly intricate and evocative graphic, originally crafted by Ajahn Sucitto and included in his book *Dawn of the Dhamma*, that appears in this volume before the chapter entitled “The Ring of Fire.” His book is a combination of illuminated manuscript – in a mode best described by imagining Robert Crumb doing a Buddhist rendition of *The Book of Kells* for a Grateful Dead album cover – and an erudite and practical commentary on the Buddha’s first discourse, “The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dhamma.” This book was originally published by Buddha-Dhamma Foundation in 1995, in Thailand, and has long (and sadly) been out of print. The illustration is used there, as here, to describe the process of dependent origination and is thus ideally suited to be included in this collection; indeed, the epigraph for “The Ring of Fire” (“Circles can be peaceful, but they can also be vicious”) is the opening phrase of his corresponding chapter in *Dawn of the Dhamma*, entitled “Getting Burned.”

All of the talks that appeared in the former book have been left largely as they were, with minor adjustments made only for consistency of grammar and spelling, and for the correction of a couple of factual errors. The order of the material has been changed, however, this being with the intention that the content of the talks somewhat match the flow of the extended travelogue.

As is the spirit in which Buddhist teachings are traditionally offered, all the words and images gathered here are presented for reflection upon by the reader; may the eye and heart take in and retain what is useful, and may all the rest be gently laid aside.

Amaro Bhikkhu
Abhayagiri Monastery, California
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Acknowledgements

BY A HAPPY QUIRK OF CIRCUMSTANCE Ven. Tenzin Chogyi was an editor before she became a nun; thus, once the text had been transcribed by the generous and careful hands of Pamela Kirby, Ven. Tenzin was able to apply her considerable skills to bringing the manuscript and its illustrations into their final form. Mark Gatter, a graphic designer now based in Wales, kindly undertook the production of the book and saw the project through to completion.

Along the way the manuscript was thoroughly scrutinized by Ajahn Vimalo and his helpful suggestions and corrections, particularly with respect to all the details of Egyptiana, were of inestimable value. Mark Gatter is also to be thanked for his meticulous and skilful editorial and design work in relation to the photographs; and Richard Smith, and Edward and Ead Lewis for their kindness in contributing many of those included in this volume.



The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...”

Part 1: Santa Rosa ~ Amaravati

Angela Center ~ November 22nd 2006

*The mind is the Triple Gem:
Dhamma is the Substance
Buddha is the Function
Sangha is the Manifestation ~*

DRESSING THE MIND in an array of desire, opinion, imaginary accoutrements of love and hate, past and future is like tipping vases of dead flowers and rancid water over a *Buddha-rūpa* – an unthinkable coarse, pathetic and pointless thing to do, sad and unworthy. Tend the mind gently, respectfully; leave it pure, central, soft in its symmetry, strong in its stability: unqualified, self-sustaining, self-evident.



If sexual desire no longer has any meaning, what remains?
If book projects no longer have any meaning, what remains?
If concern for what “others” think of “me” no longer has any meaning,
what remains?

The persimmon spreads its multipartite leaves and sprays the ground with colour – bold oranges swell with blood and scarlet in the leaves against the damp grey skies. A room, dank and dim, is a universe – calories and photons dispel its gloom for the human within; when the causes cease the clammy cave returns. Within this world forays surge: into the tales of Nileside life, spun by

The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...” – Part 1

Isha Schwaller de Lubicz in the book *Her-Bak*, into concerns for well-being of those gathered for retreat, into reflective reaches of the heart – searching out what might be useful, timely, true for the crew.

As the scales fall away, what remains? On what presumptions, reliance on the privileges of the Anglo-male world, or heap of beneficial circumstance does this insight balance? Fluxes of good fortune have brought health and energy, the blessings of great teachers, the presence of the Dhamma in the world – this time, this place, this heart – a garden in the fullness of its season.

A Buddha enters the world heralded and attended by a vast welter of *pāramitās* – a great array of forces come into alignment that support the finality of ripeness. The eyes scan the pages and imagination stretches to envision young Chick-Pea, the eponymous main character of *Her-Bak*, under open skies and treading the black mud of flood-fields. Such a ripeness there too, that gave rise to 30 dynasties, cascades of generations from the days of Narmer, Aha, Djer and Djet, as many years before Gotama Buddha as those that have passed since his time. Abstracted realms, *bardos* that bloom into being and dissolve at the bell for the next sitting. Fragile fronds of palm, even-chiselled stones – the inner eye cannot hold the forms – it’s all so far away, unreal as yet. No river-bank mud to fill the nostrils, no jackal cries from the night shore, no *feluccas* creaking at the jetty...

Presence holds its own, filling the unlocated heart – tendrilling out to shimmer through the pulverized remains of empty space. Willingness remains, even sheds its ness-itude – willing –

*“I been whipped by the rain, driven by the snow
I’m drunk and dirty don’t ya know, and I’m still, willin’”*¹

Yes

*“I’ve been kicked by the wind, robbed by the sleet
Had my head stove in, but I’m still on my feet and I’m still, willin’”*

Great Master Hsü Yün swells to fill the evening – forever willing, bestowing light, renouncing all for the benefit of those of us grubby ones who stumble after. His clarity, his incarnation of all good, rings through the heart as the visitation of the *neter*, the deity of skilful means – the very quality of goodness made manifest.



The concepts, sights and sounds of Egypt remain remote; the essence of their wisdom edges closer.

Angela Center ~ November 24th

COLD CLEAR CALIFORNIA EVENING – western peach-light rests upon the hills; eucalyptus and palms are silhouetted against the glow; swags of cloud ignite with salmon and ultraviolet. Formal meetings with the last of the retreatants filter to their end. The air in the hall is alive; electric stillness rings in the communal heart. Tears fall. Clashes of parting and joy resound, held in a firm embrace. Silence supports, wisdom illumines.

People ask of Egypt and the Plans: What to say? The capacity to prefigure, conjure, colourize draws up hasty sketches of Alexandria, the Nile, monasteries of the desert where water has been drawn from deep and precious wells since 200 years before Mohammed's time. No wonder the Copts are a little insular; they have held their own defences against the forces of chaos and wreck, the sword, the torch – they have a right to be prickly and jumpy. The Western Desert, Sinai... how will it be, to see St. Catherine's? The stronghold of Saint Makarios? Luxor, Abu Simbel...? Names and expressions form in the dying light of the lounge; concepts crystallize and fade upon formation, "I need to hear the dogs barking on the bank, to see the desert stars before it's real." Now it's just an agglomeration of communal thought in flight, of well-wishing and *muditā* – "I'm so happy for you..." The heart receives the gladdened glow with gratitude.

SFO ~ November 26th

A GREAT RAIN doused the whole Bay region. Plumes of spray arc from the wheels of our fellow cars. Brief curtains of curving spume cloud the view, dissolve to be refreshed by new. Jayce Thānavaro holds the wheel with unerring confidence as the fountains of conversation tumble between the two of us: his aunt's arrested cancer, alleviated by forgiveness; complex numbers and universal entanglements, the strange dependency of electronica, of abundant kinds, upon qualities that "do not exist"² strictly as such; infantile prognostications; life at Suññataram in Escondido; the history of his ex-wife and her Austrian ancestry; Ajahn Sanong on Lincoln... then lo – we're at SFO.

The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...” – Part 1

The gates are empty, the halls benign and hangar-like; friendly attendants are at the desks – the surreal, parallel world of airport life swallows us up into the heart of a sweet anonymity. After all the intensity of goodness hyper-concentrate – gratitude, genuine well-wishings and then departures – the framework of Angela Center and the Thanksgiving retreat dissolves. The house of cards, the jacks and queens, humble deuces are taken gently down. The players leave the stage, the theatre, “And, like the baseless fabric of this vision...like this insubstantial pageant faded / Leave not a rack behind...”³ The characters, the plot, the personæ are all put away, back into their trunks and dusty wardrobes.

Echoes of my conversations with Ajahn Thānīyā during the retreat, the childhoods of Empire at opposing poles – mine in rural Kent and hers deep in the North Island of New Zealand – fade into the fluorescence of departure lounge *ārammanas*. Resonances of exchanged doggerel fragments linger in the halls:

*“Augustus was a chubby lad,
Fat ruddy cheeks Augustus had...”*⁴

*“Just imagine how it feels
When first your toes and then your heels...
are slowly eaten bit by bit.
No wonder Jim detested it...”*⁵

*“The Dreadful Story of Pauline and the Matches,”
Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout and the garbage...”*⁷

Light breaks under the western hills – the tail of the storm ripples with some final flashes of Wedgewood blue, edged with a golden glaze. A falling, faltering brightness – the polar partner of the light beneath the giant rainbow, of more than half the wheel’s rim that bridged the Sonoma landscape as we said farewell to the retreat – tinges the new-washed airport buildings as it fades. The terminal hums, purrs and the players of the plane-ride sequence gently gather.

“We are currently at Homeland Security threat-level orange... thank you for helping to keep our airport secure.”

I’ve been patted down again – it seems to be standard now for all apparent religious fanatics – but, peculiarly, it’s more peaceful than being seen as a



respected teacher. Anonymous – Sean O’Nonamus, seated in 18K – for now that’s all I am, blessed relief.

In airports, on major roads, there is a mysterious yet familiar cross-hatching of lives – as in crowds on trains and in the Underground – close proximity, yet vast and distinct distances maintained between us and our fellow travellers. We might be elbow-to-elbow, nevertheless we are given no place in each other’s lives. Brief rivalries or romances might form, imagined tales, probapossible biographies, but they are swept away forever at the next exit, the baggage-claim and at our destinations. The currents, tides of change carry all away, to leave the heart unburdened, if we let it.

Even by now the great hearts that gathered at the Angela Center may have gone *nowhere* (a major theme of the teachings) but the elements that support their lives, those localized patches of karma, have scattered to the four quarters, dispersed widely already.

Now the great bird rests upon the tarmac outside this window. Busy nestlings worry its feet, suck out strings of debris and wrappings, feed in dollops of luggage, dim cargoes. Sharp lights, amber and aquatinted, rebound from the rainsoaked black.

“We are ready to start boarding...”



Dawn comes to the cloud-wrapped earth. A hundred, a thousand wefts of cumulus and cirrus and their cousins deck the swollen ball beneath us. Threads of mist fill interstices. Here and there sunlit ripples of the Shetland Sea peek through, a firm warp that underpins the crowded complexities above, the clotted swabs that lie settled in patterns of lucent pearl. England’s green and pleasant in late autumn – now wheeling below as the steel bird curls into its patterns of arrival, tracing lines of the great river.

Amaravati ~ November 28–29th

THERE IS A SPIRIT of reconnecting in the air: the heart touched, and honoured, by the sight of Luang Por Sumedho, as well as Richard Smith, Tan Ahimsako and young Joshua, to meet me on arrival at the airport; the journey in the van is as much through Sangha news as it is along the corridors of the M25. Pulling into Amaravati’s environs just past Water End, I note the Gade running strongly, bell-hopping the weirs, weaving through the shreds of its ancient cress-beds. Gravel crunches beneath the tyres as the temple spire rises into view. Reconnecting with place, the land, with community, family.

My sister Jane and Tony and I walked alongside the field-lines and hedge-rows, patterned by ancient logics, the kind which I had traced so many of from the air – and look! Hyde Park! Look, Eel Pie Island and my sister Kate’s house in Twickenham! – now edging into the open between the beeches, along the bridle path to Ivinghoe Beacon and the Ridgeway. Soggy lane beneath the feet; a fierce November sun lights the vale’s haze, throws the trees into relief and turns the clambers of old-man’s-beard into glowing opal smears. The fragrance of mulching beech-leaves, sharp with their phenol punch, brings back a thousand family hikes in English woods, at bluebell time, October birthdays, walking the dogs for endless miles, even the brief encounter with unexpected trilliums among the redwoods that day with our mother, back in ‘98.

Even though to be an alien is the truest state, from certain points of view – “the body is not self, feeling is not self...” – there is a certain savour to that feeling of homecoming. Perhaps only as a token of the arrival at Our Real Home of the pure heart, nevertheless such gatherings are blessed with a glad-some ring. There is a poignant upswell of rejoicing, a quiet delight in the sight of a dozen greens, bent and fractured hedge-lines, familiar faces a little fatter, eyes just that much more sunk in advancing grizzle. Reconnecting – coffee at Luang Por’s *kuūi*; the grand arrays of breakfast, the meal-offering and the evening; the grand pyramidal outline of the Temple; circles and ranks of half-expectant, half-detached good friends; glances and upturned faces across the hall in the half-dark.

Predictably I have been invited to offer a Dhamma talk on this half-moon night – Bhante Gunaratana told us that, in Sri Lanka, there’s a saying that, “Even if a garden snake wanders into the monastery, it will be asked to speak on Dhamma” – thus reconnecting with the high seat and that (also) familiar friend, the mixture of half-resentful acquiescence and gladness to share some



helpful thoughts with the community.

In a way, the reconnecting with Dhamma is the core pattern, the template upon which all these other resonances are built, from which all the other associations are simply offspring.

When we can truly speak Dhamma, hear Dhamma, practise Dhamma, realize Dhamma and *be* Dhamma, *that* is the true reconnection; “I am an alien” can therefore be best rendered, “The ‘I am’ is an alienating conceit, if it is believed in.” When the heart of Dhamma is realized, there is the true homecoming.

Amaravati ~ November 30th – December 2nd

DAY BROKE with a cloudless crisp dawn at the end of a sleepless night. Un-named songversations cross the air around the pond; the sound of the fountain paints a murmuring backdrop.

Conspiracy theories for breakfast in the bhikkhus’ common room, then out for a meal invitation to the house of Vish and Radhika Kidao. Suddenly we’re back in India and tales of our time with Radhika’s family – her mother Ammu, her aunt and uncle and cousins – usher in that other world: the twin towers in the halls of Amaravati, Calicut and Kottakal in Berkhamsted – universes nested infinitely within each other.

We dine on Radhika’s creations with her and Vish, her sister; the hours dissolve – Kerala, Orissa, the temples of Konarak, Himachal Pradesh and the moonscapes of the Spiti valley, meeting Tan Acalo at Sera Je Monastery up on the Koorg Plateau. The fumes of the rattling bus and the massaging lurch of potholes are revived as the body remembers with a soft nostalgia.

At tea time all the Egyptian pilgrims gather at Luang Por’s kutī; Ajahn Vimalo bubbles with knowledge and self-effacement in a flow as ceaseless as the fountain outside the doors. Edward, Ead, Richard, Luang Por and myself are finally joined by Ajahn Ñānarato to complete the crew. To bind us to the heart of the adventure Richard ritually passes out our packets of essentials: luggage labels, hand sanitizer, torches, pocket tissues – most are faithfully stowed away. As our conversations roam, Richard, for form’s sake and to frame the time, valiantly tries to lead us through the schedule – it’s hard to stay on track as digression is so sweet and such fertile hearts fill the cosy room.



Thursday arrives attended by racing clouds barrelling over from the southwest, rain-laden.

Breakfast in the *sālā* brings more connection with old friends. A burst of activity follows in the office, replying to essential items from Abhayagiri (the cat, the book delivery, visiting monks) and catching up with Stephen Fermor, a childhood friend – we met when we were three and went to all our schools together. All of this carries with it the flavour of drawing threads together, picking up and sorting, arranging the *sūtras* of a human life, resuming themes laid aside a few acts ago in the saga.

I spent ten years at Amaravati so the associations with the body of land and buildings, the people who comprise the community, are strong. This so even though only the first few in the lines of nuns and monks ever actually lived here with me in my time – 1985 to 1995. In spite of the feeling that all the folks of my generation have died or left the village, the spirit of continuity is a powerful loom on which the strings of karma and association are strung; the shape of a path, the books in the library, the songs of the birds – all these conspire to embody the sense of place and thus carry the power of the heart’s intuition of belonging. At first, or on the surface, just twinges of nostalgia – literally “homesickness” in Greek – belonging to the Deathless Realm by way of geography; taking that intimation in deeper, this ripens into a true realization of what Deathlessness means and what “belonging” embodies, too.

Christina, the glorious, extrovert, chaotic child of David Essex’s iconic youth, has arrived with her (surprisingly sane and stable) fiancé Marcus for their wedding blessing. We set up all the accoutrements after the meal and an arc of monastics forms to embrace the happy pair.

The blessed Christina – cursed with cerebral palsy, mental instabilities of a colourful range, a chequered childhood and challenging life thereafter – carries on a commentary as we set up and begin the rituals. Everyone warms to her sweet and innocent derangements and, as we light the candle and begin to chant, she responds by restraint and silence. At the sprinkling she falls over sideways toppled by gales of laughter; on the way out to the tree-planting she deftly rolls a smoke of Golden Virginia – “My muvva would’ve wan’ed a fag now, this is for ’er...” – and takes a final toke as Marcus begins to shovel in the dirt. It’s a yew tree, planted in a special grove of the Amaravati copse, where



two kutīs now house some of the monks' community.

We chant as the earth thuds into place; Christina takes handfuls and sprinkles it in as well. The lustral waters are bestowed on the young bush by one and all; Christina says heartfelt prayers for her mother and Marcus's granny, "E never carried the coal upstairs for 'er, so now 'e wants to do some shovelling in return" – smiles spread through the assembly and we troop out, shivering in the late November wind.

Peter Murdock has come to visit and we spend an hour together, catching up on their family life and his world as head teacher of the Dharma School, in Brighton. The rest of the day is filled with documentaries and film-clips, gathered by Ajahn Jayanto, of the inequities and deceptions around 9/11 – first up are a few John Stewart pieces, then *Loose Change* and *9/11 Mysteries*. We watch these with Luang Por, largely in silence, and the images and words sink deeply in: all very mysterious and, more to the point, sincerely troubling. Who knows what the truth is on this? Nevertheless, given the perspective of history, and the Buddha's own insight into the intrinsic immorality of the processes of governing, it all should not be that much of a surprise: "The world delights in becoming, relishes becoming, is addicted to becoming..."⁸ It is hardly a surprise that the Precepts get minced in the expediencies of obtaining and maintaining power.



Cool drizzle and pigeon calls; the day of the grand departure brightens slowly into dim greys and dampness – blue skies and desert sands could not seem more remote. The summer's dead leaves lie littering the lawns beneath these windows; a straggler or two cling to the twigs of the silver birch. Cold and glum. The breakfast gathering forms around long conversations with Ajahn Metta and Sr. Santacitta, old friends that I helped to usher into the robes when I lived here 15 years ago. Both are well in their own ways, bright with Dhamma-life and the joy of reconnecting – receiving their worlds and empathizing warms the heart. Both have been drawn by Tibetan teachers in recent years and are grateful for the sympathetic ear I can provide. It is a genuine delight to see and feel how much their training has blessed them since they first came in the gate, back in the early '90s.





The Source of Creation

From a talk given during the Easter Retreat, Amaravati, 1991

AS MONASTICS, WE ARE OFTEN asked where creativity fits into our way of life. The tone of a monastic environment is very simple. We aim at as simple a life as possible so people wonder where the creative instinct fits into all this. It is often difficult to understand why, for instance, music does not feature in our lives in the monastery when it seems to be so intrinsic to most other spiritual traditions of the world.

Since it is so often asked of us, naturally it is something that we contemplate and of course, as individuals, it is something that we are involved and concerned with, and consider in our own way. Often the assumption is that, since the monastic life represents the epitome of spiritual life, we have to strangle the creative impulse or the capacities that we have, our talents, inclinations and creative abilities. All of that has to be hidden away or discarded, and looked on as distractions, unnecessary for Enlightenment.

This is not really a healthy approach. Many of the people in the Sangha have creative backgrounds and are very artistic. The other day I was talking to an *anāgārika* who had been helping in the Italian *vihāra* for the last few months. Though there were only 4 or 5 people in the *vihāra*, there was a former *anāgārika* living locally who was a jazz pianist and singer; the *anāgārika* who visited us used to play the saxophone; Ajahn Thānavaro used to be a drummer and Ven. Anigho was the lead guitarist in a well-known band in New Zealand. These facts came to the attention of the members of the Sangha here in England, who politely asked if the artistes had ever got together. The reply was, “No, no! And if we did, I never told you so!” So it is not as though the people who are attracted to living a monastic life are bereft of the inclination in these directions. This place is stuffed full of poets, artists and musicians of one sort or another and

The Source of Creation

you might have noticed that, generally, we are not a repressed bunch of people. So how does it all fit together?

The Buddha was often criticized in his own time as a life negator. There is something within us that is very strongly affirmative towards life and our existence as human beings. That “life affirmation” is highly praised and given a lot of energy and support in our society. In our own time, as in the time of the Buddha, to be enthusiastic about life, to take one’s life in both hands and really make something of it is highly praised, and we celebrate someone who has “done something with their life.” And so the Buddha’s whole approach towards spirituality – promoting renunciation, celibacy, simplicity, non-accumulation and so forth, has attracted much criticism. People used to call him an annihilationist, someone who was denying the spirit of life and the spirit of all that was good and beautiful in the world; someone who was a big downer on life, who held a nihilist philosophy – “it’s all pain,” “it’s all a dreadful mistake,” “it shouldn’t have happened in the first place.” “You have to minimize your life, grit your teeth and wait until it’s all over, and the sooner the better!”

It was felt that the Buddha really held that kind of a view. He was questioned on it and he once replied that his Teaching did tend more in the direction of the nihilist than the affirmative, “My Teaching is much more in the direction of desirelessness, of coolness rather than in the direction of desire, of getting, of possessing, of accumulating.”⁹ Yet it would be incorrect to call the Buddha-Dhamma a nihilist philosophy; it is not life-negating.

The Buddha said that because of the way that we are conditioned as human beings, we tend to drift into the two extremes of, on the one hand, affirmation – affirming and investing in conditioned existence and seeing the beauties, delights and good things that life possesses in terms of what can be achieved or derived by conditioned existence – or, on the other hand, criticizing the conditioned world as a dreadful mess, a mistake which one wants to get away from. The Buddha pointed out that these are two extreme positions that we fall into and are points of view on life that do not actually respect the true nature of things, because they are bound up with the view of self, the view of the absolute reality of the material world, and of time.

This is not seeing things in a clear, true way. What the Buddha was always pointing to was transcendence of the conditioned sensory world, of selfhood, and the illusion of separateness. When we sit in meditation and look into the nature of our own minds, we can see how much the mind will grasp at anything. Depending on our character, sometimes it will grasp at positivity – affirming



things to get interested in and excited about, or it will grasp at negative aspects that we don't want to bother about or that we want to get rid of. But any kind of holding on or pushing away, however subtle, affirms the sense of self. Even if the impulse is destructive or nihilist, we still operate from the view there is something here which is "me" or "mine," which "I" want to get rid of and not experience, it's an intrusion upon "me," a corruption in "me," and I don't want to bother with it. I want to get rid of it.

Sometimes, when the mind has a really perverse streak we can even bring pain upon ourselves; we can actually know that something is wrong, is going to bring pain to us or to those around us – but we go ahead and do it anyway. "I know it is wrong, I know I am going to get into trouble; I know it is going to hurt; I know I am going to get criticized for it, but I am going to do it anyway!" – the "spitting at God" impulse! – "And I don't care if you are the Creator of the Universe!"

Sometimes, we will do anything to bolster the sense of "I" and keep it alive. Pushing against or holding onto something just to feel there is someone here who is pushing or holding, because this very powerful sense of ego, of "I," is terrified of non-existence, of dying, of non-being.

The Buddha was not pointing to life affirmation, or negation, but to the understanding of existence, and of life; to seeing clearly the true nature of things. When we see clearly, then we don't define fulfilment by material achievements or creations or things. It doesn't have to be demonstrated by the material world, or by experience and possessions, feelings or associations. The Buddha's insight is very much into the ability we have to hold the material world: to experience life and the people around us that create the fabric of our life; to be able to harmonize with that completely without being deluded by it. It's rather like being awake in a dream. We know that we are dreaming, that everything around us is simply dream-stuff, but we can be in accord with the dream without being deluded by it.

People often say, "If the Buddha was beyond suffering, why did he bother to live in such a miserable way? Here is a being who was liberated, incapable of suffering, so why did he choose a life of celibacy and renunciation, living as a mendicant, walking around the Ganges Valley barefoot for 45 years, giving his time up to teaching people who, for most of the time, understood very little of what he taught?" He himself said that it was going to be incredibly difficult to communicate his understanding to people. Many people assume that someone who is completely liberated can really "enjoy" life – go out and have some fun.

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They think, “Once I get enlightened, I am really going to have a good time.” One of our Australian bhikkhus, who had also been a guitarist, expected to get enlightened after a couple of months of meditation so that he would be able to play *really* well! “It will really do wonders for my technique!” – this is what he thought. “Get this enlightenment cracked, back on the road, go to the top of the charts, make a lot of money and be happy!” If we are completely beyond suffering and nothing in the world could make us miserable, then surely we could have a little bit of a good time?

But the Buddha had realized what it takes to have a good time. He lived in the way of completely fulfilling everything in life that he saw was conducive to happiness. *This is really worth contemplating.* Why did he choose to renounce, why did he choose celibacy, why did he choose simplicity and homelessness, just living on alms food? What one sees is that the Buddha’s vision of life was very different from the rest of us. When he was enlightened he had insight into the nature of the world. Our worldly mind-states do not allow us to see it that way, but the Buddha realized the limitations of the satisfaction that comes from the sensory world; although it is gratifying and pleasant enough, he saw that the true happiness, the true bliss in life, is in being free from the illusion of selfhood and separateness. “The greatest happiness of all is to be free from the sense of ‘I am’.”

This does not mean self-destructiveness, wiping oneself out, but to realize that “I am” is just a thought in the mind; anything we define ourselves as, any characteristic we claim to be, or think we are, is but a half-truth. When the mind realizes and is aware of this, then we are blissfully content, blissfully happy. And so the Buddha simply lived his life in a way that respected this realization, this sense of purity and simplicity. When someone asked him about this, saying, “King Seniya Bimbisāra [the local monarch]... abides in greater pleasure than Venerable Gotama.” The Buddha answered; “Shouldn’t you ask me who enjoys life more, the *Tathāgata* or King Bimbisāra?” They thought, “Well, it has to be the king of course; a lovely palace, surrounded by beautiful people, lovely music, delicious food to eat, and he can amuse himself whenever he wants to...” The Buddha said, “I can sit experiencing uninterrupted bliss for seven days continuously without a moment’s break; do you think King Bimbisāra is capable of that?” “No!”¹⁰

Despite the pleasures that we can experience through sound and sight, feeling, etc., the bliss of the free mind, the mind which is unattached, far exceeds any other. The Buddha taught this realization of emptiness.



When we talk of emptiness or the empty mind, it is not a mind devoid of feeling or objects or of any experience. It is not everything vanishing and the mind being an empty space where nothing else is happening. But it is a mind empty of the sense of “I,” of ignorance, of grasping and rejecting. When the mind is empty there can still be sight, sound, feeling, smell, taste, touch. It can all be there, but there is no grasping. Everything that we see, hear, taste, touch, think, remember, every mood, every aspect of ourselves and our world, every particle of it, is experienced simply as a pattern of consciousness in the mind. And so to understand and realize emptiness, is to be able to see that reality, that actuality.

It is almost, in a sense, seeing a transparency of experience, the dream-like, mirage-like nature of our world of experience. The Buddha’s description of emptiness, and what that takes us to, is thus a mind which is fresh and alert and can respond freely to life.

This is where, in a sense, creativity comes into our life as monastics. By giving up the need to have fulfilment expressed in terms of artistic creations or a beautiful home or bringing up children or anything of that nature, by living with a mind which is unattached, empty and free, everything which is creative, or which needs to be created or said or done, arises from that pure clear space. It arises with a freshness and naturalness that gives it tremendous beauty, simplicity, and loveliness. Thomas Merton talked about this when he used the expression “divine silence” or “silence of God.” Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk who wrote a great deal in the 1950s and 1960s and is very influential amongst modern Christians. He said that, “The monastic life is a life wholly centred upon this tremendous existential silence of God which nobody has ever been able to explain, and which is, nevertheless, the heart of all that is real.

“The value of the monks’ Public Prayer is therefore not drawn so much from its sound as from the deep silence of God which enters into that sound and gives it actuality, value, meaning. The beauty of Gregorian chant and that which distinguishes it from every other kind of music, lies in the fact that its measured sound, in itself beautiful, tends to lead the soul, by its beauty, into the infinitely more beautiful silence of God. Chant that does not have this effect, no matter how great its technical perfection, is practically without value. It is empty of the silence of wisdom, which is its substance and its life.”¹¹

This relates to the same principle that the Buddha pointed to: when the mind is awake, still, and pure, then every action is invested with that divinity, that sacredness. This has also been the basis of a lot of Buddhist art, particularly

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in Japan. People have also extended this into spontaneous art in more recent times in the West, trying to find the point where art and life meet (or collide!) with each other, and investigating which is life and which is art? Which is the real thing? One modern composer, John Cage, writes outrageous, weird pieces: his *Living Room Music* is the sound of people in a living room moving all the furniture and cushions around; or his most famous piece – 4'33" – is a pianist sitting with their hands over the keys for four minutes and thirty-three seconds without touching them. What you hear is the roaring silence of the mind, that plus the distress and indignation of the audience, whispering and trying to find out what is going on; that is the music! So our concept of what is music, what is art, is challenged.

I have something of a creative streak myself, I suppose. When I was younger I used to have fantasies about being a great writer; find myself a garret and go and starve in it and create unique masterpieces – be some marvellous, compelling figure like Kafka or Rimbaud and produce pithy, obscure wonders. I used to sit down and get deeply into some piece of writing but then I would realize, to my dismay, that I didn't have anything to say. I kept realizing that, although I could put words onto paper and express things, I didn't know anything, and I really didn't have anything worth saying. So I realized that this effort was foolish. Why not wait until I had something to say and then maybe the writing would happen! I was suffering from what I call the "Roy Jenkins effect": he was once asked if he had had any regrets about his political career. He replied that he used to say that he would have been fulfilled if he had become Prime Minister – but then he realized that he had never really wanted the job itself, he had merely wanted to *have been* P.M. I wanted to be known as a great writer simply for the prestige and the identity alone, like Roy Jenkins.

As the years went by, I found that in monastic life there are long periods of time when one is not expressing anything in any formal way. In our sitting and walking meditation there is no material expression but, more importantly, the way that we talk with other people and move around, this is its own expression, and of a more tangible sense. During the run of life in a monastery there is a time for us to do things like giving Dhamma talks, or writing for the newsletter; these are art forms. I was asked to write a book a few years ago after I completed a long walk from our monastery in Sussex to our monastery in Northumberland. People said, "Please keep a diary," so I started writing. It was about 250 pages long by the time I finished. I then designed it, arranged the photos and illustrations, and organized the lettering. I had a great time. Since then various op-



portunities have arisen when something needed to be done and, at such times, I find that it creates itself. On the birthdays of my mother, father, and two sisters, I draw birthday cards for them. If I sit down to draw a picture just because there is a spare moment, it is terrible. But if there is a reason, a cause for it, then amazing creations seem to appear – exotic and colourful. What arises is elicited by the occasion, by the person it is for, by the moment and the mood. It does itself. When the ego gets out of the way, that which needs to appear seems to manifest. It is in accordance with the time, the place, the situation and so it does itself.

For instance, at the end of last year [1990], the nun who was supposed to be editing the children's magazine *Rainbows* threw up her arms in despair crying, "I can't do this, it's too much!" I found myself volunteering to help. Not only did I help put the whole thing together but I created illustrations for a whole week. Yet, when there is nothing to be drawn, written or created, then I don't feel that I should be creating something to show people that I am an artist or am this, that or the other. Perfection or talent or fulfilment of ourselves as human beings does not have to be manifest. The free mind is the truest, purest affirmation of Truth, of the very heart of life. Whether that manifests as material things or as actions that we perform, or whether it doesn't, we realize that that is not the important thing.

If something needs to be done then it happens; we find that we are not holding back or being unkind. If people don't need a hand, then we know how to restrain, how to hold back. But if we see something that needs to be done, then we come forth and we find that that which is necessary, which accords, is what appears. As soon as a sense of self manifests in anything we do, then the whole thing takes on a much more clumsy and discordant tone. One can see very clearly when there is self-consciousness or self-assertion; it stands out. When it is absent, there is a real fluidity in the person, a freeness, an easiness; every gesture is magical, beautiful.



The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...”

Part 2: Ghiza & the Western Desert

Ghiza ~ December 2nd

A THUNDEROUS UNDERCURRENT of street sounds stirs the misty morning air – horns of many pitches blow like a hundred winds in some stormy orchestra. All their rage and murmur, however, blasts in contrast to the utter stillness, serene presence of the three grand pyramids that straddle the view from the balcony.

They’ve endured a lot. Their tenacity wraps them, supports them – their lines are clean and unperturbed as ever, undisturbed by every rumble of the humans, the changes of night and day, seasons and empires, whatever the world has conjured for them since they were coaxed into existence. In the rising light they rest, an incarnation of *upekkha*.

The morning passed at Amaravati with few final details to be nursed through – in the grey, damp wrappings of the season everyone moves with the down-tilted head, purposeful step and suppressed shiver that says, “I’d rather not be out in this.” It’s a silent rain, gathering in a film of beadlets on the robes that keep us cosy; not a drop can be seen to fall.

Once the meal is over there is the scurry of bowl-washing and a small scrum of lids, bowls, stands, spoons and eating kit soon covers the carpet of the reception room. As soon as mine are all through the system I pluck them out and duck away from the growing banter between Luang Por and all the monks and novices gathered there.

Despite the cautionary urgency, I’m packed within ten minutes and there is a spacious pause before the great departure. By 1:00 a gaggle of us are sheltered beneath the cloister and slowly the remaining bags and beings arrive. Neither Ajahn Vimalo nor Ajahn Ñānarato have any luggage at all – just small



shoulder-bags for their bare essentials. All *sans moi*, it seems, have decided to travel bowl-less. At 1:06 it's "Wheels up" and the van rolls smoothly from the gate; the cluster of Amaravati faithful – Kratic, a few nuns, Ajahn Paññasaro – wave their goodbyes.

Despite the inflamed nature of Middle Eastern politics, it's still currently more likely for you to drown in your bath, or to be hit by a meteorite, than it is to be blown up by al-Qaeda – nevertheless there has been anxiety written upon a few faces, although the reports of chilly weather in Egypt have been more worrying to others. There's always something to fret about, if you take the trouble to look for it; if you don't, then life is as it can only be – ever uncertain, no cause for alarm.

A buoyant *bonhomie* fills the minibus as it barrels into Hemel Hempstead and through to the M25 motorway. Ajahn Vimalo chats about past trips to Egypt and we catch up on the lives of his children, now in their late 20s and 30s. Anāgārika Bruno (Portuguese variety) drops us at the kerb and our bags and bodies tumble into the terminal. For some curious reason our flight does not appear on the Departures screen but we are assured by confident British Airways staff that it still exists. After coffees amongst the colourfully clad and chirpy holiday-makers and the sullen frequent flyers, we head to the gate to wait. Edward is hailed along the way by friends, also in transit. Maybeth, from Gualala, apparently saw me go by first and thought, "That looks like the monk I met at Edward's house-blessing"; in the next moment, of course the man himself came by and she jumped up to greet him. They were on their way to South Africa and, unbeknownst to them, had up to that point been waiting at the wrong gate. If they'd been at Gate #12, as they were supposed to be, they'd never have seen us.



No sooner is the flight called than, mysteriously, its number appears on the screens – *jāti*, born at last. The process is held up a little in the delivery room, however, and we wait on the tarmac in the gathering dark long and quietly.

"We're not going anywhere," quoth Luang Por.

"D'you mean that literally or philosophically?"

The night rain streams down the windows and the plane sits motionlessly: in our minds, the universe.

Marked by no distinct impulse, the wheels begin to roll. The Queen pres-

The Lotus, the Papyrus & the "O! As is..." – Part 2

ents herself in the form of Helen Mirren (who it's commented could get a new job as Her Majesty's sub as she does it better than the real thing) and all of those on our journey spontaneously elect to watch her and Tony Blair and the tragic ghost of Diana play out their dramas of the fateful days of 1997, after the crash in Paris.

Above the rain the hours fly by – then Alexandria and the Nile delta spread below, threaded by infinite strings of light. The bird circles its roost; Cairo's vast presence signals us and reaches to all horizons. We curve into the approach, the Nile bending, plane banking, now this way, now that. Street-lights and neon sparkle on the water – we glide down and settle on this land which will be our home for the next two weeks.

It's only now that the reality of travelling in Egypt truly hits: courteous reps from Bales Travel come to greet us; immigration officers, police keep stopping us to ask politely, "Where are you from?" "What are you?" "What is your costume?" "Welcome to Egypt" – strangers in the aisles, smiling, shy and inquisitive. Tourists have been coming to Egypt for 2500 years so one would have thought they had seen everything by now; it seems, however, that four Buddhist monks, three of them Anglos, is a novel sight.

There's a barrage of info-welcomes on the bus then, after a hearty breakfast and more enquiries from the waiters and passers-by, we meet with our trusty tour guide, Eman, a smiling, broadly-framed woman in her 40s. She soon launches into her own delivery; within moments all are in awe of her command of Egyptian history and the clear, well-ordered diction with which she offers it up. She goes from King Narmer in 3100 BCE to President Mubarak in 2006 CE in the 40 minutes between the hotel and the Citadel of Salah al-Din, the first call of our morning. A spontaneous round of applause rises up to honour her brilliance; she allows herself a shy smile of pride.

Our tour is a well-ordered cascade of movement and feeling, perception of the flow of ages. The Citadel is followed by the mosque of Mohammed Ali – built on the plan of the Blue Mosque of Istanbul, it is a tribute to the first king and minister of Syria/Lebanon/Palestine/Jordan/Egypt, who took the kingship following a deal from the European powers. He had started out as an Albanian and ended up the heir of Egypt's Pharaohs.

Next on the list was the cooler, vastly more serene Sultan Hassan mosque. There had been crowds of eager eyes, hundreds upon hundreds of school kids at the Citadel – innocent, eager, energy-filled, clad in 10,000 colours – here it was all more sedate. The walls were thick stone blocks, the courtyard spacious,



the ceilings less decked with chandeliers – Eman made it clear this was her favourite of the two, understandably.

A dip into the Coptic realm came next with a tour of the ancient stronghold of Babylon (no relation). The church of Abu Serga not only held the remains of St. Sergius and another martyr, it more importantly surrounded and surmounted the crypt where the Virgin Mary had hidden with Jesus for three months during their flight from Herod. St. Joseph the carpenter, as Eman called him, had chosen the spot because he had friends nearby and it was also close to a synagogue. The church was simple and solid – it had been the centre of the Coptic community for centuries – and was even blessed with a pillar that issued forth blood. The barrel roof was really a “boat-roof” to help the congregations of the centuries be reminded of Noah’s vessel that rescued the living from the flood; in the same way the church is to be seen as a rescue-ship in the stormy waters of the world.

We took everything in, with faith and interest, but all were getting information-fatigue. After a pause for the meal at the Nile Hilton and a recharge of the batteries we launched ourselves, in the afternoon, into the wonders of that ocean of history, the Egyptian Museum. It is hard to credit how, after 4500 years, a fully life-like face – carved in stone or even painted on wood – can look out at you and convincingly say, “Hello.” The lines and textures are so natural, so true, that there’s an eerie communication across the centuries: the life and feelings of the subject, the hand of the artist and the eye of the onlooker – at this moment of contact, there is nothing between them.

The cascade, cataract of information flows from the Early to the Middle Dynastic period – pausing hardly at all for the Intermediary – then the times of Rameses II, Thutmoses III and the mysteriously blessed Tutankhamun. He was blessed largely since his funerary array seems to be the only one of the Pharaohs that was never robbed – although a few others seem never to have been found, such as that of Alexander, crowned as a Pharaoh in his own time and even portrayed in his own pharaonic rūpa, in the Ptolemaic style with Egyptian head-dress but with a few Grecian curls peeking out below the edges.



The search, the intense and unstinting effort to conquer death – by offerings to the deities, by propitiations, by likenesses – is the message that resounds all around. But despite their intent precautions, elaborately hidden

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sarcophagi nested like giant Russian dolls, buried in sealed tombs, now they are laid out in their threadbare underwear in the Royal Mummies Hall, where one can gaze upon the shrivelled and bandaged bodies of the mighty, Ozymandiases who ruled the world: Rameses, Thutmoses, Amenhotep. Here are the toenails of the great in their final sleeps, the sprigs of hair draped round a dried-up ear – they’re laid out like corpses in a local morgue, raw, unglorified, the message of their frailty open to all.

“Actually, they have a better chance of being preserved here than if they had been left in their coffins.” But in the manner in which lords of the universe would approve of? Maybe so... Certainly their presence carries mighty lessons: even the greatest of all had abscesses in their teeth and dried to dust, eventually.

Nevertheless, in an ironic way they do remain – these bones, yes, but moreover, the Dhamma that their powerlessness proclaims still pertains and will itself live forever, outside of time.

Ghiza & Saqqara ~ December 3rd

IN THE EARLY MORNING we meet and greet each other, “Did you rest well?” “Did you have a peaceful evening?”

Quoth Edward, “It would have been better if I hadn’t been kept up all evening, solving the world’s problems.”

“I know how to solve the world’s problems,” replied Luang Por, “keep the Five Precepts and meditate.”

“Just the first Precept would be enough,” Ajahn Vimalo offered – the banter rolls on thick and rich. Already the personalities of the group have resolved into their niches: Ajahn Ñānarato is the silent, gently responsive one, Ead is the counterpart among the lay folk; Luang Por and I fall into the role of seniors, with he being the central one and the guide for us, one and all. Frequently we follow his drift into absurdist exchanges, almost as if these rare times that we are together these days should be celebrated with abundant and visible good will and wit, and the joy of laughing at the weirdnesses of the human condition with a single voice. Ajahn Vimalo has a dual persona as the chief Egyptologist of the group in addition to the role of the monastic Joker – every gesture or move, notable characteristic of anything seen, heard or suspected earns a comment of his or triggers an associated yarn. The flood is like the Nile – rich and



fertile soils are left behind, and life is well balanced through it, nevertheless the element of inundation is proudly present, carrying all before it relentlessly. It's a delight to be with him, and the current is strong; both are true. Also, with my own logorrhoeic habits being still close to the surface, any thoughts of criticism meet with a "Look who's talking!" riposte from the *hiriottappa* bank.

His chirpy Lutonian manner managed to catch the attention of one of the flight attendants on the plane from London. She told him she'd been wanting to get on a retreat at some Buddhist centre in Hertfordshire but that, every time she contacted them, the retreats were full. It didn't take long to work out it had been Amaravati she'd been trying to get to; Ajahn Vimalo then let her know he was due to lead a retreat in the spring and that he'd give her one of his discretionary spaces. Bob's yer uncle. So the flood brings many blessings with it... Edward and Richard are the Dhamma Protecting pair.

Bean fool and falafel is the traditional Egyptian breakfast; this we take, along with the great variety of other offerings.

Eman meets us for our journey to the pyramids, which takes all of five minutes as the road up to their base is right outside our door. As part of the funerary complexes, they were built so massively to help protect the artefacts that had, in the past, so often been seized by robbers who were after the perfumes, the silver, and the gold.

The wind is brisk and cool, the light diffuse as the sun rises behind the Great Pyramid. Eman finishes another flawless and fascinating delivery: the stories of the great pyramid builders of the 4th Dynasty in the Old Kingdom.

Like the canyon scene of *Zabriski Point* or some grand Beckettian drama, other tourists flock, pose, stride and jabber, pausing, moving, splaying their arms, interested, excited, intrigued like us to be in this unique spot on the planet. Hawkers and *djellabah*-wearing Bedouins offer beads, scarabs, bag-carrying, "No, sir! This is not the right way!" said one as he took hold of my shoulder-bag strap. "Yes it is!" was my line, and we strode on with our part of the dance. "Please take my picture." Let me dodge by unhampered. All of this at the foot of the biggest triangle in the world, with barren desert behind and one of the biggest cities on the planet, Cairo of 13 million *Kas*, sitting at its feet.

Soon we are climbing into the breach, stooping, squeezing by a long chain of Japanese. A few even make startled *añjali* in the half-dark tunnel as we pass each other on the ramp to the King's Chambers, at the heart of the vast tomb.

In the deep centre itself it's hard to remember that we're in a building, not a mountain cave – it's so like the temples of Ellora and Ajanta. Clean lines

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and smooth surfaces surround, support and cover us here, but have all been carved and moved into place rather than being the living rock of those other ancient temples.

In the chamber a silence densely packs the space, even though we jabber and mutter, along with the straggles of others passing through. Some people are meditating here; some sit or lie round the walls, receiving some kind of healing through the hands of friends. We stand by the stone sarcophagus for a while then go to sit ourselves; soon I notice the depth of the *nada* sound and the intensity of the *prāna* in the space. I'm reminded of the similar mixture of spiritual force, peace and chaotic noises all around that is the usual flavour of life at the Mahabodhi Temple of Bodh-Gaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment. There is cacophony, there is peace, and the two don't interfere – two natures known by one awareness.

The quality of echo and resonance in the room rouses an urge to try some chanting; “Yoso...” mounts slowly from the heart and I begin the opening phrases of the morning chanting. Others join in, or not, the chaos of six languages and 15 conversations persists for a while. Thundering notes, syllables of Pali, rebounding rich and bright – we add our spirit to the memories of the chamber. Ushered out and down we emerge blinking like moles, glad of the cool morning breezes that still blow. At the other pyramids of the group we are quietly assailed by Bedouins – one rides a camel called Charlie Brown. My effort to go off alone and sit on a stone at the foot of the pyramid of Menkaure turns into an effort to persuade Mohammed (real name) that I don't want to ride Charlie Brown, nor do I have *baksheesh* for him to be in a picture. He's a mixture of presences: the operator looking for a mark, the curious boy who wants to know why I dress this way, the human who is glad to share a life and have some friends in the world. Eventually I consent to take his picture, so he'll be happy in the knowledge that he's now in my camera. And he is.

At the Sphinx, its inscrutable and enigmatic aura is more than somewhat masked by the throng of 10,000 of us kids and tourists clustering around taking pictures of it and of each other. At one point Eman has to bark at a pack or two of children as the racket of their nearby discussions about us makes it hard to be heard at all. She's impressive in this mode. Still, they've seen the Sphinx in pictures before but a bunch of *bhikkhus* (and some white ones at that) is way outside their ken – thus, their innocent curiosity is hardly a surprise. It's quite a lot of fun, in a way, to be a *devadūta* of sorts and to have *muditā* for their lives made happier for a moment.



“It’s the vile bile, not the Nile,” is the answer to questions about the waterway – filmy, dark and pungent – that runs between the two carriageways of the road to Saqqara. Low-lying fields of intensely green vegetables lie in deep fertile strips at the city’s edge. This canal is some kind of waterway, branching off from the life-giving river and fertilizing the land throughout this area.

Donkeys and pony-carts mingle freely with the engined traffic. Djellabahs billow, veiled women scurry or stride purposefully, and piles of vegetables rest at intervals along the verge. They grow everything here: cukes, toms, lettuce, cauli and also cornflower; palm trees are ubiquitous – no wonder they have been and remain iconic – and, behind the tiny vegetable stalls, there always seems to sit a rough mud-hut or reed shack as a day-shelter for those working in the fields. Maybe these are even permanent homes, though this seems unlikely. Families squat beside the fields, a teen races out to the pausing traffic, tray of goodies in hand.

Bougainvillea has strung its densely coloured bushes widely by the road, beneath the houses some of which boast the “unfinished architecture” school’s imprint: this mode of construction leads to a half or a third of the house or apartment block complete, but the family living there anyway. The origin of this mysterious yet widespread mode of living is revealed by Eman, “If it’s complete; you pay tax – it’s incomplete, you don’t – therefore ‘unfinished architecture’ has become a way of life.”

Don’t we always go to where the game gathers and pick our berries at the least costly spots? Nothing much changes in us humans, sometimes.



A vigorous trio toots and pipes us into the restaurant for the meal – Richard duly offers them the appropriate (monetary) gesture and they stop, as if at the fall of the conductor’s baton: cash arrives, job over – that’s the law.

The step pyramid of Dzoser (pronounced “Jesser”) was the first structure of its kind anywhere in the world, completed in 2665 BCE. Whereas all later funerary complexes of the Pharaohs’ have only four elements, Dzoser’s had ten separate buildings; according to our trusty, bountifully knowledgeable guide this was agreed on as over-the-top so subsequent generations

trimmed the expenditures down.

Dzoser’s architect was Imhotep and, unburdened by the tax-laws of future times, the whole place had been brought to completion in 19 years. The ancient resonances of many now familiar forms met the eye, under the bright but cool, windy afternoon: here were fluted columns, later copied by the Greeks and Romans; here were lotus buds – symbol of Upper Egypt – so often seen in Buddhist art and sculpture; here were palm trunks carved from stone, forming the ceiling of his buildings’ entrances – just as the barrel roofs of Ajanta’s caves have stone-carved “beams” as if they needed them to hold up the mountain above. Wood faked in stone; stones cut so finely they needed no mortar whatsoever; pillars and lintels forming spaces and proportions now such a part of our towns and cities, grander buildings. Imhotep’s breath still flows within the stones of London and New York – as with the likenesses in the museum, it’s as if meeting, face to face.

Our final encounter is with the life of a high official, Ptah-hotep. His funerary chamber, preserved through its having been buried in sand for centuries, was immeasurably simpler and more homely than those of the Pharaohs. These latter were mostly inscribed with religious texts and prayers, as would be expected of a divine incarnation; in contrast, that present before us was entirely representative of Ptah-hotep’s own world: arguments among his servants, wrestling matches, preparations for a feast... It all had the flavour of life as lived, rather than sterilized and flat through needing to be seen as hyper-holy.

Ajahn Vimalo told us that sometimes these inscriptions say such things as, “I want to get so drunk that I’ll fall over unconscious.” It reminded me of the way that it’s the *Vinaya* texts of the Pali Canon that tell the reader more about life in the time of the Buddha than what one (generally) reads in the discourses. The latter are more focused on, and therefore tampered with, because of their emphasis on liberation and all things wholesome. The *Vinaya*, meanwhile, is more a catalogue of wrongdoings. The stories have remained fuller and more detailed, the causes of the wrongdoings all being spelled out, thus they carry a wealth of circumstance and the smell of dust, the fumes of the kitchen with them.

For example, when the monk Udayin was asked, “Why are all these dead crows stuck on stakes outside your *kutī*?” he replied, “They were making a racket while I was trying to meditate, so I killed them,”¹² so this was the instance that caused the Buddha to lay down the precept against killing animals. We hear these tales and we feel the presence of each other – there really is no such thing as time.



The Western Desert ~ December 4th

THE DAYS are densely packed – travels and contacts speckle the sky of our communion like stars of the desert.

Yesterday was the “Coptic day” of our planned fortnight here. Father John Watson, an Anglican minister and old friend of mine, and Ajahn Vimalo had worked long, hard and patiently to help bring about the chance to pay our respects at the monasteries of the Western Desert.

What used to be named “The Desert Road,” running from Cairo to Alexandria, is now more appropriately known as “The Agricultural Road.” Irrigation and development have sprung up all along its length, given the improved water distribution and housing that has followed in the wake of electric power and its attendant material improvement.

At the Cairo end, palatial homes are arrayed on either side – some of them arabesquing skyward with over-abundant flourishes. A Moulin Rouge nightclub sits not too very far from a newly developed mosque – there is the aura of prosperity, and a liberality with cautious hints, that seems to be the hallmark of modern Egyptian life. Apparently the cautious are less prominent in Alex which is said to consider itself a different national entity altogether. It was founded on the Greek model (by Alexander the Great, of course) and has embodied the cosmopolitan trading port role for 2300 years.

There is an unbroken rhythm of billboards beside the highway, often repeating the same poster again and again. These bring an even sharper sense of surreality to the hour and a half run to the north-west – the desert sands and barren rocks begin their dominance just beyond the ambit of the road and its greenery, usually no more than 100 yards away. It is a shout from the Ozymandias of today, “Look on my works and buy, buy, buy,”¹³ and still the desert reaches to the horizon, implacable and unimpressed.

Beyond “Sixth of October City,” celebrating the war with Israel that helped them regain Sinai in 1973, and “Smart Village,” the IT complex, the desert proper opens. It is said to comprise 96% of the land of Egypt, so the 72 million people of the country therefore live on the remaining 4%, along the life-giving river. The desert is a vast, thunderously silent presence, steadily subdued, always ready to reassert its final authority.

The Coptic monks who settled here, and who created Christian monasticism, came into this wilderness to be alone – now the highway reaches to their doors, at Wadi el-Natrun. They have survived through numerous rises and falls of empires, fluctuations of faith, and now are experiencing a major revival of interest.

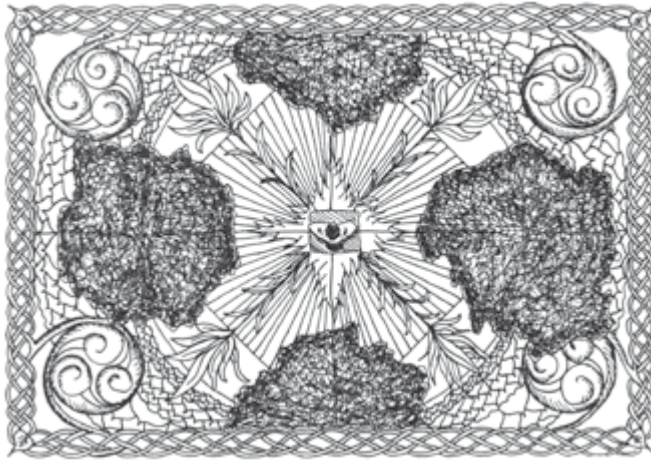
The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...” – Part 2

The monastery of Anba Bishoi is the first on the list for the day. Cumulus clouds have been piling high all morning and now lie dark against the northern horizon. It's cool and breezy; we're glad of the extra clothing we brought along. St. Bishoi Monastery was originally built in the 4th Century, the current church having been rebuilt in the 14th Century. There are now 160 monks here, padding across the flagstones and beneath those sandy ochre-coloured walls. The shapes of the domes and fascia are soft upon the eye. Bougainvillea and palms, tamarind trees fill a central garden area, lined also with a few essential vegetable plots.

Our guide makes it clear to us that they are *Miaphysites* not *Monophysites* as they believe that Jesus' nature is human and divine (i.e., two natures), perfectly unified, *not* united. It makes a big difference to them but it was hard to nail down the precise metaphysical/theological nuances. We don't pursue the details as, when I asked about their view on Buddhist influences on Christian monasticism in the earliest days, he said "There are *some* similarities, but very basic differences – we come into the desert to be with God, to know God; you are only trying to know yourselves." I was tempted to respond "Same thing..." but left it, as dialogue did not look profitable with one side fixed on such rigid axioms.



The centre of the monastery was the church – ancient and hallowed indeed as a place where St. Bishoi had visions of his guru, Jesus – complete with a 4th Century pulpit built of cedar, but the biggest structure was the fortress, built in the 5th Century, to protect the monks from the attacks of Berbers. It rose in a massive pile, with tiny windows and a drawbridge, and inside they still had the oven and well that had been used when under siege 16 centuries before. It reminded me of Glendalough, the monastery of St. Kevin in Eire, and our host keenly described how it was seven monks from the desert monasteries who had conveyed many of their traditions and techniques to the Irish. It was true that one could easily see the roots of Celtic Christian forms – the Celtic cross, illuminated manuscripts, the monastic keep to evade marauders – and once again the vivid echoes of Egypt sounded in our now familiar forms. Even the Maltese cross could be seen as having come from these churches of ancient Egypt, the points all symbolizing theological truths important to the Coptic way.



Our host outlined how modern Coptic language is the only remaining tongue close to the language of the Pharaohs. The sequence was: hieroglyphic, hieratic, demotic, and then Coptic, which was written using the Greek alphabet; it is thought that the Coptic Christians used this alphabet to dissociate themselves from the ancient Egyptians and their “pagan” religion. He also delighted in telling us how current insults in Arabic (e.g., “You are the son of a cow”) are spoken using ancient Coptic words.

Another claim, a little more dubious, was that rather than the 7–8% of the population being Christian, as is the official government figure, the population of Egypt was actually 20% Christian. This could have been a naturally sociocentric view – “our lot is really the best” – but why not hold that as true, if you really want to.

They have been an oppressed minority, on and off, since the Roman empire and, more acutely, from the advent of Islam (in 622 CE) so they should be given a lot of credit just for survival. Besides, we need such self-affirmation sometimes (even if unsupported by reality) just for the momentary boost it gives us. As Luang Por Sumedho has often quoted the old Hollywood film, “Tell me you love me, even if you don’t mean it.” This is not meant to be condescending but more sympathizing with a group that has suffered nobly for centuries to survive. Furthermore, “History is not always fair, or truthful,” as Luang Por observed.

Despite our Coptic brother’s professed differences from us, when we asked to have a picture taken with him, Ajahn Vimalo recalled when he was here 20 years ago, the monk he had asked to photograph said, “We don’t allow pictures

The Lotus, the Papyrus & the "O! As is..." – Part 2

of dead men," meaning, a monk is dead to all worldly concerns. This monk was a little more accommodating, in addition quietly proclaiming, "This is a historical moment!" as we all lined up in the corner of the courtyard. There had even been an auspicious rain-shower while we were there.

At the nearby monastery of Daer el-Sourian the atmosphere was very similar: the sky had cleared by now and the domes and minaret of the monastery bell burst with light against the cerulean spread above. A small-statured monk showed us around, quietly pointing out the tamarind tree that had grown from the dead wood of a walking staff of Abraham the Syrian 1600 years ago – its abundant leaves are still collected for their holy properties by the faithful. The original hermitage there was established in the 4th Century, while the church was built in the 7th Century. There were three or four layers of wall paintings, only now being uncovered and restored. Last year's, "Let's get rid of this old stuff and fix the place up nicely," has become today's, "How could they cover up these ancient masterpieces? Let's do whatever we can to reveal them and show it all in its weathered glory." Views change and what we call holy and beautiful, that which inspires love of the sacred, is always changing too. The discarded toys of 2000 BCE are now priceless museum pieces; a Bronze Age wanderer who died on the mountain becomes a messenger from a long-lost past – gold is truly where you find it.

The monastery of Abu Maqar, St. Makarios, was the one that my friend Father John Watson had arranged for us to visit. The great gates were opened and we drove in past long groves of olives and flourishing vegetables. It had been founded in 360 CE, one of the very first in Wadi el-Natrun, and had endured up to the '70s when "...there were only six old monks here..." A revival then began.

"What was the cause of that?" I enquired.

"It was because of the movement of the Holy Spirit!" retorted Father Iranaeus, his eyes atwinkle, and the community now comprised about 100 monks. He himself had been a pharmacist before ordination; he said, "There are eight pharmacists, 14 engineers, three veterinarians, and 11 MDs here." It's currently the same sort of pattern at all the other Coptic monasteries although, prior to the resurgence, it doesn't seem as though the monastic order had been made up of such a professionally qualified crew. When I pressed for details of why this should be the case, Father Iranaeus was only prepared to smile enigmatically. So, it seems that one will remain a mystery for now.

The monastery was famous for being the home of "the 49 martyrs," monks



slain by raiding Berbers in the 5th Century. It also proudly housed the body of St. John the Baptist and the prophet Elijah. The elderly Egyptian lady who had, with her two sons, attached herself to our tour, was quietly ecstatic to be able to see these tombs and to be so close to such massively holy powers.

Earlier on, as we were introducing ourselves and walking through the first of the three churches of the monastery, we had tried to explain that we were Buddhist monks and that our robes were of a design 2500 years old. As with the other Coptic monks we had met, it failed to register with Father Iranaeus that we were any kind of monk at all; that was, up until the point when he was asked to chant in Coptic and he asked us to chant in turn – *that* finally made a difference.

We were a few verses into “*Itipi so...*” and his face lit up with an “I’m not quite sure exactly *what* these guys are, but they are definitely monks of *some* sort,” realization. His tone of address mellowed a little at this point and, after showing us their keep, built after the 49 had met their grisly end, he couldn’t suppress a chuckle when Ajahn Vimalo remarked, “It’s not Berbers you’re getting invaded by now, it’s tourists doing it instead, innit?!”

After olives and monastery bread, with a glass of tea, we set off into the desert again, the long straight highway carrying us back to Ghiza and to rest. There was a sense of fellowship and warmth that we had all felt at these monasteries, doctrinal incompatibilities notwithstanding.

On the top of the fortress of St. Bishoi, our view of the desert, which spread widely in every quarter, was unobstructed on all sides. You could see whatever threat might come from any direction, and thus be safe in a strong and potent refuge. Similarly, when we drop our preoccupation with form, past and future, preconceptions and opinions, when the heart stands on that higher vantage point, *then* there is true security from the inner marauders of becoming, views, passion and self-concern.





The Contemplative Heart

From a talk given on the Easter retreat, Amaravati, 1992

SOMETHING THAT COMES UP VERY FREQUENTLY around the subject of formal practice is the idea of “good” meditation and “bad” meditation. There are some bright or concentrated qualities that we appreciate and that get praised, and we call this “good” meditation, and then the other – a mind which is busy, confused or over-active – that we tend to call a “bad” meditation. It’s a good idea, however, to look at how we use those terms and why we are making those judgments. Are they really worthwhile? Things can be very deceptive. Even though one recognizes that to have a bright, clear mind which is wise, compassionate and selfless and so forth is a worthy thing, and to have a mind which is filled with selfishness, greed, confusion, agitation, doubt, insincerity, one can reckon, well, yes, this is probably not such a good thing – but we can often get deluded by the appearances of things and make very superficial judgments.

It is possible to develop a concentrated mind just by applying will-power. By being disciplined and practising meditation with diligence and energy the mind can become quite a still, clear space. But what one can also find is that, even though the mind is quite alert and no thoughts are being allowed in, what we’ve actually got is a police state. We’re unconsciously running an autocracy where any kind of intruder is immediately annihilated; it is a sort of spiritual fascism. The result is a very nice, clean, well-ordered country – everything is as it should be – unfortunately there are a lot of corpses needing to be whisked away and a lot of heavy karma being created. But we’ve got our clear space, and that’s what makes it all worthwhile!

When we investigate we realize that this is a state of suffering – there’s perfect control, but no joy. So one has to guard against that, or at least notice the sterilizing, numbing effect of all of the annihilation and suppression that we’re

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doing in order to create that particular mental state.

Another frequently discussed subject is that of having some sort of good experience during meditation, where the mind becomes very pure and blissful. This may not have been induced through suppression or suchlike but is instead a direct experience of the mind in a pure, bright, natural, peaceful state. This of course is extremely delicious and wonderful – very pleasant – but we’re not quite sure why exactly this state has arisen. Maybe for a whole retreat we might have managed to drop into this mode – from day three we cruise there for the rest of the retreat. And so we think, “Oh, this meditation business is really good, I like this. I’m going to come back for more.” And then of course what happens, even if it has only been for the period of one sitting, is that we’re tormented for the next ten years, doing everything we can trying to replicate that wonderful state.

I don’t know if this is a true story, but I was told that Leo Tolstoy, who was a Russian nobleman, used to like to work in the fields with his farm labourers. One day while he was scything corn with them, he dropped into a state of absorption; he became completely immersed in the scything. He worked all day long without a break – just his body moving smoothly and scything the corn. It was completely effortless, he cut masses of corn and all the time his mind was in a blissful, one-pointed state. So, of course, at the end of the day he thought, “Wow,” or whatever that is in Russian. Anyway, after that, I’m told he spent many, many years cutting acres and acres of corn desperately trying to get back to that same experience, but he never actually managed it.

Whether it’s true or not it’s a good illustration of the hunger to reclaim the wonderful experience. We think, “Well, just a minute now: it was a morning sitting so maybe that’s why the afternoons don’t work so well. Maybe it’s the morning sunlight that’s got something to do with it,” or “It was in the autumn, maybe the season’s got something to do with it,” or, “It was a monk teaching last time, now we’ve got this nun, maybe the feminine energies do something to interrupt,” or, “Well, I had a stool then and now I’ve only got this cushion and maybe if my back was just a little bit...” – endless manoeuvrings and adjustments, trying to figure it out.

We can go into agonies trying to replicate those same precise conditions where we experienced the wonderful feeling. So what was originally a very pure and fine, wholesome experience becomes a cause for incredible misery – tantalizing us with a sense of longing.

We can still make a problem out of it even if we do find ourselves in that kind of calmness and brightness. Someone I was talking with today was saying



how he had never experienced any kind of blissful or calm mental states before and then, for the first time, on this retreat suddenly there it was – but then he thought, “Oh dear, what do I do now?”

For so many years we’ve had to wrestle with thoughts and feelings, agitation and restlessness, so that’s what we’ve come to know meditation to be. And then suddenly, “boop” – nothing to wrestle with – and we feel, “Oh dear.” The restless feeling is still there: the feeling of, “I should be doing something, I should be working with something here,” and so we end up being at a loss as to how to handle it. Even though there is a bright mental state there can be a groundswell of disquiet, uncertainty and disorientation. So even though the mind is concentrated and clear we find ourselves unable really to be with it. We feel that we have to fiddle with it or put something in to it or protect it from leaving.

So, what all of this goes to show is that what we think of as a “good” meditation can easily be not so good at all.

The same is true of what we think of as a bad meditation. Often we have got a whole lot of mental stuff – repressed emotions and feelings from the past, memories, experiences, anxieties about ourselves or about other people, about the future, and a lot of unacknowledged, unnoticed conditioning and attachments that are there. Meditation is a very good way of freeing all that up.

It’s rather like scrubbing a cooking pot. It’s only after a lot of scrubbing that you get to the black, baked-on stuff down at the bottom and it only starts to get loosened after some time. Meditation is rather like pot cleaning; we’re getting down to the serious grime, the stuff that’s been there for years. So, to be sitting for a period of meditation and just experience a whole maelstrom of feelings and thoughts can actually be the result of good work that’s being done. This is the muck that’s coming off the bottom; it is part of the cleansing process, the deconditioning, liberating process.

So if we think, “Oh dear, it’s all going wrong. My meditation is useless,” we’re perhaps judging the experience in the wrong way; it can easily be a very good thing. Perhaps we’re finally releasing our grip on all this stuff and allowing it to be made conscious. In this instance we simply need to open the mind and allow whatever is there to surface, so then we can acknowledge it, understand it and let go of it.

This is such an important aspect of meditation that it’s actually a very helpful thing to do deliberately. There are many different ways of cultivating this, but one of the most accessible is to use deliberate thought to make ourselves conscious of desires, fears, doubts and the attitudes of mind that we have. To

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make those conscious we bring them into the forefront of the mind and think out all the worst possibilities, all the things that we most dread. Or to think through the most painful memories or the strongest attachments that we have – just to make them clear.

One first needs to establish a basis of tranquillity in the mind, then one simply drops in a particular thought or idea. Often one focuses on areas of emotional strain or struggle because it's usually in the emotional world where we experience most of our suffering. As a society and as a culture we tend to be quite unconscious of our emotional world, or at least at a loss as to how to handle it. So one can just introduce a thought or an idea; or bring up the face of a particular person – our father or mother, our husband or wife, our child or our lover; or we can bring up a particular doubt to voice to ourselves – whatever is the thing that most strongly affects us. Then, as we bring that idea to mind, one brings the attention down to the area of the heart.

The heart is the centre of our feelings but in this practice we're not trying to analyze them. If you think the thought, "Did my mother really love me?" – that's a good one, nice and easy. "Does my husband really love me?" or "Do I really love my husband?" Whatever is your favourite flavour: "Should I be a Buddhist nun?" "Should I disrobe?" Whatever we use, we're not trying to analyze or even to figure out the question conceptually. We just raise the question and then bring the attention down to where we feel the emotional response to it. Then we're able to witness the flow of emotion that occurs around those questions, around those areas of our life that we can't see clearly when we are actively involved, for example, if we are around a particular person where there is a strained relationship, or where there is some heavy memory.

When we're in a meditation sitting we're in a benign situation, we're not faced with that particular person, we're not having to perform in response to them – instead we can just witness the habitual reactions that are there. If you remember a scene of violence in your childhood, or you remember someone who has hurt you badly, or you think of someone that you're passionately in love with – you can watch the play of those emotions as they occur within your heart so that you can get used to them. We can get to know them in a safe environment, they're not having to be acted upon. That way we can understand them, get to know them better.

So, for example, we might have a lot of regret about the past; the mind dwells upon how things might have been... "If only I hadn't done *that*, then everything would have been all right." One can just raise that thought, "If only



I hadn't married xxxxxx; if only I *had* married xxxxxx, then how different it would have been..." Then notice the feeling that is there, what comes with that? So we're not trying to justify it or judge it or criticize it or make anything of it but are just getting acquainted with the power that it has in our mind. And once we begin to know how it works, we are not so easily seduced by it. This process is something that I and the people in this monastic community are very much engaged in. A lot of our training is based on using this kind of practice. But it's also something that is very basic to human nature – if we make things conscious, if we “name” them, then somehow we have power over them and are able to live more harmoniously.



To equip ourselves in life for the things that we are going to face – all of the loves and hates, successes and failures – it's an important thing to make ourselves as fully conscious as possible and to use thought to raise up, to look at and to inquire into all of these different areas of our life. We can also use thought to work with the feeling of selfhood. Not that we're trying to understand intellectually, “What I am,” or what the self is, but simply using a thought or a question to illuminate the feeling of selfhood. One composes the mind and waits until it is quiet, calm and tranquil and then just drops into it a question like, “What am I?” or “What is a human being?” If there is a real quality of enquiry there then we find that, for a moment, the habitual assumptions about what we are are interrupted. There's a moment of hesitation. The query opens the door to our intuition like a key. So when I say, “What is Amaro Bhikkhu?” before the intellect can come up with some very poor but relatively true answers, the very fact that we've raised the question touches our intuition of what we truly are – which is inexpressible, but it can be realized, it can be known. We're using this form of enquiry to create a kind of gap, to open the door a crack so that at that moment we can break through our normal habitual ways of seeing what we are – as a personality, a woman or a man – and to awaken to that which is the transcendent aspect of reality.

One can use all different kinds of approach. We can use a question or we can just state what we usually think we are: “I am a man,” “I am a human being.” And even though we might think, “Of course I'm a human being. What else am I – a goat???” actually when we use that sort of statement reflectively, in a meditative space, then what is noticed is that the statement only refers to

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a little part of the picture; it's just one way of describing certain aspects of what is here but something in our hearts knows that the truth is much vaster. The statement cannot be the whole story.

Just to say our own name can have a most amazing effect. That which is the most familiar thing in the world to us suddenly starts to sound extremely weird. Because we've so associated the sound of our name with being what we are: "Of course that's who I am," and then we realize, "but it's only a label, isn't it?" It's just what we write down on our passport. But what actually is that label referring to...? At that moment the conceptual mind is interrupted, as if a door were swinging open, and then the light of what we really are is able to penetrate. At that moment of hesitation the mind is in a state of openness. There is attention, non-grasping and non-discrimination. In the mind at that moment there is the sense of mystery, wonderment.

It's almost as if you're creating a doorway between the personal "I" and the transcendent "I," so you shift from being "I am Harry Jones of 22, Acacia Avenue" to "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life." That is the shift. (Maybe this way of speaking is a bit too dramatic... Well, it is Easter and I'm a bit prone to melodrama – so never mind!)

But I stand by the principle – that's basically the reality of it. By questioning our assumptions about things on the immediate level we are then able to penetrate to the greater reality behind it. As, by making our doubts, fears and hopes conscious we penetrate from the superficial idea of them to the direct awareness of them, so in the same way, we can use this process to illuminate the very quality of selfhood.



Now, emotions are a particularly tortuous area of life. They are generally complicated and it can be difficult to see what emotions are at play. This process of enquiry and making things conscious helps us to unravel the emotional world and its reactive cascades. Often what we think of as being a strong emotion in us is not the real problem. We can have an emotion and then a reaction to that emotion; for example, if we experience jealousy we can develop hatred for ourselves for feeling jealous. As jealousy arises we feel, "I shouldn't be jealous. This is terrible. I'm supposed to be a spiritual person and I just feel mean and selfish and jealous all the time."

So on top of what is a simple reaction we pile a reaction to the reaction. This



can go on into reactions to reactions to reactions. I'm sure you're all familiar with the process: feeling anger, and then feeling guilty for being angry, and then feeling helpless because you feel guilty about your anger. The chain goes on. It's a helpful thing to bring attention to these chains of emotional reaction because otherwise we never break free from the tangle.

Some years ago I found myself madly in love with somebody; this was rather inconvenient because I happened to be a monk at the time. Normal channels of dealing with the situation were not open, as it were! I found myself completely, obsessively in love with this person, and she was around a lot of the time so it wasn't like I could just ignore it. I found it very difficult to work with – I tried everything I could do, everything in the book to try and deal with this in a good way but it went on and on – for two years. It was a grim time, and quite agonizing because I wanted to stay as a monk. My heart was in the monastic life but this passion was like having a rhinoceros in the shrine room with me; a presence that was always there, a pungent presence that one couldn't quite ignore and which demanded to be fed constantly. It was tricky.

During a retreat, whilst I was doing some cleaning, the woman I had this obsession with walked across the hallway where I was working. It was a retreat time so my mind was quite alert to what was going on, and I noticed that on seeing her, before the feeling of desire there was the feeling of fear. I thought, "Oh, that's interesting." And then a little voice in me said, "NOTICE THIS." Now why should this be so significant? This is interesting... So I pondered it and realized that the problem was actually that of being afraid of sexual desire. "The natural attraction towards this other person is probably not that great, but it's being stoked up day after day with your being frightened of it being there, and not knowing what to do with it." And I knew, "YES! You've got it!"

It was quite ludicrous in some ways but something at last clicked, so instead of trying to deal with the feeling of desire and attraction towards the woman, I started to notice and bring my attention to the feeling of fear of sexual desire, or the aversion to it or wanting to get rid of it. And in two weeks the infatuation was totally gone. It was incredible. If you put it in a movie no one would ever believe it. It was amazing – two years of solid anguish and then it was just, "Pop!" Gone. This was very impressive to me and it made me inclined, from that time on, not to just keep an eye on the most prominent emotion or problem but to look at the reactions to that – how the mind is handling the situation.



We can look at the way we deal with physical pain in the same way. We can get so involved in dealing with pain itself that we are not really noticing our attitude towards it. We think, “I should be patient with it, I should be able to accept and love this pain.” O.K. But actually what we feel is, “I’ll love you as long as you get out of here. I’ll love you only if you’ll leave me.” And we start making deals with the pain, “I’ll give you five minutes of affection and then out!” We negotiate and struggle and this just makes the whole thing a lot worse.

During the winter monastic retreats here, every so often we would have long sittings, for three or four hours in the afternoon. The rules of the four-hour sitting were that no one was allowed to leave the room. It was, “You’re in. One o’clock, click, doors shut, you’re allowed to change your posture. You can even stand up if you need to but no one is allowed to leave the room.” And the idea is that you stay with the sitting practice for that whole length of time. Now in the folly of my youth I decided, “Well, if these great spiritual warriors of our time, people like Ajahn Chah, can sit without moving all night long, I can at least sit for four hours without shifting.” As soon as the thought was formed my mind panicked. But I stuck to it and even arrived ten minutes early. Normally I can sit quite comfortably for an hour without moving but on this occasion I was so anxious about the coming ordeal that after ten minutes I was aching and twitchy. Oh dear. My mind was racing and negotiating and desperately seeking some kind of escape – this went on for the first hour.

As we settled into the second hour my legs had formed themselves into a kaleidoscope of burning aches and my mood was less panicked but more like an internalized continuous whimper. At the end of the second hour I suddenly remembered where I was and opened my eyes for a while. It struck me that during the entire previous two hours I had not thought for one second about any of the other fifty people in the room. Was I the only one who was suffering? It struck me deeply how self-obsessed the mind had become in the face of anticipated pain and how it had neatly created a hell for itself. So... what to do?

I had begun to get pretty bored anyway with the endless “Poor me! *O me miserum,*” monologue and so I decided that, if I had to spend the next two hours stuck in the same position at least I could do something useful. So I began to practice *mettā* for everyone else in the room – all the other monks and nuns, lay people on the retreat.



After an hour of this my mood was considerably brighter and the pain in my legs was much reduced. Another three quarters of an hour went by and I was flying – not literally – but I was having a great time. The pain in my legs had vanished and I was beaming metta out of every pore – I knew that I had better not lose my concentration for fear that the pains would return – but after a while I didn't even care if they came back, “Whatever happens, I am happy.” By the time that the bell rang I was disappointed – “Oh dear, it's all over...”

It was a powerful lesson: it's only through whole-hearted, sincere acceptance that release is found, and the effect of putting attention onto our attitude rather than onto the big bother of the moment is the thing which eventually does the trick.



Emptiness and Pure Awareness

or *Scarlett O'Hara's* experience of selflessness

From a talk given on the winter retreat, Chithurst, February 1991

GOTAMA BUDDHA SAID, when he was an old man, “This body is like an old cart, held together by straps; this body only keeps going by makeshift repairs. The only way I can feel comfortable is to absorb my mind into signless concentration.”¹⁴

For all of us, the Buddha included, we are faced with the inevitable presence of dissatisfaction and physical discomfort. Ever present is the danger of pain and disease, because we are born. Because there is a physical birth, there must be physical decay, the two have to go together, they are one thing. Thus our only true refuge is the Deathless, that which is not subject to disease, not subject to defilement, not subject to time or to limitation, that which is unsupported. In this way, returning to our source, the Deathless, is our only way to cure disease, the only way to pass beyond it.

This returning to the Source, or realizing the Deathless, is the sense of coming to know the source of our life, the origin of our life. Because it is the very fabric of our life, the basis of our existence, it is something that has been exerting a power of attraction on us all through our life, the attraction of Truth, of the Real, the completely satisfying, the completely safe.

When we are children, we function on the instinctual level and so that spiritual attraction becomes focused on/sublimated by food and warmth, comfort and toys. Then, later on, that satisfaction is found with people, with activities, relationships, machines, ambitions, the doings of worldly existence. All along however, that pull has fundamentally been a spiritual motivation.

It gets sidetracked by the search for wealth, for material security, for perma-



ment happy relationships. But one sees the reason why these things don't complete the picture: they are not really sustainable as our support because they are impermanent, and also because the heart knows it has not gone the whole way, one has taken a side road. If you are trying to make a journey to a distant place and you take a detour, you get caught up in interesting things along the way. But it is only when you get to your destination that there is feeling of, "Ahh, now we are home, now we are safe, now everything is okay."

Even when you are side-tracked, there is a feeling lingering in your heart, "Well, there is a bit further to go." Or, "This is all very interesting, but, mmm, there is something missing here, there is something not quite right, not quite true, not quite final here."

The attraction towards Truth is fundamental. It is attraction towards reality, the basic fabric of all being. This is the primary natural law; it's the living law that rules the universe. The gravitation which draws all things to Truth, drawing everything to the centre, this is the basic law of life. So once we are attuned to this pull and have realized its spiritual nature, and have picked up the idea that life is fundamentally and completely a spiritual activity, once we have got that clear in our mind, the task is much easier, and the realization of the Goal becomes inevitable. The tendency to get side-tracked diminishes, the knowing of the true nature of the Goal calls us on, encourages and inspires us to keep going.



When we talk about the Deathless, or the Absolute, or the Goal, or the Other Shore, the mind goes a little bit blank trying to get a hold of it. Even in the way we speak about "*Nibbāna*" – "cooling down," "coolness" – we don't use any dramatic or emotive term, it's all a bit bland, non-descriptive. We talk about "emptiness": the realization of Absolute Truth, of our true nature; the realization of the non-conceptual pure mind, we describe as "the ultimate emptiness."

We use that kind of terminology not because there is nothing there, but because when the conceptual mind tries to grasp ultimate reality, since it can't be formed into a pattern, it finds that there is no *thing* there. It is like picking up a book in Chinese; if you can't read Chinese you are picking up a book in a foreign language. Here is a book, perhaps full of profound and wonderful teachings and pure truths, but you can't read the script, so it's meaningless. This is like the conceptual mind trying to grasp Ultimate Truth, the nature of the Godhead.

The thinking mind says, “Well, what is it?” “How do you describe it?” “Where is it?” “Am I it?” “Am I not it?” It gropes for some kind of handle. In the same way the thinking mind falls flat, as when trying to read a book in Chinese or Devanagari or whatever, when it only knows English.

So, because to the conceptual mind the experience of Ultimate Truth has no form, it can be described as “emptiness.” But to the non-conceptual wisdom mind the realization of Truth is the experience of the Truth seeing itself. Pure Mind, aware of its own nature. When the mind is completely unattached, when there is no identification, no sense of self whatsoever, the mind rests pure and still, simply aware of its own nature. The Dhamma aware of its own nature. There is a realization that everything is Dhamma, but that realization is non-verbal, non-conceptual, so the conceptual mind calls it empty. But to itself, its real nature is apparent, it is understood, it is clear.



This is the source of our life, the basis of our reality. Our world of people and things, of doing this and of doing that, this is what we call the world of manifestation, the conditioned or sensory world. The Buddha taught in terms of the relationship between these two, the Unconditioned and the conditioned, the ultimate and the relative, the *samutti sacca* and *paramattha sacca*, conventional truth and ultimate truth. A lot of Buddhist practice is about learning to understand the relationship between these two aspects of what is.

When we see clearly, when we have a realization of the Unconditioned, what flows forth is harmonious, beautiful; and that which is beautiful and harmonious helps to lead the mind back to the Uncreated. All religious acts, teachings, works of art, these are designed to be harmonious and pure forms which draw the mind back to recognize the silence, stillness, that purity which lies behind all things. As in the chanting that we do: even though the sound itself is quite beautiful, its real importance is that it leads the mind to an apprehension of the silence of Ultimate Truth which lies behind the sound, permeates the sound. This is why certain pieces of music or works of art stop the mind, or fill the heart with warmth and light and a feeling of blessedness and beauty. It's a religious experience. All true art is a religious experience. That is what it is for.

One witnesses the same thing with relationships: if we try to find happiness simply on the level of personality, try to find a completely satisfying and perfect relationship just on the external level, then all we get is an outpouring of self-



hood. We get our projections of how the other person should behave, or what they should be like to make me happy.

This is something that one sees, not just in romantic relationships, but also in monastic life as well, particularly within the relationship between someone and their teacher. You find that if you have got very fixed ideas about the teacher – what they should be like, what they should say, what they shouldn't say, what they should do and what they shouldn't do – it is very much divided up into “me and them.” Then you end up feeling terribly pleased and enthusiastic about being connected with this person when they say all the things that you like and when they pat you on the head and compliment you. And you also get filled with terrible irritation and disappointment, hurt feelings and anger when they don't do the things that you like, they upset your image of them or they don't fit into your projections about them. Intense devotion and affection very easily goes into intense violence and destruction.

In the Greek myths, Aphrodite and Ares were lovers, even though they were the goddess of love and the god of war. This is very indicative of the human condition, in that passion easily goes into either attraction or aversion. When there is blindness there, it will go easily either way. They say that 90% of all murders have some kind of sexual aspect to them, which is a pretty astonishing statistic. But you can see why. You can see why, when we have very definite expectations or feelings about each other, and it remains stuck on a personal level, then we *have* to end up in dissatisfaction of some sort. It *has* to be that way, because true satisfaction can only come by seeing that which is beyond personality, beyond the sense of “me” and “you.”

Devotion to a teacher, to a guru, or being in love, these are in a sense all religious experiences. The devotional practices we perform generate a sense of love, because in that sense of love we lose identity, we lose the sense of “me.” In romantic love we forget ourselves because we are completely absorbed in the Other. The Other becomes supremely important and the sense of “I” vanishes. The blissful feeling of being in love is almost religious: there is no sense of self, there is perfect happiness.

That happiness is conditioned because it depends on the presence of the other, their affection, or their abiding interest or whatever. But at the moment of pure romantic contact the sense of self vanishes, and there is bliss. In *Gone with the Wind*, the moment that Scarlett O'Hara and Ashley Wilkes first kiss is very interesting; it describes how all she knew was that everything vanished: the world vanished, he and she vanished; how “...for a timeless time...” there

Emptiness and Pure Awareness

was total bliss and "...a low curious roaring sound in her ears as of sea shells being held against them."¹⁵ Which is a very common description of mystical experiences! So one sees that, on the level of personal relationship, when there is a complete abandonment of the sense of "I," it takes us, at least momentarily, to that place of unification, wholeness, contentment, perfection.

The religious path is a way of taking this possibility of realizing perfect happiness, fullness of being, and making that an ever-present and independent actuality that doesn't depend on the presence of the teacher or the presence of the beloved, or a kind word or good health or *anything*. It is founded completely on mindfulness, wisdom and purity of heart; it is not just an ecstatic experience through drugs or romantic union, or through an experience of a wonderful piece of music or work of art. It is only when that experience is founded on spiritual qualities, and is independent of the sensory world that we experience unshakeability. Otherwise, even though that experience is there, and for a moment there is complete transportation, it inevitably has a pale shadow of, "This isn't going to last. This is wonderful now but I have to go home after the concert, I have to leave, have to separate, have to go to work, have to pay..."

That is why this is a difficult path. To establish the unshakeable happiness means we have to be ready to leave all of the secondary happinesses on one side. We have to grow out of our old skins, like a reptile, or an insect that grows out of its old exoskeleton and leaves it behind. In our life we have to keep sustaining this sense of being ready to leave behind the old. Not hanging on to our old skins, our old identities, our old achievements and attachments. For an insect or a reptile, when they leave that skin behind, for that moment they are very fragile, vulnerable; their new skin is soft, very delicate. It takes time for it to harden and become strong. So too in our own spiritual development, when we leave something behind, when we let something go, there is a feeling of relief, "Oh, glad I'm out of that one." But then there is a sense of vulnerability, being open to the way life actually is, with laying down the protection of our "self."

We are making ourselves open, sensitive to the entire vast nature of our life, the universe or whatever can be experienced by us. So we can feel fear or hesitation, "I think I'll just climb back into my old skin – it doesn't fit and it's falling to bits but at least I can *try* and climb back in there, I'll be covered up a little bit, protected a little bit." But we realize in our heart we can't do this, you can't get back into the clothes that you wore when you were five years old, no way. There might be one or two things, like a scarf or a little bracelet or something that we had, but we realize that it's impossible to keep dragging along all our old



identities, our loves and our attachments and our problems, our trials and our pains, our mistreatments.

It is hard for us to leave behind the things that we like but sometimes being parted from the things that make us suffer is even more difficult. A wise teacher once said, “You can take away anything from people except for their suffering, they will cling onto that until death.” We realize that in actuality we have to let everything go, no matter how reasonable it is to long for something, or to bemoan something, to feel pain over something. We have to leave it all behind. We can’t go back to it. As we grow up we learn that the best thing, the only real way to go, is to face that sense of vulnerability, being open to the unknown.

The unknown is frightening: when we don’t know, when the thinking mind can’t get itself around an experience, when it can’t describe, or name, or pigeonhole what’s happening, then we experience fear – because of the sense of self. The unknown is frightening as long as there is the sense of self. When we face the unknown and abandon selfhood, then the unknown changes from being frightening to being mysterious, full of wonder. The mind is left in a state of wonderment, rather than terror. This is the transmutation that frees, that liberates – it is our path.



The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...”

Part 3: Abu Simbel & Aswan

Aswan ~ December 5th ~ full moon

THE NIGHT WAS TO BE a short one as we had a very early flight booked for the next day. We thus made our farewells with the good Eman that evening; her voice (and its 10,000 bits of information) had accompanied our every move and had introduced most of us to Egypt, so we all felt a genuine and deep gratitude toward her, along with a warm and sincere friendship.

“You must come and visit our monastery in England.”

“Do you mean it? How long can I come for?”

“As long as you like,” said Luang Por.

“How about a year? Could I come for a year?”

“Certainly, we will make you at home for as long as you like.”

She and Ead had drawn very close, elbow to elbow much of the time, Ead’s attention transfixed by Eman’s flow. They walked arm in arm, addresses and recipes duly exchanged, and will doubtless remain friends far into the future.

Eman was not too happy to be a tour guide – her great love was archaeology but tour-guiding paid the bills and that had to be her priority until son #2 was on his own in five more years. Her heart might not have been in the job, however it had certainly been in the people, and Richard and Edward tipped her more than double the suggested amount.



Way before dawn – 2:00 a.m. to be precise – we met for a cuppa in the restaurant below the pyramids for the last time. We are supposed to set off



promptly at 2:30, however this five-star hotel is unable to come up with some string to tie together our boxed breakfasts – powerlessness comes in surprising places sometimes.

Soon the problem is solved and we roll at 2:35, racing through Cairo's nightlife and over the sparkling river; we pass the Cook Door Restaurant and it takes a moment to compute that this is probably a residue of the Napoleonic occupation of 1798–1801 and started life as a nod of admiration of and affiliation to the famous Coq d'Or of Paris.

At 4:30 a.m. the departure lounge of Cairo airport is a buzz of chatter and bustle. Flight 245 on Egypt Air takes us south and, as dawn edges over the horizon, we curve around gently towards our landing at Aswan, site of the great dams on the Nile. It might just have been the short night and general lack of sleep but it strikes me how one of the flight attendants bears a striking resemblance to Queen Nefertiti of the 18th Dynasty. She wears a navy blue uniform rather than an embossed blue crown, nevertheless the resemblance seems almost eerie. I am half-startled that the Queen speaks when she asks what beverage I would like, almost as if one of the faces in the museum had blinked at us and said, "Hello. Where do you come from?"

We stay on the plane as it disgorges most of its passengers at Aswan; some more join us for the last leg to the south part of Lake Nasser, and in half an hour we're in full sunlight, above Abu Simbel. The four grand statues of Rameses II are clearly visible from the air; the bright copper sun rebounds from the lake and lights up the cliff face vividly. Then we're down and blinking into the desert horizon – it's flat and utterly open beneath the great blue dome.

"Not a tree in sight," volunteers Luang Por, at the sight of the infinite ochre plain. This observation notwithstanding, and its implication for a community of forest monks, Ajahn Vimalo hints, "If you open up a vihāra in Aswan..."

"You'll be the first person I think of to run it, Venerable," Luang Por completes.

Once more we become part of a varicoloured throng, a flood brought by the Nile to pester Abu Simbel, or perhaps to fulfil the wishes of the Great Rameses – for a name forgotten is to be lost, so it is said, to eternity. Coaches, cameras, sun hats, metal detectors, crisply-speaking, confident tour guides performing their well-tried lines in French, German, Italian and English with accomplished ease – this great agglomeration of attention vigorously does its part to keep the fame of the great king Rameses II, Usa-mart-ra, alive in the world.

As we approach from the side of the giant rūpas, up to now hidden from view, our guide asks Richard to step forward and look to the left. What does he say? “Wow!” That was the right comment, and just what Ram the Man had intended, this great temple being: a) built as a monument to himself, and b) right in the face of the ancient foes, the Nubians to the south – foes because *they’re* sitting on the gold and *we* want it – sound familiar?

Substitute “oil” for “gold,” and “Iraq” for “Nubia,” and see how that fits...

Ajahn Ñānarato had deliberately *not* looked at the heights of the statues in the guide book so he too is in a deep state of “Wow” in the presence. Somehow the fluid mass of fellow visitors is a part of the place’s energy and, even though our visit to the temple is very different from that of a priest in Rameses II’s time, there is an exchange of energy and a transformation that happens regardless. And his name certainly lives on, so calling himself (uniquely megalomaniacal of all the Pharaohs) “God of the Gods” might not have been so wide of the mark or indeed extravagant.

It also transpires that Rameses the Great was the model for Shelley’s *Ozymandias* (the Greek name, as they couldn’t pronounce the name as it appeared in ancient Egyptian phonetics, *Wsrmaatre* = *Usa-mart-ra*) and, even though here there are, in truth, “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone” and “Near them, on the sand/Half-sunk, a shatter’d visage lies...” this was not the statue that the poet based his verse upon – that was a different one, in Luxor, reported on to him by an English traveller he knew.



The *ankh* is heavily represented here as at most other ancient Egyptian temples. It is the symbol of life and, more particularly, Egypt itself; the top drop represents the Delta, the leg the Upper Nile, the arms the rising and setting places of the sun. This symmetry and simplicity seemed, to the Egyptians at least, a clear indication that their land was the centre of the world – another *Majjhena Padesa*, or Middle Country, as was *Jambudīpa* for the Indians and *Chung Guo* for the Chinese. The fact that the Milky Way also flows north-south at this latitude added confirmation to the thesis.

In a way it’s a natural enough extension of the ego – “I am the centre of the universe” – because we certainly can feel it to be that way: “My pain is *much* more real than yours, and your happiness is much less keenly felt than mine, ergo I’m more real than you, right?” This self-centredness of the child and the unawakened has simply been translated to a national scale and when the king



truly believes, nay *knows*, “*Moi, je suis l’état!*” then is it really megalomania or some kind of deity yoga, an embodiment of the divine, that is practised for the welfare of the manyfolk?

The success and viability of such an embodiment will depend on the true spiritual maturity of the embodier – if Rameses the Great was selfless then all his actions could truly be said to have been healthy and holy, just as His Holiness the Dalai Lama is said to be an incarnation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Chenrezig, and thus manifests enlightened activity. On the other hand, if Rameses was guided by greed, hatred and delusion, rampant egomania, then these qualities will certainly have affected the result of that life. Regardless of grandiloquent inscriptions and deifying self-aggrandisement, no quantity of self-congratulatory edifices can erase that.



Facing the famous relief of Rameses II in his war chariot, at the battle of Qadesh, reins wrapped round his waist and bow in hand, horse a-gallop and arrows aimed, Luang Por opined, “I think war really is our true nature.”

“Can I quote you on that?” I replied.

“People really don’t like peace – it’s so boring. Who *really* wants to give up sex and violence? It’s too interesting. Very few really want to wake up.”

Soon after these reflections our guide informs us that the god of fertility is blessed by the name “Who?” since, when all the men were off at battle he stayed behind and, when the war was over, they returned to find their wives all pregnant. The first question asked by the angry cuckolds was, “Who?!” so our hero, ithyphallically represented, of course, was given the name “Who?” – in Egyptian, “Min.” This was, of course, once his case had been pleaded and the fact that he should be deified for regenerating the nation, rather than killed for ravaging the betrothed and wedded, had been agreed.

Beside the temple of Rameses is a temple to Hathor with unique, full-size images of Nefertiri, Ram’s beloved queen; the evidence is thus there to suggest that his capacity to love and be generous was equal to his profligacy and his egomania.

So many of these temples and carvings reveal their stories gingerly and slowly over time, as the archaeo-detectives draw one thread together with another, then another, constantly refreshing the view of the patterns that emerge. What *really* happened? How was she, in truth? Did he *really* do it that

The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...” – Part 3

way? History is an evolving kaleidoscope of patterns, coherent now, mysterious and ever fresh, ever lost – patterns coalesce, make sense, then need to be radically revised again, and then again. Truth is the ore that the smelting of investigation and effort coaxes forth.

In the flurry at the bag check, I unknowingly dropped my sunglasses, but a comment on the bus that I had lost them reminded Ajahn Vimalo that he'd seen one of the guards holding them up, “Oi thought 'e was trying to flog 'em so Oi walked right by.” Our tall young guide – with the confidence of a Ram – called up the police post, sent off a taxi and lo, miracles *do* happen. I had said goodbye to them but here they were again – like Osiris reappearing from the marshes, whole and alive once more.

One moment, “Let go, give up” then, “Do something...” “There is only *one* right thing to do but it changes all the time,” said I. “That’s Right View,” responded Luang Por.



To Aswan for the meal and then onto the river, at 4:00, for the traditional felucca ride – if you carry on with something long enough, if it is sufficiently loved, the fake eventually becomes the real in its own right. The feluccas are only used for the tourists now, but as the tourists are the main source of income for the nation, in a way these fine sailboats of the Nile – in use for so many thousands of years – are still employed in moving valuable cargo around. It’s just a different kind of produce that is being moved; its basis as the means of livelihood is just the same.

We join a Gujarati Indian family from New Zealand, husband Fiji-born, and climb eagerly aboard our little vessel. We tack gently with the current, against the wind, negotiating with a handful of like craft upon the water. Seven million visitors a year (2005 figures) is considered low – “60 million to France, 45 million to Italy!” Nevertheless 300 cruise ships ply the waters between Aswan and Luxor – and that’s not the feluccas, that’s the floating hotels. The crowds seem thick, at Ghiza, at Abu Simbel, but people keep insisting it’s low season, small numbers... This is hard to credit and somewhat frightening to think of the swarms that must be here at the height of the flood in a good year.

We gentle our way to the north and then swing round to return to Kitchener’s Island – favoured by, and eventually gifted to the General who relieved



the beleaguered Gordon at Khartoum in the Sudanese war of the 19th Century. We glide through the botanical gardens – it’s a Rousseau-land of palms and bougainvillea, orchids and vines, trumpet flowers, cats and birds; across the water on the western bank, long softly-shaped dunes form a colossal wall, the afternoon light on the water showers Prussian blues and bursts of sun-sparkle at us. Edward is in awe of how beautiful the place is; all of us drift along the paths, carried easily by the ancient spells cast here.

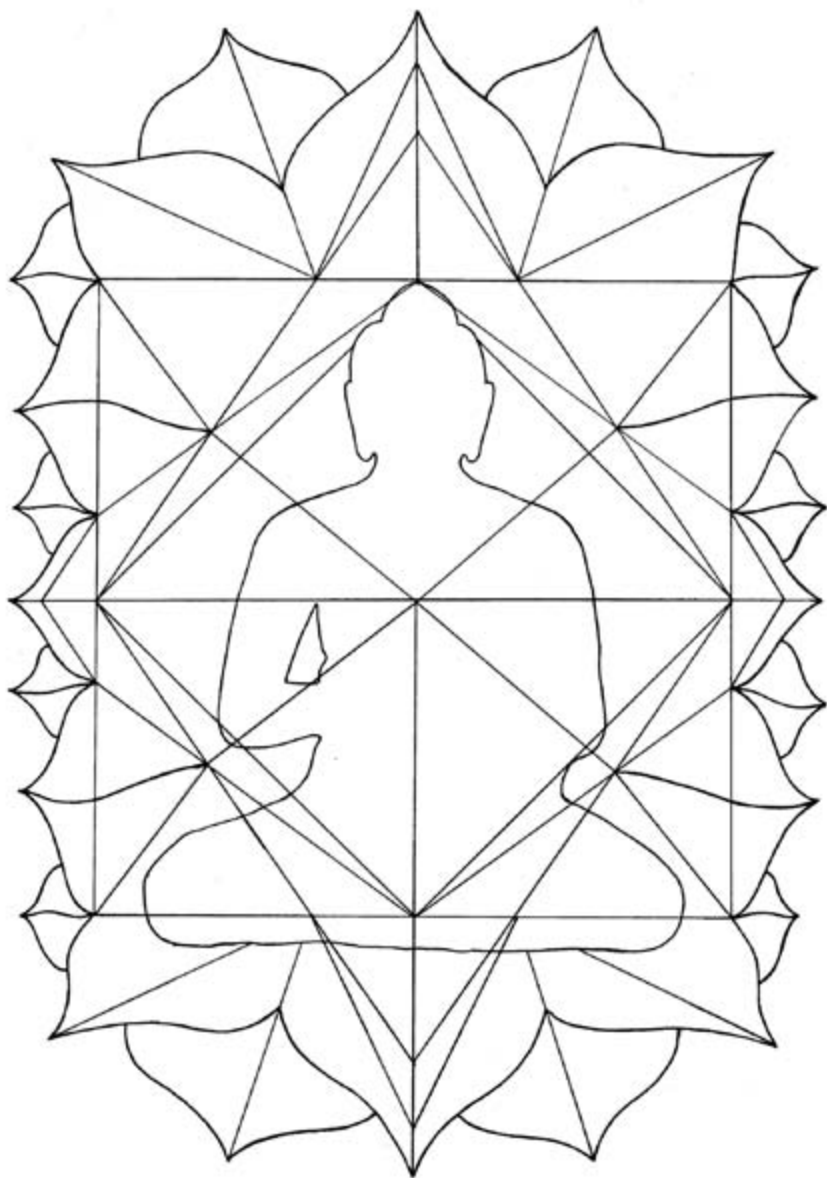
Churchill was also entranced, as was Mitterand and Agatha Christie, although she stayed in the favoured chambers of The Old Cataract Hotel – this, indeed, was the place she wrote *Death on the Nile*. When the British Dam was built, in 1902, the cataracts still ran through Aswan, following seasonal flows. Now the Russian Dam is there, completed in 1971, and the cataracts are marked by the patches of rock and island, but the name no longer really applies, the waters being so much more tightly controlled.

Back to the boat – serenely passing the T-shirt and trinket hawkers, “Madam! Sir, Sir!! Please, just looking, no need to buy...” As if to say, as you pass them, “How can you treat me this way, after all these years? And all we’ve been to each other!?!” All on the basis of the meagerest of fleeting contacts – it’s an odd little dance, a sweet little drama we necessarily must act on by virtue of our being here.

Tarek, our river guide, brings us back to our fine ship, the Oberoi Philæ, and we gather for 5 o’clock tea – a daily feature.

After such an early start the urge towards extensive conversations is low – although, at one point, Luang Por proclaimed, “Buddhism is the underlying truth of all religions.” Such a potent assertion – especially in the light of the conversations we have had since visiting the Copts, plus our discussions on *Vipassanā* in the US, the history of the Sangha in England, etc. – yet the group is so weary that there is an unvoiced recognition that, “That’s a really interesting point to reflect on, and to hear more about, but not today.”

And so to bed it was, instead.





The Real Me

From a talk given on the winter retreat at Chithurst, February 1991

THIS EVENING, ON THE VERGE OF PEOPLE entering into great conflict in the Middle East, I thought I would talk on the fundamental causes of war. Even though we are in retreat and somewhat secluded from the events of the outside world, still we keep our eyes and ears open and feel a sense of sympathy and compassion for all the beings caught up in this conflict. Our efforts in the spiritual life are not to evade such actualities in the world – just because these events happen outside the walls of this monastery doesn't mean to say that we feel exempt or not interested or not a part of it. How many times have we been in conflict ourselves, even in this life, caught up in contention between ourselves and others? Probably in hundreds of thousand of past lives we have taken up arms against others, shed blood and died ourselves in conflict.

In considering this, and looking at the workings of the mind, one sees that the fundamental problem arises from the ability that we have to discriminate and take sides. When the mind is clouded and caught up, then "this" and "that" seem to be completely different from each other, they seem to be inherently separated and apart. Black seems to be completely separate and different from white; "you" separate from "me." The more caught up and clouded by ignorance the mind is, the more absolute that separation seems to be and the common ground that exists between us becomes invisible; we lose it. In a personal clash we forget that we are actually both human beings – both people who enjoy pleasure, who feel pain, who love life and fear death – and the particular point that we are squabbling about possesses our minds so much that it becomes the most important thing. Even if it was something absolutely minuscule, the mind can take hold of anything, make a cause out of it and become completely blind to the common ground, the common unifying bonds there are between us. This is how wars begin.



I remember, before I was a monk, I used to find that I lived in about five different worlds; there were five distinct circles of people that I moved around in and some of these were ideologically very opposed to each other. When I was a child I did a lot of horse riding; I grew up around horsey people and spent a lot of time going to horse shows, fox hunting and hanging out with horsey types, believe it or not. This is a group composed of very conservative country people who liked to ride and go hunting, out for a good day's sport. (This I might add is attended by such pagan rituals as "getting blooded" – when you are in on your first kill you get your face wiped with the fox's blood – just one of the delightful aspects of polite country society!)

The other spheres that I moved in were: my family, my old school friends, my academic life at university and lastly there were the freaks and hippies – underground people in London living in squats and anti-establishment collectives. I often thought, when sitting slumped against a heap of cushions in some dive in Bayswater, "I wonder what they would say if anyone knew that three days ago I was having stirrup cup with the Master of Foxhounds at the local meet!" Or once, when I attended a press-conference at Whitehall for the Royal Tournament, as a reporter for *Dog World*, still in an altered state of consciousness from an all-night party, "If only they knew..."

It used to disturb me sometimes how easily I moved between these different realms. I noticed that each group seemed to be under the impression that it was the only thing in the world that existed – perhaps not completely but certainly to a great extent.



Within the sphere of the family I was the youngest child, the only son, so with the family that was my identity. They called me "Jim" and there was the whole web of unique family relationships and family activities and events. When I was with my old school friends – who were heavy-drinking, materialistic, public school rowdies – I would become completely involved with that. When I was with the horsey people I would be fully involved with that; when I was with university people I



would become a studious academic and attempt to be a scintillating intellectual; and finally, when I was with the underground types, hippie radicals and so forth, I would become completely involved with that.

I used to think, “There must be a real me in here somewhere. Which one is the real one, and which ones are just a front?” I could see that there was a lot of contention and negativity between certain different aspects of the worlds I moved amongst, but somehow I realized it was all quite all right. I wasn’t being two-faced or hypocritical; there were very good aspects to all of these people and I really enjoyed being with them: the local hunting set, the academics, the pub-crawlers, all of them. What my mind homed in on was the good, appealing qualities, the friendly noble qualities that existed within all of these spheres of activity.

One could witness the judgements one group made about another. The conservative country people would make scathing remarks about hippies and condemn them; they would be critical because of superficial characteristics or through the emblems of that tribe being different from their own: beards, patchouli oil, hashish and *The Politics of Ecstasy* rather than green wellington boots, tweeds and *Horse and Hound* (and gin and tonics, of course). One could easily see how people become divided and drawn into contention with each other simply through not seeing our common humanity, what actually lies at the heart of our life. Amongst every single one of those groups there were good people doing what they felt was right, living in a way that seemed a reasonable, wholesome and humane way to exist.

The causes of conflict arise from identification, blind adherence to a role, a position, to attributes of our personality or some aspects of life. There is an incredibly vast array of different things we can identify with. We can identify with our family and our name: “These are my parents, this is my relationship with them, I get on well with my father, trouble with my mother, bit of a dodgy relationship with my brother.” The family bonding that goes on can seem very real; we can become deeply involved in the emotional pulls and struggles of family life. Reminiscences of family history can also be involved with sustaining who we think we are. I notice whenever I visit my family there is an enormous urge to fix everyone as a particular identity; stories about embarrassing things that we did when we were small get told repeatedly. Many times I have heard the tale of how my parents came back from a dinner party to find the babysitter watching television and myself on the kitchen table with the lid off the treacle tin, with me and everything covered in a black sticky mess. The tales are varied and numerous.

The Real Me

The family is a particular group of human beings and our relationships, our past, the events of our childhood, our upbringing and all those triumphs and disasters are the cement that helps us form together as a distinct group, so it can very easily become a strong identity.

The physical body is probably the most powerful source of identification we have: our physical frame, the appearance of being female or male, being young, being old, being attractive, being unattractive – these can make a tremendous difference to us. “I am young. I am old. How old are you?” We don’t say, “My body is thirty-four years old.” We say, “I am thirty-four.” Our mind doesn’t really have any age, only our body ages. The more concerned with appearance one is, the more the importance of the body inflates. When we’re young, as teenagers particularly, there can be an absolutely earth-shattering terror about the prospect of a spot appearing on our face, just when we have an important party coming up at the weekend. Some great blob tries to manifest around our chin, or in some unhideable place and we feel totally destroyed – God has betrayed us. The body becomes an enormously powerful influence on how we feel.

I have quite unusual physical features, so I grew up with a bewildering array of nicknames. I used to have long curly hair, which would turn blondish in the summer sun, a great crown of ringlets and a very muscular body, so one group of women friends used to call me Adonis – I quite liked that. Then there was another group of friends, some obnoxious males who, because of my long nose and prominent ears called me Dumbo – I didn’t like that so much. (I think I must have been an elephant in a past life.)

Identification with the body is something that has a very powerful effect on us as we age, the feeling of seeing the wrinkles arriving, the flesh beginning to sag and the lustre disappearing from our skin, our health and vitality fading, our hair beginning to silver and disappear. Men will try to convince themselves that they have always had a high forehead rather than recognize the fact the hair is actually receding: “It’s a sign of intelligence, a high forehead!”

We can also develop a tremendous amount of identification around health – fearing illness, fearing pain, wanting to be healthy and vigorous. A great deal of time and energy can be spent trying to become healthy, trying to overcome





sickness, or in feeling hard-done-by if we have a sick body – feeling we have been cheated or that something terrible has been done by us or has happened to us because our body is so sick.

We identify with the personality: “She is such a nice person, so outgoing, so intelligent. I am such a clumsy, socially inept type.” Or the reverse, “I’m so wonderful, I am brilliant. So and so over there is foolish and stupid, a hopeless case.” One can judge oneself against other people very easily over personality characteristics. Are we quiet or talkative? Are we bright or are we dark? Are we moody or enthusiastic? It is very easy to judge, “This one is good, that one is bad. That one is right, this one is wrong. I like this one, I don’t like that one.” We can create endless judgements and comparisons. The materialistic society spends an incredible amount of time in judging people against each other in competitions, seeing who is the most athletic, talented, attractive, most appealing. We put billions into endless contests to spruce up, fire up our enthusiasm for making these kinds of discriminations.

Another area is our achievements: the kind of things that we have done in our lives, our successes and failures. We catalogue our ambitions, what we hope will happen in the future and also all the terrible things we have done, the crimes we have committed. We can identify with and carry these things around with us perpetually. “I had an abortion when I was seventeen,” “I am the head of the team” or “I was caught stealing comics from the local newsagents at the age of nine,” a crushing moment, caught in the act. All the successes, failures, good and bad things in our lives one can home in on and make a big thing out of. We can see ourselves as a high person, a low person, a weak person or a strong person just because of the events that have occurred – whether we are a victim or whether we are a success, a winner or a failure. How well we do in the kind of profession that we have, our abilities in the social world – “I am a teacher, “ “I am unemployed,” “I’m just a housewife,” “I’m a Member of Parliament, “ “I’m a meditation teacher, “ “I’m a failed Buddhist” – all of these masks can be picked up and believed in endlessly.

There are also innumerable things in the social realm that we can tie our name onto and claim to be who and what we are – “I’m a conservative,” “I’m a liberal,” “I’m an anarchist,” “I’m a royalist,” “I’m for the war,” “I’m against the war,” “I think it’s right,” “I think it’s wrong” – there are political opinions of an incredible variety of shades and strengths that we can identify with. Then there are things like football teams that we can tie ourselves to – “I’m an Everton supporter,” or “the San Francisco ’49ers are the best” – just to have a hero and to root for them.

The Real Me

There are any number of things that we can align ourselves with on the social level and take that to be our group: “This is my team, this is important and real to me.” So when the group wins, we are happy and we celebrate. Then when they lose we die, we feel sad and depressed, and in aligning with one group we are automatically in conflict against the others. If our mind absorbs into politics and we are into the Conservatives, then we inevitably feel pitted against the other political parties, and the more fully we adhere to that, the more full the contention is. Identification causes that absoluteness of division.

We can identify with our astrological make-up: “Well, of course, he’s a Scorpio, I can’t talk to him, you know what Scorpios are like – appalling!” We can get an enormous amount of mileage out of astrology, palmistry, psychoanalysis, the Enneagram and all the rest of the great variety of different ways of mapping our characteristics, giving them labels and categories and relationships. All of these have a certain validity, but the more we buy into it the more we can see this pattern of division occurring. Even if that to which one is adhering is wholesome and good and helps in some respects, still one sees, however, that the more we take it to be “I” and “me” and “what I truly am” – “A Virgo with Sagittarius rising, the Moon conjunct with Uranus in Leo, Sun and Jupiter conjunct at the mid-heaven...” The more we believe that, “This is what I am, this is the revelation of my true nature,” the more we miss the point. It can never be the whole story, it can only be partial.

We could go through the entire list of things to identify with in our present situation and, as if that were not enough, we have got past lives to play with as well! “Well, of course, this life is pretty mediocre, I’m not really anybody special, but you should have seen me when I was Queen Nefertiti or Josephine, Empress of France, that was a real event – you should have seen me then!” We can make a big deal out of the idea of past lives; who we were can become much more significant than who we are right now. “Well, I was a priest at a temple in Lemuria, then I showed up in Egypt, got stoned to death for stealing a watermelon in Alexandria in about 200 BCE. Then of course I was a nun with the Cathars and got a bit of karma going with the Catholic Church when they walled me up...” We can really get some wonderful stuff going!



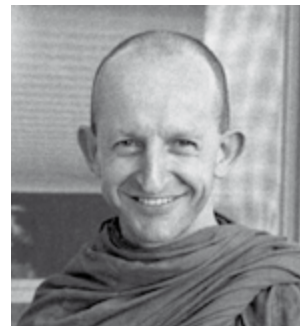
One can see that in the midst of it all there is the search for the real “me.” Which one is the real me? It’s like trying to figure out which one of the social



groups that I was describing did I really belong to? Within all the different strata of our existence we can be hunting for the real me, and the mind in its hunger for security and belonging will latch on to some aspect and claim it, own it, be it, saying, “This is what I am, this is my true self.”

Anything that we identify with in this way, we find that it always leads us to a sense of separation, barrenness, loneliness, a sense of incompleteness and conflict, afraid of what others think, wanting to be whole, wanting approval, fear of attack and friction. As soon as I am isolated and separated from the rest, then there is suffering, *dukkha* comes into being, it’s inevitable. So with the spiritual path, what we are aiming at is to penetrate the question of what we are. I came across a wonderful statement that was made by Sri Ramana Maharishi, “Why are you so concerned about getting things and doing things when you don’t know who it is that is going to get them? Why are you so concerned about knowing who you were in the past when you don’t even know who you are now?” We can be so interested in doing and getting and becoming, so interested in who we were in the past that we forget, “Do I *really* know who I am? Do I really know? What is a human being? What is anyone? What is this?” The spiritual path is the path of enquiry into the very roots of our nature. “What are we...?”

In meditation one can develop this enquiry in a very distinct way, using the mind’s reflective thinking abilities to look into “who I am.” When the mind is reasonably calm and quiet, and we raise the question “Who am I?” we start to challenge all of those identities: the identification with the body, with our family, our gender, with our social group, our memories, our successes and failures, with our occupation and the whole array of different things. When we contemplate, “Who is it that knows masculinity? Who is it that remembers? Who is it that feels pain? Who is it that is sick?” – when we raise the question in that way, clearly and consciously bringing it into the mind, then there is a moment when the thinking mind stutters; just for a moment, there is a realization, a recognition – there is that which is knowing and then there is that which is the feeling of pain or the idea or whatever. We bring our attention to home in more and more directly on that gap, that moment when the mind halts, because quickly afterwards it says, “Well, of course, I am Amaro Bhikkhu, I am 34 years old, I am a Buddhist monk, this is my father, this is my mother, I am living in Chithurst Monastery and today is Saturday. This is your real-



ity, be satisfied with it!”

The thinking mind will rise up and fill the gap with all these conventionally true attributes, but there was a moment, there was a moment when there was a clear space and it was seen that the knowing was one thing, the known another. And, most importantly, in our hearts we realize that the knowing is much, much more truly “me,” “what I am,” or what truly is than any thoughts, any feelings, or any designation of young, old, happy, unhappy, depressed, elated. Those are seen more and more clearly as simply patterns of consciousness, patterns in the play of nature that there is an awareness of. With the contemplative, reflective mind we can pursue this kind of enquiry, learn to keep challenging over and over again the assumptions that we make, and simply abide at the end of the question.

As the mind becomes more calm and we begin to use this practice in a systematic way, we discover a strange process occurring – we ask:

“Who am I?”
After some time the word “Who” starts to sound ridiculous
so then it changes to,
“What am I?”
Then the “I” starts to sound very weird so you ask,
“What is it?”
which then changes to
“What is?”
which reduces to
“What?”
then only
“?”
then just the
•
then the point vanishes,
and there is only pure Awareness –
we are left completely pointless...

This is a process that we can see distinctly when it is followed carefully and systematically; the mind is more and more firmly allowed to rest in the quality of pure “pointlessness.” In some ways this is a good word, being pointless, because it means we are not making the mind have a point, an abiding place¹⁶ – we are allowing it to rest, simply aware of its own nature, aware of both its emptiness



and its suchness, and the arising and passing of all things. We are not defining reality, giving it a limitation or a location.



Somebody asked Krishnamurti one time, “What would you say is the meaning of life?” He said “*MEANING!!!* – how do you think our puny little thoughts can cast the nature of life into some kind of words that can truly express what *IS*? Life *IS* – it doesn’t *mean* anything! What does air or moonlight *mean!*?” This is very true; this is very, very true. To believe that we can express what life’s meaning is is to assume that we can put into words, into some formula, the entire nature of the cosmos – the universe and the mind in all their infinite and inconceivable stratifications and their incredible complexity and interdependence – to try and put that into the expression of human mouth noises is just absurd.

When the mind is allowed to rest in that sense of complete clarity and choicelessness, we find that it is beyond dualism – no longer making preferences or being biased towards this over that. It is resting at the point of equipoise, where this and that and black and white and where you and I all meet; the space where all dualities arise from and where they dissolve.

With the mind thus resting, all conflicts are healed. This is the way that war is ended; affliction and conflict are drawn to a close because the very root delusion of separateness has been dissolved. It would be like our left hand going to war against our right – it’s not going to happen, even in the craziest of people, since the commonality is much more obvious than the differences.



Self-portrait

My father is a judge of dogs
My sister Katie dislikes frogs
My sister Jane is fond of horses
And mother dear, well she of course is
An angel who is past compare.
And then there's me... but do I dare
To claim that I am that or this
An "I am" swimming in the "IS"?

The question is beyond the reach
Of petty mind for on the beach
Of senses beat the endless tides
Of births and deaths, the carpet rides
Of cherished thoughts and memories
Of wives and lives and families.

Waves washing in and washing back
Create a past and future, a sack
Back-burdening, a being blind
And gripping too intense to find
The architect of all their pain,
The singer of the sad refrain
Who builds these realms of birth and death –
Inhaling and exhaling breath,
Inhaling birth, exhaling death.



Confused, incomprehensibly bizarre,
Clutching waves we think we are;
So lost that we forget the eye
Of wisdom, which does not belie
The truth of waves and sand and seas
Yet is transcendent over these.

A song of Suchness clear and bright,
The boundless inner peace of light
Whose unremitting presence roars
Oceanic at its shores.

So what awesome space is this
Wherein the wheel revolves,
And who the ocean into which
This universe dissolves?

A subtle thief, the question "Who?"
It burgles with delight,
It pockets pain and happiness
Then slips into the night
Taking all identity
And leaving on the light.

Taking petty mind up to that watershed
Beyond which nothing can be said,
Where, if words were to apply,
They would create a "you" and "I,"
A plotter and their plot;
Abiding at this spot,
Untouched by anything at all,
No dust, nowhere to fall.

(Devon, 1981)



The Lotus, The Papyrus & the “O! As is...”

Part 4: Aswan ~ Kom Ombo

Kom Ombo ~ December 6th

MORE ABSURDIST CONVERSATIONS at breakfast – the last one, on the lake at Philæ, had been Luang Por, on being reminded to check all his belongings before disembarking, remarking, “All my money’s gone! What do you think we ought to do?” This time it’s launched by a news report about a Bulgarian sumo wrestler, trying to make his way in Japan, this leads on to born-again evangelists (of course) and soon to tales and details about amphetamines and their dangers.

The events of the past days ripple in the memory as numerous, unique and interwoven as the wavelets of the Nile. There is an infinitude but all is held in the embrace of Nût, the overarching goddess of the sky, the immeasurable open space of awareness: boat/water/reed beds/grazing cattle/palms and shrubs/dunes and rock/gibbous moon – the infinite blue enwraps it all.

We headed out with Tarek, our guide, and the Indian family at 8:00. The temple of Isis at Philæ is on an island in the lake formed between the British Dam of 1902 and the Russian Dam of 1971, further upriver. We cross the British Dam, passing a billboard proclaiming, “Philæ – the peace, the glamowr [sic], the creativity.”

We clamber aboard a small motor boat – called somewhat politically incorrectly “Sambo,” although (ever the looker-on-the-bright-side) I suggested it might be an abbreviation of *Sammā-Sambodhi* – and a short ride takes us to the dock and the customary welcoming committee of our dear hawker friends. It’s another of those brief, anonymous relationships – we’re together, contact happens, we pass – nothing need remain but a memory.



The Temple of Isis is extraordinarily beautiful, set above the water, its halls and columns decked with the firm, delicate carpet of hieroglyphs that are found everywhere. The capitals of the grand columns alternate between papyrus and lotus motifs; the former of these traditionally represents Lower Egypt, the land of the swampy Delta, the latter is the emblem of Upper Egypt, the long river. The twinning of the two of them symbolizes here, and in countless other locations, the unification of the two lands, a quality synonymous with strength and prosperity. Once upon a time these very pillars were painted in vivid and intricate mixtures of colour, which lasted until the first dam was built, but now only faded traces remain to tell the stories.

For us as a group of Buddhists, for whom the lotus is also an iconic symbol, principally representing virtue, this repeated intertwining of lotus and papyrus almost becomes a symbol of our own journey here and our participation in these hallowed spaces and spiritual forms. For if one takes the papyrus as being the most archetypally unique emblem of Egypt, the intermingling and joining of these two evokes the presence of the Buddha-Dhamma within the sphere of the ancient Egyptian realm and, of course, vice versa.

Tarek is another fine and knowledgeable guide and leads us through the various ages and stages of the temple and the life there, including the defacings by the Christians and the graffiti of the Napoleonic and the British occupations, pointing out that the whole structure was completely neglected, and used for all kinds of odd purposes, for 1700 years.

Not only is it astonishingly well-preserved – maintaining a serene hallowedness and elegance worthy of the mother of Horus the protector, goddess of magic and loving wife of Osiris, god of the Underworld, Lord of the Dead – it is doubly remarkable since it was moved to this spot from far away, when the first Aswan dam was built to support the cotton production desired by Lancashire. It had been under water for several months of the year because of the changes brought by the new control exercised over the river, and after the Russian Dam was built (more for power), it seemed it would now be immersed for seven to eight months. Thus “Move it!” became the only option, and they did – and it only cost £15 million to carry it out. Tarek took pains to demonstrate how the great dismantling and reconstruction was done, pointing out the one pillar-stone that had been put in upside-down, easily visible from the inverted ankh. Well, only Allah is perfect so perhaps it was put in this way in the spirit of the one mistake that goes with every carpet, deliberately and carefully placed. This is also the place that gave Champollion the means to decode the Rosetta Stone.

As we are leaving, crossing the open plaza before the temple, Luang Por reflects, “I think I’ll start encouraging devotion to Isis at Amaravati; I quite like her...” She is the goddess who embodies motherhood, magic and, like her son the falcon-headed Horus, protection. She is the feminine principle/principal in the Egyptian Holy Trinity of Osiris/Isis/Horus: Osiris is the husband and brother of Isis; Horus is their offspring, conceived after the death of Osiris.

She is thus the Blessed Virgin of their pantheon, and it doesn’t take too much of a leap of imagination to suspect that the early troop of Christian philosophers and theologians (among whom were Alexandrian Greeks), when standardizing their own belief systems and uniting them with neoplatonic thought, managed to be influenced by the 3000-year-old Egyptian spiritual model. It cannot *not* have been in the mix of world-views present in the Mediterranean sphere at that time.

In fact, worship of the Goddess Isis was officially banned around 400 CE, and no statues of her with Horus sitting on her lap were to be displayed. She was so popular, however, that right after she was outlawed, statues of Mary started to appear with the child Jesus on her lap.

Once again the subject of Christian tendencies to conceit and their views of uniqueness come into the conversation. It’s hard to acknowledge that one has not sprung unique, pure, perfectly redemptive, unprecedented in all prior universes, and that one’s beliefs are indeed only *that* – beliefs. The genius of the *Kalama Sutta*, in which the Buddha encourages his own disciples and the people of Kesaputta not to believe blindly but to act based on experience and investigation, is a Gödel’s Proof of the spiritual realm: it proves that all proofs are incomplete or inconsistent – only the direct knowing of the heart, of dukkha and the ending of dukkha, can be trusted. In the light of this teaching, inscribing a Maltese cross on the column at Philæ, to express one’s true dominance, seems sad and pathetic, all at once.

“This temple is *very* beautiful.” The morning sun sparkled on the waters that now lie over the original site of the temple; distant dust-coloured hills bordered the lake while bright bursts of pink and orange bougainvillea flared against the sky. Edward was in awe once again; “I’ll take it!” he declared, “How much do you want?” It had been constructed in many stages from about 350-50 BCE with the holy of holies, the innermost chamber, being the oldest part – this is a pattern that repeats itself throughout the country.

“Even though they have all these images of battles ’n that, it wasn’t all about war – it wasn’t that way for them. They were a genuinely peace-loving culture.



A lot of this is just symbols for spiritual qualities. In fact *everything* you see was used for its symbolic value.” Having Ajahn Vimalo on hand to provide explanation and commentary has been a treat for all of us. His knowledge is incredibly broad – doubly amazing since he has been seriously dyslexic all his life. He always excelled in art but anything with words and grammar has always been a trial.

It was when he was ten and saw the film *The Ten Commandments* – and the Egyptians represented there – that he was inspired to go to the public library and find out all he could on Egypt and its ancient religion and culture. He taught himself to read hieroglyphs and has worked his way, with painstaking determination, through much of *Gardner’s Grammar* – a notoriously demanding but seminal text on the ancient Egyptian language and its writing systems, along with numerous other books on the field. He is a rich and deep mine of information, a seemingly inexhaustible mother-lode.



The big Russian dam produces 17% of Egypt’s power, so that’s a great blessing; it also provides a much greater control of the annual flood – another plus. There are some downsides, however (as with all blessings) and this edifice of progress has been responsible for the wiping out of the Nile’s crocodiles – once a sacred animal here. Along with this the rich silt that washed down with the year’s inundation, that deposited itself over the fields lining the banks all the way to the Delta, now piles up against the southern wall of the dam. Thus the immensely fertile soils of the past are no longer replenished and chemical fertilizers have become the rule of the day for Egypt’s farms. Then there are the 100,000 Nubians that had to be moved...

The final detriment is the vulnerability factor rendered by the presence of the giant body of water (Lake Nasser is 500 km long), held in place by what is, effectively, a little plug, even though it has 17 times more stone in it than was used to build the Great Pyramid. If that little plug pops out, for some reason, a tsunami 18 metres high would burst down the length of the river and destroy the entirety of the country – at least all of the human habitations, farms and temples at the water’s edges, plus almost all the human population.

The airport at Aswan is thus 80% military, with bunkers for the jet fighter planes, and if any unauthorized plane should enter the no-fly zone over the dam, it will be shot down in five seconds, maximum, even if it is the President of Egypt himself up there on a private flight. The risk is so great that zero toler-

ance, no warning, is the only recourse: you enter, we shoot – end of story.

It's bright, rich azure sky, but the breeze is cool as we return to our boat and to the dock at Aswan. Djellabahs are on sale for the party on the boat, "Hello, sir," "Yes!" "Where from?"

"Hemel Hempstead" is an effective conversation stopper if the enquirer is English (it was hard to resist responding thus, in the Cairo Museum among the regalia of King Tutankhamun, when the question was posed by a polite lady with a distinct Home Counties accent) but it falls a little flat, perhaps sounding too exotic, to the unanglicized. One tall, dark fellow, glad-eyed and beturbaned, lights up as he sees us. "You are Nubian!" he announces, possibly as he is one too – he's so tickled to meet us he hardly even tries to make a sale, although he does transfer his head gear to Ajahn Vimalo for a try-out. We have learned to say "*Buzah!*" ("We are Buddhists") and "*Raheb*" which means "priest," and with that much we seem to get through well enough. All are friendly and endearing – there is a feeling that, at the root, our meeting as humans is the dominant quality.

We set off at 1:00 and travelled on the life-giver for three hours, up to Kom Ombo. In the boat's restaurant, the water outside the window is at waist level so the undulating surface is right beside us as a constant companion. The top deck however, is way up high and is arranged as if it were a large, rectangular patio with a splash pool at its very centre.

There is a stiff breeze on top but most of our group happily spends the whole afternoon there regardless. It is such a treat, a joy to be here, to have been blessed with such unbidden privilege to be able to sit and be with the Nile-life as it passes by us. The fat clumps of reeds along the banks proclaim well that they, at least, have not gone the path of the crocodile. Feluccas, even local working ones *sans* tourists, coast by; palms sprout vigorously from the shore, all the way to the edges of the cultivated area, or run up to abut the sharply rising rock-walls of the local tawny outcrops.

It's an archetypal dream, in a way: cruising, at ease, upon the River of Life, carried by a trusty vessel and begarlanded with a group of noble friends – what have we done to deserve this chance, to be awake and to enjoy the embodiment of such primal myths? It's as if a part of the inner journey has leaked through into the manifest world of the senses.






As we pull into the dock at Kom Ombo we are joined by a flotilla of at least 20 vessels of like size, “This is Victoria coach station!” quipped Ajahn Vimalo. The great white bulks of the National Coaches, gathering at the Central London depot, with their red and blue trim, having been increased in size a hundredfold but edging into place, nudging, barging, honking their horns in the approved and identical fashion. Each one contending assertively, sensitively, for a parking place.

Ingeniously they are all now made to a compatible size, and have access doors that match each other perfectly. Thus they can park side by side – up to eight or even a dozen deep – and one can walk through the connected lobbies of each of them to emerge upon the shore dry-footed. Fortunately we only have one between us and land – a splendid Las Vegas kitsch affair – so we pass through easily and walk up to the temple, at the upper part of the town.

It was 4:00ish by then and the good Tarek stoically led us through the burgeoning crowds. One has a feeling that most of the day the place has been deserted, that it has only been at this time that the locusts have descended, by some unconscious agreement. At least unconscious to some of us; perhaps the tour operators design it this way out of some compassionate sense or some economic advantage or other.

It is a temple of particular significance because of its references to Imhotep – architect of Saqqara and Dzoser’s complex – but by the time of the temple’s construction, some 2500 years later, he had been deified as a god of healing, medicine having been one of his great skills, along with architecture. In Greek he is known as Asklepios (Latin, Æsculapius) and is, in effect, the patron saint of healing and medicine.

In the back section of the temple were to be found hieroglyphs depicting medical instruments of many types, lists of cures, potions, antiseptics, child-birthing methods and other obstetric advice; elsewhere there were details of their socialized medical system – the poor did not have to pay the medical specialist priests – and a relief of a papyrus wand spiralled round by a long thin cobra. Tarek suggested to us that this might well have been a rudimentary version, or perhaps better, a primal version of the caduceus that is still the symbol of medical practice. By the lists of medicines there was also the Eye of Horus , the primal form of today’s shorthand for a prescription R_x .



Once back on the boat another long discussion ensued at tea-time, again centering around Christianity and the problems of self-view: if one takes "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life..." at face value (i.e., in terms of self-view) it can only lead to divisiveness and suffering. If it is recast in an inductive way, that is, "What do you need to have in order to realize the Deathless?" and then it is compared to the lines from the *Dhammapada*, verses 21-22, "Mindfulness is the path to the Deathless..." this would indicate that when Jesus said "I am" he must have been referring to mindful awareness, which implies, "Mindful awareness is the Way and the Truth and the Life" – then it works.

These discussions are often triggered by the sight of remnants of the early Christians' efforts to deface these "pagan" shrines – faces and bare breasts have been chiseled off in many cases. These repeated examples of wanton destruction, based on the religious views being held, easily triggers feelings of indignation: "Who do they think they *are*!?"

The Greeks, it seems, were much more accommodating than the Christians and actually supported the construction of temples to Egyptian deities while they ruled the area, from 332 up to 30 BCE.

Ironically much of the well-preserved carving is that which was buried and lost beneath the silts and sands of time. The so-called forces of decay and destruction actually preserved the temples better than any laws, or swords, or prayers could do – the gods do work in mysterious ways, don't they?

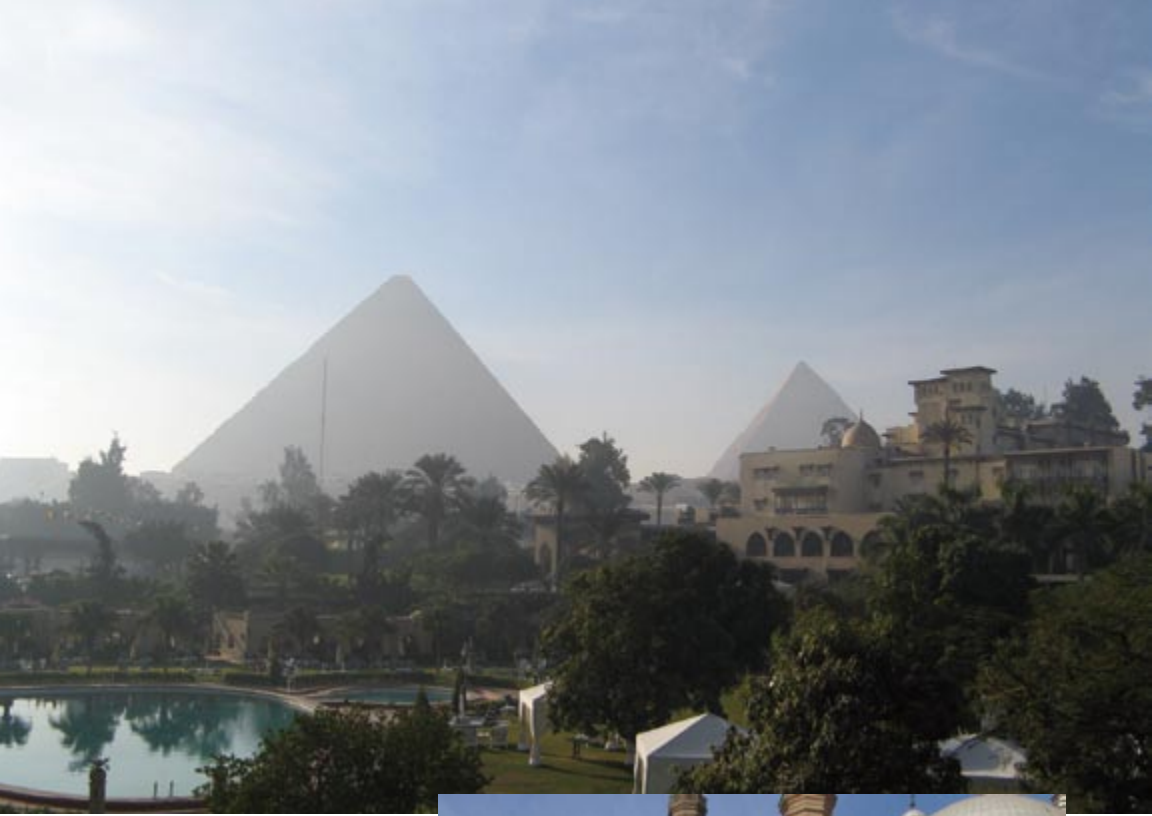
There is an "Egyptian party" for the passengers and all are expected to wear djellabahs for dinner – Edward and Ead willingly go along. The rest of us Eight-Precept-and-above types lie low; I bring the diary up to date and find myself with weary fingers by midnight.



p. 4 - the polar partner of the light beneath the giant rainbow

p. 6 - the grand pyramidal outline of the Temple





p. 18 - grand pyramids that straddle the view from the balcony



p. 20 - the mosque of Mohammed Ali



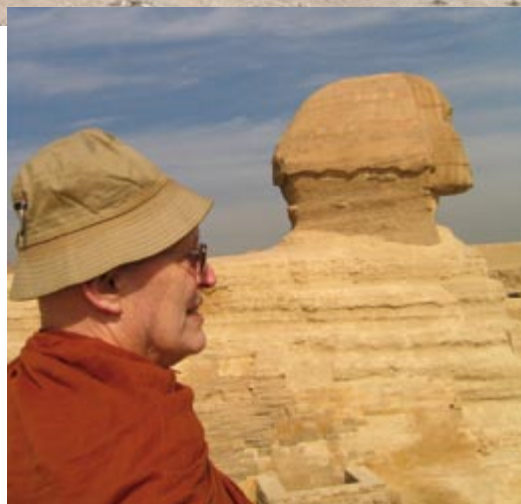
p. 20 - there had been crowds of eager eyes



p. 23 - "Please take my picture"



*Ead and Edward Lewis, Ajahn Vimalo,
Ajahn Nānarato, Luang Por Sumedho,
Ajahn Amaro, and Richard Smith at the
pyramids of Ghiza*



p. 24 - at the Sphinx



p. 26 - preparations for a feast

p. 28 - The monastery of Anba Bishoi





The mummified body of St. Bishoi

p. 30 - There were three or four layers of wall paintings



*Ajahn Amaro at
Anba Bishoi*



p. 30 – *“This is a historical moment!”*





Sunrise over Lake Nasser

p. 49 - one of the flight attendants bears a striking resemblance to Queen Nefertiti of the 18th Dynasty





p. 50 - "Two vast and trunkless legs
of stone... Near them on the sand...a
shatter'd visage lies..."

*At the feet of the statues of
Rameses II, Abu Simbel*





Rameses the Great



Ajahn Amaro at Abu Simbel



*p. 52 - onto the river...for
the traditional felucca ride*





p 53 - long softly-shaped dunes

p. 53 - our fine ship, the Oberoi Philae





p. 66 - The temple of Isis at Philæ

At the Temple of Isis



*p 67 - The capitals of the grand columns at the Temple of Isis -
Ead in foreground*



p. 70 - The top deck...is way up high and is arranged as if it were a large, rectangular patio





p. 71 - As we pull into the dock at Kom Ombo we are joined by a flotilla of at least 20 vessels of like size

p. 71 - at this time the locusts have descended





*p. 71 - in the back section
of the temple*

*p. 72 - Edward &
Ead willingly go along*





Perfect Proof

From a talk given on the winter retreat, Chithurst, January 1991

SOMETHING WHICH COMES UP REGULARLY in dealing with the question of spiritual practice and spiritual authority in the scriptures is: How do we know anything is true? So I thought to speak this evening about proof, about how something comes to be proven.

I remember reading somewhere that the definition of proof is that it is a shrine in front of which pure mathematicians immolate themselves. The quest for certainty, absolute knowledge, is something which has been very strong in our culture, particularly in the last few hundred years. So much of our thought and our style of life has been based around rationalism and certainty that this has given a whole tone to our society. The sense of wanting to be able to prove everything is very strong, and this quest for certainty is based on the understanding that, when we have everything proven, then everything will be all right...

Up until the turn of the last century, people in the scientific world felt that we were getting through the problems bit by bit and that soon we would have the whole material, natural world understood – there was even the hope that psychology was going to become a mathematical science. At Harvard University, in the 1890s I believe, they closed the post-graduate section of the physics department because they thought that there was nothing left to discover. There were just two slightly strange effects that they needed to figure out: one was radioactivity and the other was why hot bodies emit light in the way that they do. The belief was that once they got those two little things figured out, then all knowledge about the physical world would be complete.¹⁷

So they shut the post-graduate department. Unfortunately, Max Planck and Albert Einstein came along a few years later and blew the whole thing to pieces with their insights and discoveries about the nature of matter, energy and the

sub-atomic world. This kind of hubris within us is very strong – the rational mind feels that somehow it can get everything tied up, and that we can establish absolute knowledge within the realm of thought.

Also around the turn of the 20th Century in England, a couple of philosophical mathematicians, Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead, set about trying to prove from first principles all of the most important theorems and aspects of mathematics, starting out with the absolute basics – no assumptions whatsoever – for example, they take 345 pages to define the number “one.” They spent about fifteen years doing this and they published, I believe in 1913, their massive masterpiece, *Principia Mathematica*. They had the whole thing tied up: “There’s nothing more to be done here, this is it, we’ve got it, it’s all fixed, WE KNOW.”

A few years later another person came along with an insight that I feel is extremely important for the philosophy of our age. From a background also of rationalism and logic, which our society worships and looks up to as its great idol, this man came up with an insight, a proof that turned the whole thing on its head. And, for humanity at this time, an inroad into the realization that the absolute cannot be established in terms of the relative is very important.

This man’s name was Kurt Gödel. In 1931 – when he was quite a young man – he produced a proof whereby he showed that any formal system, any logical form whatsoever, any mathematical system has to be either incomplete or imperfect. Paraphrased, it reads something like, “All consistent axiomatic formulations of number theory include undecidable propositions.”¹⁸ In this way he came up with a very straightforward and ingenious proof that shows one can’t establish absolute certainty in relative terms. It is intrinsically impossible. It cannot be done. It is like a camera – it can take pictures of everything in the world except for itself, there is always something that has to be left out of the picture. You either have to generalize things and leave things inaccurate or there is something left out, there is a piece missing. And he proved that no matter how hard you try and work it, no matter how you try to get around it, intrinsic in every single proposition, every single idea or proof, there is this quality of incompleteness, the lack of absolute certainty.

In a way this was an insight into the First Noble Truth, it was a recognition of dukkha in its subtler sense. This was displaying, from a very logical standpoint, the same insight that the Buddha had: that any thing whatsoever, by its very thing-ness, by its very existence, has imperfection or insubstantiality or change or unsatisfactoriness intrinsically embodied in it. It has to be there. There is no way around it.



Now this rather deflated poor Bertrand Russell, even though young Gödel didn't really trust the strength of his own insight; when he published it, he published it as "Part One," sure that people were going to come along and shoot holes in it – but they didn't. There was nothing wrong with it. There was no "Part Two." He had captured it in one simple expression, a clear act of understanding that still stands up today. Its verity is unshaken and it's proving to be more and more of a significant factor in the understanding of our own nature as conscious interdependent beings. It's having more and more of an effect on the philosophical climate. Interestingly enough, Whitehead seemed to get the message, adapted his line of thinking in this later work and it is his name behind much of today's liveliest and most viable thinking in the academic world.¹⁹

The Buddha used the term *sankhāra-dukkha* to refer to this same kind of imperfection, which is not saying there is something bad about the world of things and ideas but that, in the very nature of the apparent independence or particular individuality of things, there is dukkha bound up with them. There is not the vision of wholeness.

A way to look at this and understand it is to think in terms of the arising of the material and mental realities that we experience from the scientific point of view. From a Buddhist point of view we describe *nāmarūpa*, mind and body, as arising from consciousness, and originally arising out of the *saccadhamma*, the fundamental, ultimate reality which is the ground, the basis for all things. In scientific terms, some have called this *saccadhamma* the "sea of potential": that energetic quantum vacuum which is the basis of all physical and mental reality, and out of which all things emerge.

The body and the mind – atoms and molecules, protons, neutrons, electrons and everything that forms our material world and the consciousness that arises also – they all arise from the same place. They arise from that same basic, fundamental reality. They are two aspects of the same fundamental reality that spring forth into being. And one can reflect that atoms and molecules and the forces between them exist in very much the same way that we as individual people and the relationships between us exist. The wave-like and particle-like nature of matter is mirrored in the material and mental aspects of our own life: *nāmarūpa* is like an expanded version of the wave- and particle-like nature of matter, of reality at its most basic level, *rūpa* being the particular and *nāma* being somewhat wavey.

So, springing out of this sea of potential, this ground of being, are our physical being, our mental world, our thoughts and feelings and the whole universe.

Perfect Proof

These spring forth and then return to that same sea; as Ajahn Sumedho is fond of saying, “All conditions arise from the Unconditioned and they return to the Unconditioned,” “All conditions merge in the Deathless.”

This is a pattern for our whole experience of existence. We see that the Unconditioned in itself can be uninteresting. One analogy often used is that the Unconditioned is like space, like the space of this room. It doesn’t catch our attention – the bodies, the pictures, the light, the colours in the room do. So in that sense the Unconditioned is not “interesting.” It has no features, it has no characteristics. When the mind opens to it, its nature becomes more vivid and understood, more real. But at first glance it seems as though there’s nothing there. The potential that is there can perhaps only know itself through the fluctuations or excitations that occur within it.

Our thoughts arise out of the Unconditioned. They come into being and become interesting, then the attention fixes on them and so they start to seem very real but they purchase that reality, that substance, at the cost of separation from the ground of being, from the Unconditioned. So this is where the experience of dukkha or alienation, imperfection arises, and trying to know or to understand the Unconditioned in terms of the conditioned will always bring us a sense of lack, a sense of incompleteness.

In Buddhist terms, this is what we talk about as the arising of *sankhāra* – that bringing forth of a whole material/mental world and the attendant dukkha that arises within it. But when that is seen with knowledge and vision, when the mind is awake, then this is the ending of dukkha, the ending of illusory separation; we understand clearly the origin and nature of things.

In a way this is also what is represented by the Fall, in the Biblical sense – that separation which is eventually the source of knowledge, bought at the price of leaving the total fusion and wholeness of the Unconditioned, life in Eden. Our journey through life and our evolution as human beings is an evolution through this sense of separation to the quality of knowledge clarified, to where we realize the true nature of things. We find our way back to Eden, back to the peace of the Original Mind that was always there but we felt we’d lost only because our eyes were closed, our vision was absent and we didn’t see it. It’s like becoming so enraptured with all of the objects in this room or so worried about all the people, liking this one and not liking that one, becoming so caught up in the web of relationships that we feel there is no space in this place. “I need more space, I need more space, there’s just things and people and activity and...” The place is full of space, there’s nothing but space, but we just fail to see it.



The Unconditioned, the bliss of the mind's own nature, is here right in our own hearts, it's always right here behind every thought, behind every sound, inside every colour, every feeling, every mood; if we penetrate to the heart of it that same purity, radiance, peacefulness is right there, *right here*, if only we take the trouble to look for it.

This is pointing to the fact that in order to deal with the Fall, to deal with suffering and the inability that we have to establish certainty and completeness on the sensory level – or in terms of what we think, what we do and what we have – we can solve this simply through being awake. We solve the riddle through the true understanding and penetration of the sensory world, by the complete relinquishing of any illusion that wholeness can come from any thought, from words, from achievements or from possessions. It's only through the true awakening in our own hearts to the fundamental nature of things – which is not just a clear idea but an actual transmutation of our vision of life right here within us – a breaking of the habit of self-identification that divides reality into subject and object, self and other – it's only through this that we come to recognize absoluteness, we come to recognize certainty, we come to perfect proof, to completeness.²⁰



In terms of Dhamma, spiritual teachings, we often talk about nonduality; this is because there is something in us which knows that wholeness is true, that is to say that any kind of apparent separation or fragmentation is somehow a mistake, an error. There's something in our gut level feelings that tells us, "This just isn't right"; there's a longing for completeness, and this takes shape as desire. Desire is a sense of having something missing, so we look for an object of desire to fill that gap: longing for home – like Ulysses longing to return to Ithaca, that feeling driving him on and on through all the terrors and trials of a ten-year journey – being pulled home.

With any kind of desire that we experience, we feel that there is something missing and that, if only we could just get that thing: "If I could only achieve this or acquire that or get to this place then everything will be all right." We want to be whole, we don't want to be two, we want to be one. So *tanhā*, *upādāna*, *bhava* – craving, clinging, becoming – these, in a sense, come from the same drive that pulls us towards that realization of wholeness, the Unconditioned. In the moment of becoming, that thrill of, "At last I've got it, this is it, I have it," that

thrill is like an echo that comes from the thrill of wholeness, the satisfaction of knowing there's not two, there is one.

It's because that thrill doesn't and cannot last that we experience dukkha, so the spiritual path is always pointing to the place where we can really find completion, where we won't be disappointed, where that sense of wholeness and satisfaction won't be conditional, temporary and fragile. The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths based on the letting go of desire, arriving at nonduality. He said: first of all, stop looking for wholeness in terms of sense objects. This is where we really cause problems for ourselves. He also said, "Ignorance is the cause of suffering," but this is perhaps a bit too subtle for most of our minds to grasp. Desire is the place where we can see the problem most easily, most readily. We can spot the mistake happening. So he taught us to see desire, notice desire but to not follow it. Just let desire pass through the mind like a wave. Let it come through the mind. Let it dissolve back into the silence, into the Unconditioned. Let desires end, relinquish, abandon them.

The Buddha uses a beautiful sequence of terms: *viveka*, *virāga*, *nirodha*, *vossagga*. This means seclusion or separation – this is *viveka*; then *virāga*, detachment; *nirodha*, cessation; *vossagga*, surrender or abandonment – this is the putting down, leaving alone of desire. It's like putting down something in your hand which is burning hot, leaving it alone, walking away from it, not looking back – we let go of desire in this way.

The problem is that we don't recognize that desire is desire. Often it can seem to be very reasonable: putting one's mind onto a task and getting down to it. In spiritual practice there's a lot of emphasis on making effort and using energy but often this is particularly difficult to be clear about. It so easily slips into the desire to become: that effort, doing the right thing, very easily overreaches itself and becomes a yearning, a racing ahead, a blind trying. Particularly if we are engaged in spiritual practice, what we want to become is something that has got all the right credentials. We want to become a good person, we want to become wise, compassionate, loving, unselfish and so on and so on. The objects of desire are all very wholesome and praiseworthy, but that very trying can be that which blocks the mind.

I had a very revealing experience a year or so ago, when I was on retreat in the forest here at Chithurst. I'd been about two weeks on retreat and my mind was very energized and concentrated. I came in to spend an all-night sitting on the new-moon day here in the house. I was very awake and found myself sitting up all night long without any trouble. I was sitting there full of energy with a



mind concentrated and clear but all the time there was a feeling of adjusting and pushing and shoving: “Just a little bit more of this and a little bit less of that and, oh yes, nearly there, and oh, right, doing well here, yes, this is it, *this* is what I like, yes, oh no, no, gone, oh it’s slipped away, oops, O.K., what am I doing, yes, go back to what I was doing five minutes ago, right, O.K., a bit more of this, ah, right, yes, yes, getting there, nearly, that’s it, steady, steady, right...” and all night long this was going on. There was a nagging feeling of discontent, restless becoming, going on all the time. When the night was over and I was walking back to my hut in the forest, I felt a deep sense of irritation and disappointment, sadness that somehow I was getting it all wrong. The breakthrough into perfect peace had seemed so close, yet so veiled all night long, like pressing at a thin curtain, tantalizingly unable to get through.

It was just after dawn when I got back to the little hut. I lay down in this same kind of mood, fell asleep for about half an hour and then woke up. I was really energized, my body was still charged up from the night’s meditation and so I thought, “Oh, no. I can’t even go to sleep. This is really unfair!” So I shoved my bedding into an untidy heap in the corner and decided to forget the whole thing. “I’m not going to meditate. I’ll just lie here in a crumpled heap,” so I flopped down and just let go of everything – the result of this was that my mind instantaneously went into an absolutely clear, peaceful balanced state. It was as if I could hear the voice of Wisdom saying, “At last! I was wondering when you were going to stop all that mucking about. It was getting quite exhausting there.”

As I half sat, half lay there I experienced a wonderful, transcendent peacefulness and clarity. The mind seemed light, empty and void of personality. It was a tremendously liberating and wonderful experience. It was very clear that, all the way along, the trying was what had been obscuring the Truth; that bashing, thrashing effort in the mind, trying to get something and become something. Even though what I wanted to become was very reasonable, it was “I” that was doing it and that was what was creating all the problems.

The following afternoon, just by way of reiterating the predicament, I found myself sitting in the doorway of my hut, as I often did. The door was open but there was an insect, a bee, bashing away on the glass trying to get out. Over and over again it kept flying into the glass and bashing into it to escape, even though the door was open. I began to look at the poor thing, thinking, “Let me help you get out.” I got a little card and tried to get the card behind it to scoop it out around the window frame and release it, “Look, friend, all you’ve got to do is just go around this way, its right here; let me help you.”

But the more I tried to help it the more frantic and frustrated it became, the harder it flapped its wings and the harder it bashed itself against the glass. I kept saying, “No, no, no, it’s all right, don’t worry, just sit still and I’ll help you to get out.” Then I began to notice a distinct similarity between my own mind states of the previous night and this insect bashing away on the glass. So I thought perhaps I’d better leave it alone; and in exactly the same way, once I stopped trying to help it, after a little while the insect calmed down, it eventually got to the edge of the window frame and then, by just waiting for the right moment, with one quick move and a little flick with a piece of card, the insect was away. I thought, “How wonderful! This is exactly what was happening during the previous night: there I was, bashing away at the glass, longing for the Light – I could see the Light and was flying at it but kept colliding with time and the sense of self – resulting in frustration.” All that it had needed was a moment of inconsequential calm, when the fury and flurry had abated, patience, observation for when the time was ripe and then BOP! Freedom at last – the open door.

The state of freedom, wholeness, carefree peace is our original nature and we only appear to depart from it and feel the need for something to replace it because of *avijjā* – not knowing, in its most profound sense. Space, light, selflessness: these are all words pointing to that inexpressible pure heart that is the centre of everything. It is from that wholeness or suchness that the sense of self and other arises – the arising of *sankhāra* is the division between self and other, subject and object, the sense of “I” and “the world.” This sense of self is the most basic illusion so, even if one is breaking the chain of Dependent Origination at “desire,” there is still the unconscious creation of the sense of “I” and “the world” or even “I” seeing the “Truth.”

In one of his teachings (the *Pañcattaya Sutta*, M102) the Buddha points out how, if some person is meditating and has developed a lot of insight and peacefulness, they might arrive at a blissful state of mind where there is clarity and knowledge; then the thought arises in them, “I am at peace, I am without clinging, I have attained Nibbāna.” Then that very thought proclaims the clinging which is still there. Even if there is just a sense of “I seeing the Truth” then there’s still a subtle sense of division, there’s still *sankhāra* there, subtly being created and producing the feeling of separateness and therefore imperfection.

Our goal is to break through even that, to be able to remain at the root, to go right back to the Source and break through even that sense of there being an observer. Just to let the mind dissolve in the ground of its own being so that there is no sense of “me” seeing the “Truth,” an observer and an observed, there’s



only peacefulness, clarity and the sense of wholeness. The world of “things” is not formulated and therefore any idea that there could be certainty or “decidability” is without a basis – there is no *thing* there to be decidable or not – this is true completeness, proof of the Real. In knowing such completion, no shadow of imperfection of any sort at all can remain.



Beyond Being and Non-being

From a talk given on the winter retreat, Chithurst, 1991

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT THE GOAL of Buddhist practice, about enlightenment or Nibbāna, we use the term “realization” as being the most accurate way to approach it. Often one sees the term “getting” enlightened, or “becoming” enlightened; this is good and meaningful enough in ordinary speech but it also has connotations which are obstructive or misleading. Whenever we think of “getting” something or “becoming” something, it always implies that what there is right now is somehow lacking, there is “me” that is missing something and I have got to get some kind of experience or some kind of quality that is going to make me complete in the future and then, once I have got it, it is going to be mine and I can keep it. There are many characters who have “got” enlightened and then their enlightenment has wandered off and left them rather bereft and despairing for months or sometimes years.

So when we think and talk about enlightenment it is much better to use the word “realization” because it is pointing to the fact that we are discovering what is here already; we are realizing, real-izing that which is already true, that which is the fabric and nature of our own being. Any thought of getting or becoming is what ties us to the incessant cycles of birth and death; this is what is called the *bhavacakka*, the cycle of becoming, because anything we get we can lose or we become anxious about being separated from – ownership is suffering. Thinking in terms of realization, discovering the Truth, lends itself much less to the idea of ownership. The Dhamma, the ultimate reality of things has no owner and this realization of Truth is the fulfilment of our life; you do not have to take this as a proclamation but I would say that this is the goal, the fulfilment of our life. Everything else that happens in life that we achieve or create, bring forth into the world, these are all secondary to the realization of Truth, to this quality of seeing and being Dhamma.



Knowing the reality of things does not seem like very much. Our worldly tendencies and our habits of seeing always tend to focus on the objects, beings and places, the achievements, triumphs and disasters of our lives as being the real, substantial, important aspects and something as ephemeral or intangible as realizing Truth, on a conceptual level at least, seems a bit flimsy or simple-minded.



Buddhism gets criticized a lot by people who take the position of life-affirmation. This has been the case right from the very beginning when the Buddha first started teaching – particularly because of being a religious tradition with a monastic order of celibate monks and nuns. This renunciant lifestyle gets quite a pounding from people who are not necessarily worldly or indulgent but just those who see value in the fulfilment of life on the worldly plane: the qualities of a loving relationship, of having children, of creating music or beautiful things, planting gardens and trees, building houses, forming friendships, creating networks of wholesome activity, learning, teaching, nursing, healing the sick, helping the dying – these are all tremendously appealing, important and positive things in life. There is something very deep, very instinctual in our hearts which does appreciate and celebrate this – that loves life, that wants to live, to laugh, to love – and this seems to be the very fabric and essence, the spice and purpose of life, to live life to the hilt, to the full.

In the Fall 1990 issue of *Inquiring Mind*, a Buddhist newspaper put out in America, they had an article about Ajahn Sucitto and Ven. Vipassi teaching a retreat in Massachusetts. This article went to great lengths to make sure that people knew that both these monks had lived very “full” lives before they became monks, which is a polite way of saying you have done everything you could think of and then some before you became a monk. People are very scared of the idea that you would become a monk before you had really done *everything*, tried everything out. The idea is that life is to be lived, everything is to be tasted, to be experienced – Rajneesh was very keen on this kind of practice: doing absolutely everything to the limit and learning from that. The true learning experience in life is described as to take it all on, to swallow it whole and watch the results – so this does make what we do here at this monastery look a bit strange! Maybe I am sounding like an advert for Dionysian hedonism (brandy will be served in the kitchen after the evening meeting), but it is a very powerful streak in our minds, it strikes a powerful chord.

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The other day I ran across something that D.T. Suzuki wrote in one of his books on Zen Buddhism; it went something like, “The spirit of freedom, which is the power behind Buddhism breaking through its monastic shell to ever more vigorously bring enlightenment to the masses, is the life impulse of the universe,” then he says, “The spirit of Buddhism has always been intellectual, moral and spiritual freedom, thus the moral aristocracy and the disciplinary formalism of primitive Buddhism could not bind our freedom, our spirit for very long,”²¹ so *we* are right out of the picture! I am not criticizing D.T. Suzuki but just saying that there is a strong tendency in people’s minds to think, “Well, if you are living a very restrained, renunciant life you really must be missing out on a lot; you are not respecting all that life offers, these bodies are fertile, they are designed to produce offspring and you have creative talents – we can do, we can speak, we can create – why not!”

Because I draw pictures for birthday cards for my family and occasionally write poems, I find that this is one of the few things about my life that my family can relate to. My mother is always encouraging me to create more masterpieces; I have got pads and pads of drawing paper and crayons and pens and ink, an incredible stash of stationery to do my creations on. I regularly get a burdened feeling when I look at this pile of stuff in my desk-drawer: “Oh dear, I suppose I should create something.” I like doing that kind of thing but one sees that for people with a more perceptually-based perspective on life, what you create becomes the most important thing, “After all, you can draw such nice pictures, you can say such nice things, why not? You are robbing the world by not producing offspring, poems, pictures, etc., etc., etc.”

This question had long puzzled me and struck me deeply when I first arrived at the monastery in Thailand. I was reminded of it this morning, since we have been having readings from *The Life of the Buddha* and we have just got to the time of the enlightenment. Oftentimes as a Westerner we think about enlightenment as meaning having a mind which is happy all the time, regardless of whatever is going on and whatever we choose to do – this is a very attractive proposition! After the Buddha’s enlightenment he sat for a week rapt in meditation, experiencing the bliss of deliverance and, after that absorption into bliss, he emerged and then what did he do? He spent the whole night contemplating Dependent Origination, the law of dependent arising: ignorance conditioning the arising of desire, attachment, birth, death, suffering and so forth; contemplating its arising, contemplating its cessation, backwards, forwards, up, down, all night long.

Now, if you were enlightened and had just become completely, irreversibly



free from suffering, it's possible to imagine you might think, "What a relief! At last that's all over – no more suffering, marvelous, amazing." And you might think, "Let's go eat pancakes!" or "I wonder what that nice young lady who brought me the milk rice is doing tonight, maybe I'll pop round and see her." Or, if you were of a less sensual character, with a bit more nobility, "Now I'll go back to my kingdom, encourage my old father, give him a bit of support and then help take over the kingdom and run a really good little country for the rest of my life."

But we can see that, far from having this reaction, with his enlightenment the Buddha experienced life from a completely new dimension. He was seeing things in a way that he had not seen before, he was seeing what the rest of the world could not see. It's rather like when we come into a new situation – an institution, a school or a family, a monastery – we are a stranger and we suddenly find ourselves in the midst of all kinds of webs of relationship, power-trips, struggles, gripes, loves and hates and personality conflicts going on; we are an outsider for whom all this has no value and yet to all the people involved in that place it's all terribly real and important. We are not a part of it, however, we are not caught up in the value system.

One can also see enlightenment as simply growing up; as an adult one stops being able to play with dolls and toys in the same way that one did when one was a child, it becomes impossible. It's also like having solved a puzzle that everyone else is still deeply involved in trying to unravel; you can see the answer whereas everyone else is anguishing and fretting and rushing about and discussing how to find it. Or that lovely feeling of understanding a clue in a crossword – when you have got it and the letters all fit in the right places: "Ah! I see!"

At the enlightenment, the Buddha stepped out of the worldly perspective and could see from above the world – *lokuttara*. There is a wonderful passage in the scriptures that describes this insight of the Buddha and the way he saw things after his enlightenment: he saw that the worldly mind cherishes conditioned existence, it cherishes becoming; it opens itself to and welcomes conditioned existence, it welcomes becoming. The urge of the world, of worldly thinking is always to become other: to get to the next thing, to progress, to develop, to have, to keep. It cherishes, relishes conditioned existence but the problem is that what it relishes brings fear and what it fears is pain, because that which is the very basis of conditioned existence is also the basis of suffering.²²

This was the insight that he had with Dependent Origination – he saw how ignorance was the originator of all problems in life; how the reality that we give

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to our thoughts, feelings and emotions, to our memories and perceptions, is the true creator of all our difficulties. He also saw that if we believe in conditioned existence, if we believe in everything that happens in our senses, then we will believe in our suffering and we will possess it, we will own it, it will be ours. But with the ending of clinging, the ending of attachment, then suffering ceases.

This is perhaps a difficult insight to comprehend and really digest. In the same passage he says something like, “Liberation does not come through loving conditioned existence but neither does it come through loving non-existence. One who is liberated, abandons craving for being without relishing non-being...” Now where is that? You do not find that one in the *A-to-Z of London!* “Liberation comes from abandoning craving for being, without relishing non-being.”

The worldly mind can only see that either we are or we are not, something is or is not, but the Buddha is talking from a position which is neither this nor that, neither being nor non-being, neither existence nor non-existence. On hearing this sort of thing maybe our mind starts to go into a flap, just goes blank or thinks, “What on earth is this about? I mean, come on, let’s be serious, let’s hear something useful, shall we?” But from my perspective this is the most useful and powerful tool for insight that we have with which to understand and live our lives.

It is, however, something that is very intangible; conceptually it is not graspable; it evades our intellectual faculties. It is also the very reason why in his lifetime the Buddha was constantly criticized for being a nihilist – because of not saying, “This is the Truth,” and stressing some kind of metaphysical pattern or grand cosmology. Instead he kept talking in terms of Nibbāna, which just means “cooled” or “blown out,” like the blowing out of a flame. Nibbāna can also be translated as “extinction” and to many people the concept seemed nihilistic. “Life has got to have a bit more to it than just extinction to look forward to!” But he refused to go along with the eternalists, people who were philosophically life-affirming, yet he also refused to go along with the annihilationists, those who were philosophically life-denying; he kept pointing at the fact that the Truth is other than either of those two fixed positions.

There is a lovely story from the Theravāda tradition concerning a seeker called Kāmanīta.²³ He, having heard of the Buddha’s reputation, was passing through Rājagaha on his way to meet him at Jeta’s Grove in Sāvatti. At nightfall he put up in a potter’s house; little did he know at the time that the monk that he was sharing his lodging with that night was the Buddha himself.

Kāmanīta, after a while, started enthusiastically telling his fellow lodger how



he was on his way to meet the Buddha. The Buddha sat there listening and didn't let on who he was; "Tell me about this great master and his teaching," he said. So Kāmanīta goes on for some time, telling the story of his own life and extolling all the wonders of the Buddha's Dhamma, and how he teaches the path of bliss and eternal happiness.

Finally he said, "Well, I've talked for long enough, you tell me about your life. What is your philosophy? Who is your teacher? What do you proclaim as the truth?" The Buddha started to speak, saying, "I will, in return for your narrative, unfold to you the doctrine of the Buddha." He described the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the origin of suffering, cessation of suffering and the Path; he expounded on *anicca*, impermanence and *anattā*, selflessness. As he began, Kāmanīta was looking quite interested and taking it all in but after a while he began to think, "This guy is a bit of a sour-puss... this isn't the Master's teaching as I understand it; well, never mind, he's got a right to think as he does."

As the Buddha continued Kāmanīta got more and more uncomfortable. All that this monk was saying to him seemed to hang together logically and it felt disturbingly right, but seemingly it had a horrible negative life-denying streak to it: all about extinction and cessation, and with no promise of "eternal and blessed life" after death. His mind was still heavily programmed towards the idea of eternal happiness so, by the time the Buddha got on to *anattā*, Kāmanīta was decidedly agitated and did not know what to do. The monk's exposition was obviously flawless but Kāmanīta's heart was fixed on the fact that he must be incorrect, so he thought, "What he is saying is all wrong! This is bad philosophy. The Buddha is the great teacher, he teaches absolute bliss for eternity. I am going to get the teaching directly from him. I should forget this guy, he really does not know what he is talking about." The Buddha finishes speaking and sees that Kāmanīta is a bit agitated.

Finally, in a subdued tone Kāmanīta asks him, "Have you heard all this before from the mouth of the perfect Buddha himself?"

At this point a smile plays around the Master's lips. If he is to be brutally honest, since his teaching had contained spontaneously-arisen insights and expressions, he finds that the appropriate answer is, "No, brother, I cannot in truth say I have."

Greatly relieved to hear this, Kāmanīta reassures himself that they will be able to meet the Buddha in person soon and that this monk's mistaken and destructive conception of the Buddha's teaching will be set straight.

Kāmanīta never realizes his mistake – not until much later anyway, but that's

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another story... The Buddha, when asked about him said, “Foolish as an unreasonable child was the pilgrim Kāmanīta, he took offence at the Teaching...”; in this lifetime his karmic obstructions were too dense to enable him to see what was right in front of him.

Ajahn Chah often said that this is a position that we regularly find ourselves in – face to face with the Buddha, sharing a room together, spending hours and hours deep in conversation and not realizing who this is. The truth of life is staring us in the face but because we have already got programmed with something else that we want and expect, we are missing out on the lessons that life is actually able to teach us.



What we need to understand, then, is what this knowledge was that the Buddha was pointing to. Firstly, it's necessary to understand what we mean by the word existence – clinging to existence and clinging to being or non-being. The word “existence” actually means “to stand out”; that which exists stands out, it protrudes, it is something which comes out, like a branch coming out of a tree. What the Buddha is pointing to is that, as long as we are talking in terms of existence or even non-existence (which is as if instead of coming out of the front door we have just gone out of the back door), both are taking a fixed position about some solid thing – there is still a separate “thingness” there. What the Buddha is pointing to is that which does not come forth, that which is Home, that which is the basis, the root. “Existence,” therefore, means a condition of nature, mental or physical, and what the Buddha is pointing to here is the Unconditioned, that which does not stand out, that which is not created, that which is not born or dying.

This is perhaps a bit hard to grasp but it is a very important point: as long as we are talking about something “existing” it does not mean that that is the only reality. An experience is an excursion out from the Unconditioned through a pattern of events, back to the Unconditioned, like water rising from the sea, falling on the mountains, running down through the streams into the rivers and back to the sea. It is an excursion of existence; a lifetime is just an excursion, so is a thought – it is something which arises from the Unconditioned, from the space of the mind and dissolves back into it again.

When something “exists” it has a false independence, a false individuality, because at that time, it seems to be of a different and separate substance to all



other things. When we believe in separate existence then we are giving solidity to that which is actually transparent, ephemeral, merely an element of the infinite patterns of consciousness in the mind. So the Buddha is pointing to the Unconditioned as the basis for reality. The Buddha's enlightenment was awakening to this Unconditioned nature of the basis of life; this was the dimension, the position from which he was seeing.

In this respect, then, those aspects of life, like the material, manifest world, that we celebrate and which are so important become the basis for the realization of the Unconditioned; the conditioned is needed in order to realize the Unconditioned. Through the agency of a human life and a human body, the Unconditioned can be realized. This process is a ripening or a transition, a transformation of the life spirit, the life force – the *jīvita*. The conditioned, the green, is infertile but becomes the basis for that which ripens into the gold, like a field of corn: the green of life ripens as the gold of wisdom, civilization and true knowledge. The *lokiya* becoming the basis for the realization of the lokuttara, these two always exist in relationship to each other and the transformation, the ripening of the one to allow the realization of the other is what, in Buddhism, is called stream entry.

This is also called “the change of lineage” – when we see through our attachment to the body, to the mind, to ourself and to the world, it's known as a change of lineage because, rather than looking upon our physical parents as our origin and the source of our being, we see that the true Origin of all is the Unconditioned mind. This is the source of all creation – as Thomas Merton puts it, “The living law that rules the universe is nothing but the secret gravitation that draws all things to God as to their centre. Since all true art lays bare the action of this same law in the depths of our own nature, it makes us alive to the tremendous mystery of being, in which we ourselves, together with all other living and existing things, come forth from the depths of God and return again to Him.”²⁴

So, rather than placing ultimate value in the products and activities of the manifest, existent world, we learn to see that the saccadhamma – the Ultimate Reality of our own nature – is the source of all true value. When the need arises, we act, but when there's no need we are still – and whether there is activity or not the essential nature of the saccadhamma remains the same. It doesn't have to prove its worth by taking a certain form, or any form at all; the sea is still the sea whether it's rough or placid, gold still has the nature of gold whatever shape we make it. So, in this process of realization we are affirming the very source

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of life – the Uncreated, Unconditioned – rather than making value judgments about waves or their absence on the surface. The source of our life is the source of the whole universe – the heart of the universe is your heart – so, far from the Buddha-Dhamma being a life-denying, negative philosophy, it is actually the most earth-shaking, silent roar of YES!!! – it is just avoiding making a fuss about the secondary details and attending to the essence instead. It is a philosophy of the ultimate aesthetic: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty...”²⁵ – one who has arrived at Release knows the truly Beautiful.



The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...”

Part 5: Edfu, Esna & the Valley of the Kings and Queens

Luxor ~ December 7th

WE PUSHED OFF from the dock at Kom Ombo at a chilly 6:00 a.m. The air is still but carries with it the deep damp of the river basin in December; the power of Ra diminishes as it reaches its lowest point of the year, which will soon be here.

Ninety-five percent of the other boatels had already departed the day before so come the dawn there were few others moored here.

Light rises rapidly over the pylons of the temple on the hilltop; it ignites the riverbank dunes with a golden-copper glow and the life of the Nile people flows into action once more – another day in the heart of the world. It’s a rich life – reed cutters line up their stems for the current project; a man rides a donkey, sugarcane laden, at a trot along the sandy shore. Sun dries the dates, a camel chews her breakfast, kids wave frantic cheerful hellos with all their voice.

By the time we reach Edfu, at 10:00 a.m., the morning has turned hazy. After some leisurely hours on the upper deck – “Another day in paradise” – there is a clustering of energies in the lobby, and off we all go again.

The temple of Horus at Edfu was constructed over a nearly 200-year span, from 237 BCE to 57 BCE, the holy of holies having been built there first as is usual. Horus is the falcon-headed son of Isis; Her-Bak is a nickname for him (“Chick-pea”) as that humble pulse has the cast of a falcon-face to its form. I had been reading the Schwaller de Lubicz books, entitled *Her-Bak*, that follow the fictional life story of a gifted youth who becomes a temple priest in ancient Egypt. The books are mostly a vehicle for describing Egyptian religious life (i.e., short on plot, long on mythology and theology), as de Lubicz

was an Egyptologist rather than a novelist, and sometimes arcane to the point of impenetrability – as Ajahn Vimalo put it, with inimitable concision, "It's eesoterick, innit?"

Although Horus is the protector god, as well as that of youth, his temple was itself protected from destruction by a millennium or so of silt. It was uncovered in the 19th Century by the Frenchman Auguste Mariette. Perhaps the great god knew that his temple would be well cared for now and that the protection it needed would be brought about in other ways than a silt-cloak 30 metres deep.

It had 404 priests for each of the three seasons of the year and this particular spot was considered especially auspicious as this was where the final battle between good (Horus) and evil (Seth) took place – naturally Horus came out the winner. As everything is symbolic in a temple, and as it is supposed to be a representation of the universe, the mud brick walls that still surround it were built in a wave-like form, to show that the temple has arisen like Ra, the Sun God, as he emerged from the primordial waters that existed before all began.

The key statue of the deity was the small one (only 52 cm tall) that resided in the holy of holies, placed in the smallest of chambers at the farthest end of the complex, rather than any of the bigger statues out front that greet all new arrivals.

The succession of spaces, as one enters, has progressively lower ceilings and higher floors the deeper one penetrates toward the centre. Only the high priest was allowed to go into that innermost chamber, the whole arrangement being symbolic of a deepening initiation into the teachings and the growth of wisdom. It was also set up this way so that, "The god could see what everyone was doing but no one could see him," as Tarek put it. On festival days this small image of the deity would be brought out from the sanctum sanctorum, on a ceremonial boat, but the rūpa itself would still remain hidden in a case, "So that the common people would not mistake the image for the god itself," a misunderstanding that the priests worked hard to prevent.

These traditions, symbols and practices all seemed eminently wise and useful, although they, of course, could be misunderstood and misused as much as in any religious form. However, it seemed that the priests' basic understanding of spiritual reality was very keen. It also seemed to fit quite easily into the Buddhist understanding of things but one would need to learn more and actually apply some of their practices to find out if that was so for sure.

One other principle that seemed to resonate, particularly with Tibetan Buddhist beliefs, was the way they positioned their windows so that the shift-



ing sunlight would play over certain prayers inscribed on the walls: in the morning shining on one lot and in the evening on those prayers appropriate for that time. They constructed the temple so that, even *sans* priests and kings, when only the stones of the temple remained, as today, the sunlight falling on the written prayers would activate them and release their power into the universe – just as the Tibetans believe, with respect to prayer flags and *mani*-stones, prayer-wheels powered by wind, water or hand, that the flapping of the flag, the touch of the breeze on the stones or the turn of the wheel releases those same prayers into the cosmos, regardless of whether any human is involved after the making and setting of the flag, the stone or the wheel.



We leave Edfu's temple at the time of the noon call to prayer; the boat is underway at 1:00 and the river carries us smoothly once again. Ajahn Vimalo and I are up on deck all afternoon – the heart keen not to miss a minute of this. Huge factories and mud brick hovels blend with cattle grazing the waterside meadows and the *imams'* afternoon calls to prayer.

The river seems to broaden before us. Barren, rocky mountains rise on the eastern horizon while rich fields of sugarcane glow iridescent, close to the water. Towns, minarets, grazing goats, camels in the backyard – a man takes a rest beneath a palm, another paddles a dinghy and three women in black stroll together along the riverside path – a trail that has been there 5000 years. Other cruising boatels pass us; our superstructure of awnings gets cleverly slanted down by a system of hinges as we glide beneath a low bridge, then gets repositioned again once we are through – water, rock, greenery between, cyan cupola above – it's a supremely simple and elemental world here.



We arrive at Esna at around 4:00 – it's a sleepy town and no tour is planned for today. Luang Por and I stay on the upper deck while the others all go off to explore. We muse on the subject of, “We live a very privileged life,” reflecting on the use of the blessings of good karma, how the Buddha didn't shun rich offerings – indeed was ready to be misunderstood and criticized for accepting them, “...these are not sought by the Tathāgata, or the monks and nuns, they are freely offered so they can be freely accepted and used.”

It's no accident that Buddhas appear when conditions in a society are most stable and ripe. And it's then that those of the greatest pāramitā get born – advantageous conditions are not just a bonus for the lucky, they can be used to good effect and for the blessing and benefit of the many.

“People criticized the money that was spent on the Temple at Amaravati – but if it's seen as a gift for everyone to use, rich or poor, then its value as a spiritual resource is infinite,” said Luang Por.

As we stood there, leaning against the railing, the sun sank behind an unfinished apartment building across the way – the last rays flourishing in a burst of glory, beams forming in the dust, and mosquitoes clouding in their path. It was a glorious, temporary temple to Amun-Ra, the greatest of gods – and to whom no permanent temples were ever raised, the sun itself being its own supremely evident symbol of the deity. At that moment that most humble of structures, bare concrete beams with rebar bristles poking out unkemptly, was transformed into the holiest of spaces – if only one could see it – Ra, the Great One can be found in naked concrete, if you look.

It may sound like a feeble excuse for enjoying the life of the rich whilst claiming to be a renunciant but perhaps it's the capacity to find the divinity everywhere that is the real state of privilege, and one that can't be bought for money. If one dedicates all experience, all intended actions to the benefit of others, and holds the entirety in the embrace of selfless awareness, like Nūt, the sky goddess, arching over the whole world beneath her, *then* the heart is pure and that which is offered is delighted in, used well and without attachment or presumption, becomes a basis for the realization of Nibbāna and, moreover, carries with it muditā for the happiness of the donor – thus everybody in the equation wins.

Often it is the force of idealism that produces the greatest criticism of the use of worldly possibilities: “How can you enjoy such food when there is even one hungry mouth in the world!” Compassion is not a state of suffering, and to be able to enjoy both having and *not* having with an equal heart is the Buddha's way. “You have conquered, like good men!”²⁶ said the Buddha when, during a famine, the monks ate only horse-bran, without complaint.

“To be attached to idealism is the sure direct path to dukkha,” said Luang Por. The sun set the far mountains alight with the fire of molten bronze, as the earth swung round and hid it one more time – another day closes on the Nile.

Our finale of the light hours, before solitude and the dark folded in, was a film of the dismantling and rebuilding of Abu Simbel, Philæ and many other



ancient Egyptian temples. Cutting the rock with cables or saws, amputating the face of Rameses the Great – Ozymandias himself – and hoisting it with a crane up 60 feet. It was a little undignified, in a sense, but wholly in accord with His Majesty’s desire for immortality. The sight was unforgettable – human ingenuity and diligence (and the generosity of those privileged nations donating funds to UNESCO) all coming together to make the miracle happen. And the result is that the temples live today, Abu Simbel and all the others, rescued for us to rejoice in our precious human heritage.

Esna ~ December 8th

BREAKFAST AT 6:00 – sunrise over the Nile behind the boatels at Esna dock. All is placid and serene – white birds fish for their breakfast too, diving to skim the water’s surface.

The day’s journey takes us on a bus to Luxor, one of the ancient capitals of Egypt and home of the Valley of the Kings and Queens. This is the site of the type of royal tombs that were adopted after the pyramids were found (irrespective of their vast bulk and intricately sealed and booby-trapped passages) to be so easily robbed. The Pharaohs had hoped to hide all their funeral treasures out here in the rocky canyons but, even though they covered the entrances to the tombs and hid all the earthworks, still all but King Tutankhamun’s had (apparently) been found and stolen. “Maybe they didn’t find them all...” suggests Luang Por. And it’s true – the tomb complex of Rameses II’s many sons was only found 13 years ago and it’s the biggest construction in the entire valley. At least 150 rooms had been discovered as of 2006, and the excavation work is still in progress. Kent Weeks, a professor from Chicago, found it all, “... at the end of a collapsed tunnel to nowhere.”



Round here things are much as they were 3000 or 4000 years ago – the clothing, the ways of farming, the tools – little has changed since the time of the Pharaohs. One thing that has come about in recent years however, apart from the great locks on the river and the canal to Luxor, is that the Egyptian government has carried out major agricultural reforms. Prior to this time 7% of the people owned 90% of the land – with the reforms, much of this was confis-

cated and five-acre lots were given out to many of the poorer families.

We follow the arrow-straight lines of the canal north and a little east to Luxor. Barren mountains murmur along the eastern horizon and mud brick, rectangular houses speckle the waterside. With the coming of the Republic education was socialized and made compulsory so the largest buildings we see are the local schools – each one serving two or three villages.

Sky light reflects in the mirror-water of the canal – like the Nile, it seems very clean and well-kept. This is hardly surprising, what with 5000 years of respect, love and mythology of water backing up the basic need to preserve and to survive. As locks control the flow of water, there are times of year when the canals need to be tended, flushed out and restored. During those times no boats can go on them – this is why we're in the bus, not on the water. It's only a few weeks a year but this is one of those times.

The old Grand Lock built by the British is now a bridge; the new lock that has replaced it was built in 1994. The counterpart to such impressive, if rare, modern presences is the ubiquity of donkeys and their carts – some are scrawny, forlorn and repeatedly whacked; others are chipper and trot briskly, the rider's legs adangle on either side, lush green vegetables in bundles across the rump.

Once we reach the Valley – along with 40 other tour buses – we hear that Ahmenhotep III established his place here, also Rameses II, III and IV, Tutankhamun – so many of the famous names of the Middle Kingdom.

Their magnificent gatherings of wealth and power – buried and hidden in the shelter of this valley topped by a natural pyramid and thus marking it for this holy purpose – have all scattered, nevertheless great richness still remains. The tombs we visit this morning are painted in colours still so fresh that the brushstrokes of the artisans of 1500 BCE are still plainly visible – as if the painting of the murals and the hieroglyphs was carried out only a few years ago. The robbers left the walls, the spaces, and thus the legacy of love and skill that crafted all of these preparations for the eternal lives of their rulers; all these are still here with us.

Tarek explained to us something of the ancient mythology around the death and life processes: Ra is the creator and thus eternal; the sun, his symbol, is reborn each morning after a night-long battle with evil, divided into 12 phases to match the hours; Nût gives birth to the new day at dawn and the cycle of birth and death forever revolves.

They believed in resurrection, *not* reincarnation. Many elements must come



together to ensure resurrection and eternal happiness, including: the body; the name; the shadow; the physical heart; the Ka, the “divine double” or life force; and the *Ba*, the non-physical attributes, or soul, represented as a bird.

The Ka was represented by a statue, thus four of the elements had to be physically present in the tomb – the Ba, or soul, was the wild card. It had to be subject to judgment before the gods to see if one’s deeds had been good and pure. The god Anubis takes one into the Hall of Judgement, and oversees the weighing of one’s heart, which is associated with the Ba, against a feather, the symbol of Ma’at (goddess of truth, justice and discipline). The result is recorded by the god Thoth (who is “a nice ibis,” according to Ajahn Vimalo). One also had to make a “negative confession” – the gods asked 42 questions to which the newly deceased had to answer, “No, Your Divine Majesty.” If the soul passed 12 stages (whether quickly or slowly, it didn’t matter) then the Ba was united with the Ka in the afterlife, creating an entity known as an *Akh*, or transfigured spirit, which then met Osiris, the Lord of the Dead, and was released into eternal happiness.

If the heart failed the test, being heavier than the feather:

- 1) the heart was attacked and eaten by Ammit, “The Devourer,” who had the head of a crocodile, the torso of a lion, and the hindquarters and legs of a hippopotamus, which were considered by the ancient Egyptians to be the most dangerous animals;
- 2) the body was burned continually on a lake of fire;
- 3) the name of the deceased was erased and forgotten;
- 4) last but not least, the Ka became separated forever and was lost, “in the chaos of darkness.”

By the way, the deceased always passed the tests, because all the necessary spells were written in the *The Chapters for the Coming Forth by Day*, now known more commonly as *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

Human life was enjoyed but seen to be very brief in the face of eternity; the preparations for this eternity were therefore given extreme priority.



“We are entering the Valley of Death,” pronounced Luang Por, and even though it was hot and rocky, bone dry or drier, the smile on his face and the bounce in his stride belied the solemn utterance.

All the tombs here, in the Valley of the Kings and Queens, were established between 1500 and 1100 BCE. So many come to visit nowadays that the authorities only open a few of the tombs at a time, since just the moisture exhaled and perspired from the tourists' bodies have caused damage to paintings that had passed the previous 3500 years otherwise unscathed.

After an hour in the tombs of the kings, Tawrsset and Sekhnakt, Tuthmoses III, and Rameses III (“the last great Pharaoh of Egypt,” as Ajahn Vimalo tells us), we transfer to the Valley of the Queens. Far fewer people are here. It's a cavernous high-walled cleft and was also used for the children of the Pharaohs. The younger ones, who died in infancy (a common result of all the intermarriage), were put in simple chambers in the ground; adults were given grander homes, like Amunherkhepshep, son of Rameses III. We also entered the tomb of Queen Titi. Both of these were quite humble compared to those of the kings – no surprise – and it was a shame that the tomb of Nefertari, beloved wife of “Ram the Deuce,” as Edward called him, was closed to visitors this day. This is the one in the Valley of the Queens that contains the finest array of surviving murals.

The hiding of treasure and the capacity of robbers to find it seems to be an eternal dance, as potently repetitive as the rising of the sun. If there are objects of value, and *you* have and *I* don't, something is likely to pull me toward that – especially if the safety and welfare of my family can be vastly improved by a lucky find.

It's obvious that the hunter-gatherer spirit is still strong within us, first coming for perfume, silver and gold, and nowadays – still on a worldly level – for pictures and experiences to impress our friends with. We go to where we'll find the goodies most easily – that's our nature and blameless in its own way.

In the Dhamma realm, correspondingly, we are trained to seek states of concentration and virtue, qualities of non-attachment, company of the wise – we train ourselves to go to *these* valleys and to unearth the treasures we can find by patiently digging there, sometimes in equally hidden and unexpected places. And, just like the tomb-robbers, you have faith that the “gold” is there and, even if it's hidden up a crag and down a tunnel, like the tomb of Tuthmoses III, if you are diligent and attentive and sustain your efforts with wisdom, the gold will be found eventually.



Out past the mud brick village that was, only last week, evacuated of its



inhabitants (families having probably been there since 1000 BCE) so that the archaeologists could dig beneath. Past the twin statues – the Colossi of Memnon, that we had visited on our way in, now seriously chewed on by the elements and peoples of the centuries and currently a fine roost for the local pigeon population. We pause a moment for a view of the temple of Hatshepsut, who ruled for 22 years, and was one of the only female Pharaohs, and then we pull in at an alabaster factory and emporium.

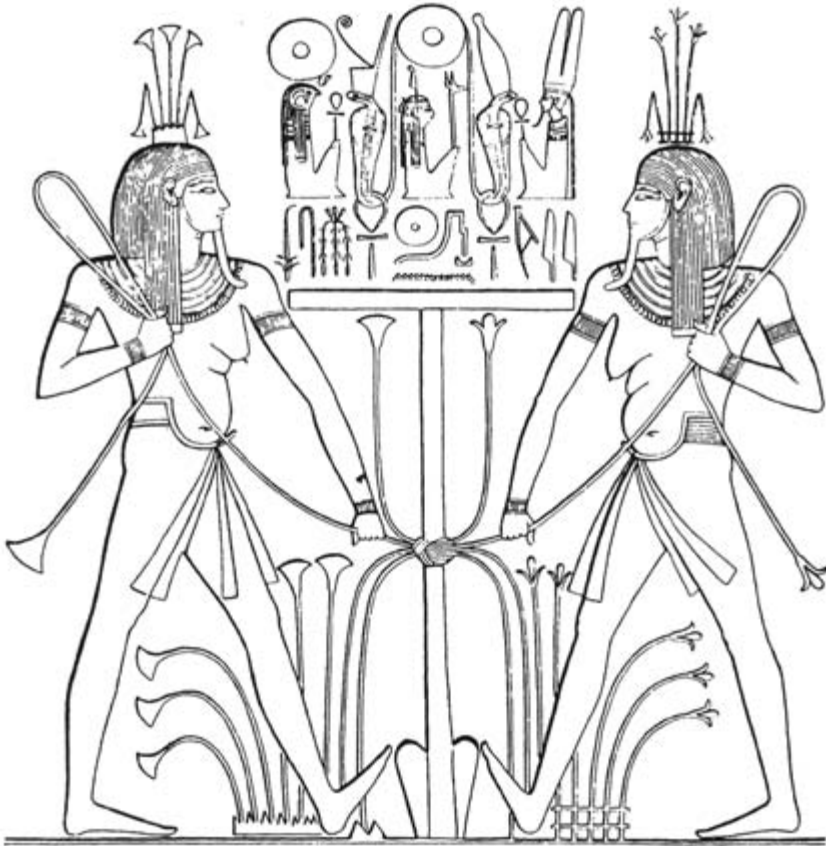
This stone being so abundant here, its carving is the principal local industry. The fronts of the local workshops are painted with murals as bold as in the tombs and temples, these colours brighter but the lines less true and balanced. They also have a wealth of figures and vessels in lapis lazuli, malachite and even amber. These dry mountains and barren marches hold more treasures than even the robbers knew about – you only have to find the right rock and remove the pieces that are not the smooth-flanked vase... only...

The last call of the morning and I'm confessing to the first flush of being "templed-out." There's a glazing over for a moment, a phasing out of attention as the worthy Tarek tells us of the story of Medinet Hebu Temple: of its Syrian characteristics; how it's different from the Greek style, having fortress-like elements on the outer regions; its having been built in the era of invasions by the Libyans and Hittites; how the battle scenes are unique in the outer courtyard; the deep-cut hieroglyphs that came with the need to express power... it all begins to recede a little.

That is until Tarek finishes and Ajahn Vimalo and I head off alone and he gives me a private tour of all sorts of the temple's uniquenesses – where Rameses III bestowed gifts to the worthy; where he relieved himself, a few yards from the throne – suddenly it all comes alive once more. The Cambridge blue ceilings, the spreading vulture wings, the gigantic doors, colossal flags – the life of the place and its people, the work that created it all emerged, in quiet glory amid the Friday Sabbath crowds and tourists.

We ate on the bus and rode home to the ship in the midday glare – the afternoon was open so we met at tea and then took ourselves away for the evening each to our own places. Edward paid for an hour at an internet café on the waterfront, so I caught up with a few essentials and stray requests, and passed on greetings to Abhayagiri.

Even though we have only been in Egypt for a week, that truth seems hard to credit – time really does not exist for we have been here so much longer than that, and it is all here in us, all along.



The symbol of union, *sma*. The plant of the North, the papyrus (beneath the red crown, on the right) is bound to the centre with the plant of the South, the lotus (beneath the white crown, on the left).

*From an inscription at the Temple of Karnak,
illustration by Lucy Lamy*



Meaning in Myth

From a public talk given at Amaravati, September 1993

THE TITLE FOR THIS TALK is “Meaning in Myth” – because of the work of people like Freud, James Joyce and Joseph Campbell, this is quite a popular subject in current times. In this century, there has been a whole re-emergence of the understanding of myth and what its usefulness is, what its place is in our culture and in our way of thinking.

Oftentimes within our ordinary patterns of speech, we take the word “myth” to mean something which is false or untrue, or a fabulous lie; it is quite common to say, “Oh, that is a myth!” or in books such as *The Myth of Mental Illness* or *The Myth of Freedom*, the word is used to indicate that this is not real; this idea of freedom or mental illness is not the truth. If we look more deeply at what we mean by myth, we can see that in its original purpose it is not just pointing towards something which is fanciful or untrue, but it is more a pattern which is symbolic, evocative of a greater reality. A mythical tale is not necessarily aiming to be factual or historical, it is simply an archetype which is portraying some common experience of humanity, some common experience of our mind. In that way it is not intended or necessary for it to be historically accurate in order for it to be something which is useful, meaningful and helpful to us.

Looking at any religious scripture or at legends and mythical tales, we can see that there are basically three different strands involved: firstly, there is the aspect of archetype, there is an image which is being portrayed of a common human experience; secondly, there is the historical aspect, i.e., events that actually happened – if a person like Ulysses really lived, or what events really occurred in the life of Jesus Christ or the Buddha; thirdly, there is the psychological aspect, how that same pattern is represented in our minds – how the events of the life of the Buddha or of a particular story match our own experience, what does it say

Meaning in Myth

about our own psyche. Through any kind of tale, any kind of religious scripture or suchlike form, there are these three different strands involved.

In modern times, with the arising of analytical study by historians, theologians, archaeologists, anthropologists, etc., searching for what is true in terms of what can be historically and scientifically verified, it has been assumed that if you can not pin an event down to a definite date and certain historically corroborated characters, then it is not true or it is to be discarded.

From my own limited perspective I think that this is taking things too literally, because even if one can prove that it was impossible that the Buddha was enlightened at that particular spot or that Jesus was definitely not born on the 25th of December or that Jesus never existed at all, still there can be some usefulness to the story. This is because it can match experiences common to all human beings. Stories such as these are carried through time, we remember them because they have meaning for us in that they are symbolic of aspects of our own nature. The reason why we remember myths then is that they give us an inroad, an access point into our heart. They are pointing to general experiences of life and, in making them conscious by graphically portraying those events, those triumphs and crises, the comedies and tragedies of heroes and villains in history, we can see the events of our own mind occurring. It is by making things conscious, by bringing them into our minds, that we can begin to objectify them, understand them and learn to harmonize with them.

I found out a while ago that in ancient Greece the theatres, which had strong religious connotations, and the hospitals were always built close to each other. Spiritual and physical health were both very closely related to the use of theatre; it was not just entertainment, but rather the comedies and tragedies that were portrayed in Greek drama were there as a type of psychiatric treatment, as a way of helping to understand and balance out our mental life. This is very much how one should understand the use of myth and legendary tales: they can be employed as a way of understanding our own life in a direct and complete way.



Since we live in a very multi-cultural society, we are in contact with a great variety of influences; we are surrounded by different stories and we have access to ones that not only come from our own European or Asian backgrounds but we live in the middle of a whole confluence of different cultural patterns. One can



see that there are fundamental human questions, problems or qualities that appear all over the world. Different traditions, different groups have evolved stories and ideas to help symbolize these and to bring them into consciousness effectively.

Wherever humanity has appeared, one of the questions that has arisen is, “How did we get here? How did humanity appear? What made the cosmos happen?” Everywhere in the world, each culture has its own creation myths of how the universe came into being. Then, even if we have some sort of idea of how and why we got here, the next question is, “What am I supposed to do now? What happens next? What should I do with my life?”

In the Judeo-Christian tradition there is the creation story of Genesis, the story of God creating the world. (Somebody sent me a postcard a couple of days ago from Israel saying, “Five thousand seven hundred and fifty-four years ago God said, ‘Let there be light.’ Happy new year!” I thought that was a very sweet way to put it!)

Scientists and historians can say, “This is absolutely ridiculous; there is no way that the universe could have been created 5754 years ago, we can easily prove that was not how it was!” and one can discard such a story as being absurd just as one can any other aspect of scripture. We can dissect it, take it apart, say that it has all been cobbled together from a variety of sources and that it is therefore invalid or unimportant. Rather than looking in that way, however, the whole usefulness of a myth is to apply it reflectively so that it works on an intuitive level.

If we compare this story with the Buddhist tradition we find that the Buddha avoided such proclamations; he did not make that kind of story prominent. He is one of the few religious teachers that did not make very much of a creation myth. In fact, he made a point of saying that the ultimate beginning of things is fundamentally inconceivable – it is one of the imponderable things. Which does not mean to say that he did not know the Truth but rather that this is something that can not be put into thought or word; the thinking mind can not conceive the reality of the situation.

The way that we see the universe in terms of human-centred perceptions of time and space is restricting to the quality of true vision, so the Buddha said we shouldn't bother trying to figure out how it all began. He said something to the effect that if we try to, we will either go crazy or our head will explode into seven pieces. He avoided talking about the ultimate beginning of things²⁷, but then he also said, “If you want to know how a universe comes into being at the start of an aeon, how a universe arises, it's like this...”²⁸ and he describes how first of

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all different beings arise in the high heavenly realms and then as time goes by they appear in lower and lower realms, then the physical world comes into being and eventually reaches a point of degeneration as the universe expands to its fullest extent. It then starts to collapse again – this is called a period of universal expansion and contraction – and such cycles have occurred innumerable times. Interestingly enough, this pattern matches quite well the scientific model of a Big Bang and then a Big Crunch. I find it quite marvellous, however, that the Buddha described this but indicated that this is just the way a universe happens and that this kind of knowledge is not really important.

What the Buddha was trying to point to was that it is not a matter of how it all began in the first place, or how we can develop a universal picture of it, but to recognize how our experience of the world arises; this approach brings it more inside. In the Buddhist approach he talks about the genesis of problems, how our experience of separateness and our difficulties in life arise. So, rather than having an average creation myth, the Buddha taught what is called Dependent Origination, which describes how it comes to be that we experience dissatisfaction or unhappiness in the moment. How do our sense of alienation and our problems arise? And how do our problems cease? That is the significant thing, isn't it? It's not a question of "How does a tree do its thing? How does a star be what it is? Why are electrons the way they are?" Nobody knows, basically!



It is interesting that we can look at the biblical myth of the creation of the world in seven days and at Dependent Origination and find many correspondences. The Buddha describes how ignorance, not understanding the truth of things, is the cause of alienation and dissatisfaction. From ignorance comes the apparent separation of mind and body, and of self and other. Attachment to the senses becomes solidified, which leads to deepening of sense-contact, and the concomitant feelings of pleasure and pain become something that we absorb into and attach to, so that we run away from pain or we chase after pleasure. The mind thus becomes caught up with self-based desire of one sort or another; attaching to that desire then causes us to invest further in trying to possess the beautiful and escape the painful. When the beautiful slips through our fingers or the painful catches up with us, then that is what we call dissatisfaction or dukkha.

It struck me a number of years ago how accurately this model matches the



story in the first three chapters of Genesis: from the Buddhist point of view, ignorance and desire are portrayed as the cause of suffering and alienation, and in the Judaic myth it is pretty much the same.

It has always seemed to me to be a disastrous mistake to think that Genesis is referring to historical events rather than being a meaningful myth to symbolize some deep truths about us. Rather than looking to it to describe the origins of the human race, the Jewish people and so forth, the first three chapters of Genesis seem to be talking about this same process of Dependent Origination: whereby out of God, out of Ultimate Reality, not only the human race arises, with all the creatures, plants and animals of the world, but also so do alienation, suffering, misery and pain.

It is true that the familiar expressions of Dependent Origination all begin with *avijjā*, ignorance; however, as the Ven. Ajahn Mun pointed out, “Ignorance has to have a mother and father just as we do, and we learn from the scriptures that *thītibhūtam* is its mother and father. *Thītibhūtam* refers to the primal – Original Mind.”²⁹

At the source, all there is God – Ultimate Reality. Then, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” I understand that in the Hebrew version of Genesis, rather than “God created” – as a being that acts on a volition – its meaning is more like “Out of God, heaven and earth arose,” which equates more with the kind of pattern that I have been describing. Heaven and earth, here and there, represents the basic division and separateness of *sankhāra*; heaven and earth are set apart from each other. The spirit of God moving on the waters is like the arising of consciousness in that world. The land is then separated from the sea and all the creatures are brought forth into the world. Here again is the same sort of branching, complexifying elaboration of the pattern to the point where there are first creatures and then Adam and Eve living in the garden.

This takes us through the levels from *viññāna*, *nāmarūpa*, *salāyatana*, *phassa* and *vedanā* – the mind and body, the six senses, sense-contact, to the level of feeling. So that, symbolically, living in the Garden of Eden is like living at the level of pure feeling, being responsive to the world in a state of innocence and invulnerable pleasantness where we are not being driven by desire or fear but just being responsive to life.

If the mind is really sharp and aware, we can actually live at that level of pure sensitivity where we are not driven by desire, fear or aggression. Ajahn Buddhadasa would regularly encourage this – to try and cut the cycle between feeling and desire, before feeling turns into desire. If we can just live at the level

of feeling, where we are mindfully responding to pleasure and pain, attraction and aversion, not acting on desire, then we are in Eden before the Fall – we are able to live in a contented, blissful, naked and harmonious way.

Then the serpent arrives on the scene... the fruit of the tree of knowledge is advertised and Eve is persuaded; this is the arising of desire. Following that desire, the attachment to it leads to the choice to eat the fruit, *upādāna* or grasping. The actual eating of it is *bhava*, the moment of knowledge arriving – the impact of getting what you are after. The *bhava* leading to birth is when we hear the voice of the Old Man,

“Adam, where are you?”

“Oh God!”

The point of no turning back has been passed; they have emerged into raw knowledge, which then leads to the two of them being driven from the Garden. Alienation, separateness, “All the days of your life you will toil with sweat and bring forth children in pain...”³⁰ and so on.

So one sees the same pattern being portrayed in this mythological form. For all of its faults, it must be a primary myth that exists in our society because of its ability to identify that same pattern. It is a tying together of the relationship between absolute transcendent Truth, selfish desire, and alienation, suffering.

You might think that all of this is complete nonsense; however, one can also see that these are simply different ways that we can use to describe and understanding the arising of suffering.

The other of the two questions – “Where do we go from here?” or “What do we do now?” – is dealt with in the central myth of Christianity in the crucifixion and the resurrection. That is the crucial point of the life of Christ and the main symbol of the religion; the cross is always used in Christianity as the central image. The scientists, theologians and historians all have a great time taking apart the crucifixion and resurrection story. It may be completely unprovable factually but it is much more significant if we think of it in terms of what it might be symbolizing and embodying. This event is the parallel of the Buddha’s enlightenment, the experience under the *bodhi* tree; both are about the conquest of death. The crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus show how, through the experience of suffering, persecution and humiliation, the sense of self is transfixed, pinned down, and has to be completely transcended for the resurrection, for salvation, to occur. The self or the ego had to die completely for the deathless Christ-nature to be realized.

In the Buddhist scriptures and commentaries, the accounts of the enlighten-



ment under the bodhi tree depict the assault by the hordes of Māra; his name means “Death” and he is also the Lord of Illusion. The Buddha-to-be is attacked by the forces of fear, the forces of desire and then the forces of duty. First an army of demons comes at him, then the daughters of Māra, trying to seduce him, and finally the visions of his family – his old father trying to call him back to Kapilavastu to take over the throne. Just as the crucifixion and resurrection are, these are pointing to experiences within our everyday life: the Buddha symbolizes the mind in all of us which is awake, which is pure and aware; that mind is constantly impinged on, assaulted by the hordes of Māra in perhaps more subtle and not so graphic ways but certainly we are assailed by feelings of fear, feelings of desire and feelings of responsibility. Just like the Buddha, the only way we can skilfully respond to that is to sit unmoving under the bodhi tree of awareness and say, “I know you, Māra!” What causes Māra to be unable to harm the Buddha is simply that sense of recognition and awareness; death is powerless against it. Similarly with Jesus on the cross, when he completely surrenders, he lifts up his head and says, “It is finished.” *Evam* – his work has been fulfilled and the illusion of death destroyed. As Ajahn Buddhadasa has put it: “The Christian cross can be seen as the word ‘I’ deleted.”



One can take a myth, a story, in many different ways and it is always up to each individual to see how these different images affect us. In a way, however, because these are talking about deep and complex aspects of our own being, the patterns can help and guide us even if conceptually we cannot follow it or put it all together. Stories point out directions for us and tell us what to expect in many different ways.

Another of the most famous and powerful myths in our time is the story of the journey home of Ulysses from the Trojan wars. This story and its archetypal value is something that James Joyce picked up on in his great novel. He portrayed it as a journey through a wild night in Dublin in 1904 but, in the same way, he was trying to take what is a universal symbol and put it into a context of ordinary everyday life to make our life more understandable. This kind of representation is talking about you and me and the events of our own world, our own minds. Similarly in George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Pygmalion*, originally a Greek myth about a sculptor who falls in love with a form he has carved and whom Aphrodite eventually brings to life as Galatea, Professor Higgins falls in

love with his creation, a cockney girl who, for a bet, he trains to behave and speak like a duchess.

The story of Ulysses contains powerful religious symbolism: in many ways our spiritual life is built around the sense of longing for home – we feel a bit like Adam and Even outside the Garden, we have been chucked out, we feel separated from other people and uncertain of ourselves, we feel insecure and have a sense of longing. We long for security and comfort, we long for that feeling of “Ahh... we’re HOME” – like returning after a long journey or just that feeling of getting back to our home after work. It is that same heartfelt quality that is expressed in this story – “Ahh... safe, we’re home at last, this is *good*.” This is a religious symbol in that a spiritual homecoming is a realization of the true nature of what we are. The experience of being pulled constantly homeward, that quality of longing for home, is in a way the spiritual longing that we have for Reality, for completeness, for fulfilment.

It is interesting that in the story of Ulysses it takes him ten years to make what is, if you look at it on a map, a journey that should have taken him just a few weeks. But he is drawn in by all kinds of events both painful, beautiful and disastrous – being attacked and imprisoned or being distracted, seduced, being shipwrecked and so forth. When looking at the trials of his journey and comparing that with our own spiritual life one can say, “Yes! That is what it is like”; sometimes we are beaten up by some angry god, shipwrecked and set loose to float in the ocean. It is also interesting, however, that Ulysses had Athene the Goddess of Wisdom as his protectress, his mentor; she was always there looking out for him and making sure that, even if everything else fell apart, he would somehow manage to survive.

In looking at the different events of his journey, even though it took about ten years, seven years of that were spent in the company of an island of nymphs. Calypso fell madly in love with Ulysses and he lived with her and her companions for seven years. It was a blissful existence: a lovely Mediterranean island, surrounded by beautiful people, an idyllic, dream-like existence, but after seven years of this he feels in his heart, “I want to go home. This is all very lovely but this is not home, I want to go *home* – I have to return to Ithaca.”

I won’t go into all the other aspects of this story, but such things as being trapped by Polyphemus the Cyclops, and being caught between Scylla and Charybdis, the sea monster and the great whirlpool – these all represent the trials and difficulties of our spiritual development, when everything goes wrong and we feel attacked and oppressed. Ajahn Sucitto once compared meditation to



the journey of Ulysses and his sailors past the Sirens. The Sirens represent the desire mind. Ulysses knew that the only way that he and his crew could defeat and get past the Sirens was if one of them could hear the Sirens' song and not be entranced by them. Passing sailors would hear the Sirens singing their beautiful intoxicating songs, promising bliss and knowledge and then would land on the shore of their island. These beautiful sea-nymphs would then turn into terrifying monsters and summarily devour the sailors.

Ajahn Sucitto was commenting one day how the spiritual powers and faculties are very much like Ulysses' crew – they filled their ears with wax so they could not hear the song and then they tied him firmly to the mast. They then rowed past the island and of course the Sirens start calling to them, singing their bewitching song. Ulysses is straining at his ropes trying to break free but the crew just rows on. He is desperately yelling at his crew, saying, “Come on, it's all right, lads! Change of plan, I'm sure this is going to be all right. Untie me!” But the crew just hauls away. The ropes are the Five Precepts and the crew are the Five *Indriya*: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom – these are our spiritual powers, they are the things that power us through even though the desire might be overwhelming. The fickle mind is tied to the mast and screaming – this is what it feels like being on a meditation retreat sometimes, strapped to the mast and screaming to be let out, but it is only by being patient and letting the spiritual powers carry us through that we actually get past the Sirens. This represents how we have the ability, if we have good friends, a moral commitment and the right spiritual powers at our disposal, we can get through the most intoxicating, bedazzling, entrancing pulls upon our hearts.

It is also an interesting aspect of the story of Ulysses that, when he finally arrives back at Ithaca, he is fast asleep – that he is carried there by some friendly, nearby islanders. He has become totally exhausted by this time and, as the story goes, they sail the last stretch then pick him up and carry him onto the beaches of Ithaca. When he awakens there, Athene puts a haze over his eyes so that he cannot recognize where he is. Even though all the way through the story he is referred to as “noble, long-suffering and resourceful,” she realizes that if he wakes up on the beach and finds he is home at last he is going to lose control, he will be so happy he will get careless and is therefore likely to get killed. He has been away by now for twenty years and things have changed on the island. She thus puts a haze over his eyes so that he discovers slowly where he is and that the island has been taken over in his absence. A whole gang of suitors have been trying to win the hand of his Queen Penelope.

He eventually meets up with his son, Telemachus and a few other friends; first of all he is recognized by his dog, who has waited and stayed alive until Ulysses came home and at last, overjoyed when he sees him, finally lies down and dies. His old nurse also recognizes him, from a scar on his leg, but many of his old servants and friends have turned against him and are now helping the suitors and trying to get the most out of the land that they can. Some others, however, like Eumaeus his swineherd, are still faithful – after all this time he is still looking after the pigs. In his disguise as an old man, Ulysses goes and stays with Eumaeus; they sit and talk through the evening, but what really impresses him is that, even though it is late at night and it's dark and cold, Eumaeus says, “I have to go out and look after the pigs, I should not just stay in here chatting.” Symbolically what all this means is that it is only those qualities of being faithful, humble and simple that enable the recognition of Ulysses, the King, to take place.



I will not go into the details but, eventually, all the suitors get killed in a gory finale and Ulysses resumes his throne at last. Thinking about this some years ago, when I happened to be reading *The Odyssey*, it struck me that it was very like the stages of enlightenment: Ulysses leaving Troy and heading for home indicates the entry onto the spiritual path and from there the whole story unfolds as a spiritual analogy. When he arrives on Ithaca, he is home but there is still danger, he still has not completed the task. This is rather like the third level of enlightenment, what is called *anāgāmi*, non-returner – he is home but there is still work to be done. The main opponent, the main obstacle to regaining the throne is what is called *asmimāna* or “the conceit of identity.” This is the final battle: even if we have developed enormous virtue, clarity of mind and purity of heart and we are home, back in Ithaca, if we do not deal with the sense of self, with the conceit of identity in a very intelligent way and we are incautious, then we are going to end up getting skewered by the sense of “I” and we are never going to make it back to the throne. Perfection here is symbolized as the rightful king back on the throne of his kingdom with the country at peace and in harmony.

It struck me that this was very much the final battle of spiritual life. The last three of what are called “the ten fetters,” *asmimāna*, *avijjā* (ignorance) and restlessness, these are the final tasks that are laid out before someone on the



spiritual path; of these, the sense of “I,” the sense of identity, is perhaps the main antagonist that one faces. Confronting it can be a gory business, but with wisdom, symbolized by Athene, on one’s side, with humility, simplicity and faith, the hero of the saga must win out.

You can probably tell I have a fondness for mythology. Actually it was the only kind of thing I read as a child – I was never interested in the usual adventure stories or normal things that boys like – I was buried in fairy tales and myths from the age of about four onwards, so this has always been a main reference point for me in my life. These stories work on an intuitive level; they are there, they are absorbed and they give us models to work with.



It is also interesting to see how myths arise within our own life in unexpected ways and present themselves to give us direction. I remember some years ago Ajahn Kittisaro talking to me about an unusual experience that he had had. He was taken by a friend of his, who is an artist, to visit an exhibition of sculpture in London. This man had said, “There is this incredible sculpture there, you have got to go and see it!” It was Jacob Epstein’s “Jacob and the Angel” that he was referring to, and it was on exhibition in London for a while.

Ajahn Kittisaro said, “You’re joking! We are down here in Devon. We can’t drive all the way up to London to look at a piece of sculpture, that’s ridiculous,” but his friend replied, “You’ve got to see it, it is incredible, amazing,” so, eventually he agreed to go. Now this particular monk used to be a wrestler himself, and when he saw the sculpture, he was stunned. He later described to me the effect it had had on him, and there had obviously been a very strong spiritual message there for him. The two figures, which are physically identical to each other except that one has got wings, are locked together in a hold. He was able to see that Jacob had obviously been trying to go for a certain hold on the Angel. In this manoeuvre you get your arms under the armpits of the other person and then you flip them over – if you can do it, it is very dramatic and you completely defeat the opponent in one glorious slam. But you have to get your balance just right – if you don’t then you put your own position greatly at risk.

In this statue Jacob has obviously been going for this hold, trying to flip the Angel over, and he has lost it. Jacob’s hands are thus now above the Angel’s arms. The hold has just been broken and his hands have flopped down, he has lost the advantage. Meanwhile, the Angel has got him in a bear-hug. Now in a

bear-hug you have to have your hands locked together to crush the chest of the other person, but he noticed that the Angel, having just broken Jacob's hold, rather than the hands being locked together, they were fingertip to fingertip. He realized that the Angel was not crushing him – it was an embrace – and the Angel is looking right towards Jacob with a piercing gaze. Jacob meanwhile is looking up to heaven, so the moment of defeat has actually turned into a moment of embrace and exultation – Jacob thought he had lost, but it wasn't the contest he thought it was!

As he was telling me this story I remembered a dream that I had a little while before. For years I had had a recurring dream, a nightmare of sorts, where I would be in conflict with some people or some other person. I would always be bashing away at them, or trying to knife them or shoot them, chuck rocks at them or something! And the other person would always be just standing or sitting there completely unbothered by what I was doing, just smiling benignly or with a look of: "When is he going to stop this silliness?" There would always be a sense of anxiety, fear in me so that I had to keep this opponent off: "My life is in danger, I have got to keep them away from me!"

The language of myth is the same as the language of dream, and I could see that these dreams were indicating something to me, but at the time I could not figure it out – "What is all this violence? What is going on here? I am not a violent person... am I???" This dream, however, would come back over and over again; every few weeks it would return in one form or another, which was quite disturbing. I could not figure out what it was about. I would think, "Who is this opponent? Who are these people I keep thumping away at, and why are they never the slightest bit bothered by what I am doing to them?" They would never retaliate in these dreams; I would never get hit or hurt by them in any way, but I always seemed to think that they were a terrible danger to me.

Then one night the dream came again, but it was in colour and very, very vivid. I was wrestling and was locked together with some other person, and then I thought, "It's that dream again!" It was so clear, I woke up inside the dream and asked myself, "Who is this that I am wrestling against anyway?" Then the other person raised their head, looked me right in the eye and smiled, and guess who it was... it was me. Oh ho! "Well if that is me *there*, then who is this *here*???" Very interesting...

About a year after that I had another dream wherein I found myself in the opposite position. I won't go into all the details of it but I was instead the one that was being ineffectively attacked by an enraged figure. It was someone well



known to me who was an incredibly arrogant, conceited person. He had very good qualities in other ways but he possessed a monumental ego. He was in a state of rage and started to attack me; I let him bash away for a while, but it was not really having any effect at all, even though he was thrashing furiously away trying to hurt me. I thought, “This is a bit pointless, I might as well leave.” I just walked peacefully away and left the situation unharmed, not feeling any fear or negativity to him at all.

So, when Ajahn Kittisaro talked to me about the statue of Jacob wrestling the Angel, I went and looked up the story in the Bible. It was quite remarkable that I had had this dream without ever having seen the statue or thinking consciously about this story. What it seemed to be symbolizing was the ego wrestling against the true nature of things, or the sense of self wrestling against the Dhamma. No wonder that no matter how much the ego was bashing away trying to protect itself, the Dhamma, that which is true and real, the natural order of things, was neither being aggressive towards the ego, nor was it needing to retreat; it was utterly unbothered by what the ego was doing, just mildly and affectionately amused. Witnessing that in the dream then enabled me to contemplate it and question, “Which is the real me?”

The face that I had seen in the wrestling dream had been utterly peaceful, happy and contented, and very different from the agonized, anxious, frantic state that I felt my “self” to be in. One could see that this symbolized the interplay between identifying with the egoic mind and identifying with the Dhamma or Buddha-mind – the mind which is completely attuned to Nature, the transcendent knowing mind. This all seemed to show that sometimes these stories are in the air, in our blood, in our race memories; they just arise in this way and play themselves out in the world around us when we need them.



As a culture, we can make good use of this process – it is not to be underestimated how much bringing our attention to these different stories can guide our lives in a very helpful way. I was very impressed recently on reading an account of the Royal Shakespeare Company performing the works, often the tragedies, of Shakespeare in psychiatric institutions. There was an account of them performing *King Lear* in Broadmoor, a hospital for the criminally insane, which one would think would be a very dangerous thing to do. However, just as Greek theatre was very much tied up with mental health, what they were doing was portraying the

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very things that these people had done, the very things that their minds were filled with, in front of their eyes, and in that portrayal a healing occurs. Apparently the players felt a rapport with the audience, a commitment to the depth of their acting and an understanding of the material far greater than they had ever experienced before in any kind of major theatre production. The audience understood what the horror and the tragedy were about because they had been there. After the play they would have discussion groups, workshops wherein the players, the inmates and the staff would all talk with each other. One of them said that three different people, all of whom had killed their parents, came up to them separately after the play and said how much they wished, like Cordelia who makes good with her father King Lear at the end, that they could go to their parents and make good with them in the same kind of way. Simply by witnessing the whole situation they were better enabled to understand their own lives.

It was said that one or two could not cope and just took themselves off and cried, but even that, just being able to let the tears out in the sense of regret, allowing it all to surface, is a tremendously powerful aspect of spiritual training. In Buddhist practice, on the internal level, this very much relates to what is called “wise reflection” (*yoniso manasikāra* is the Pali term), whereby we bring consciously into the mind the things of our life which are important or difficult for us – things which are hard for us to understand, or which are painful, things which are powerful in our minds. We use our reflective abilities to look at them, to raise some image up and get to know the feeling of it, to witness and acknowledge it, because the very act of attention, knowing, is itself the healing agent.

If we are very upset about something or very angry or depressed or we are very excited, just to be able to raise into the mind the recognition, “Here is excitement. This is what excitement feels like,” or “This is a tragedy; everything has gone wrong. This is a total failure, a disaster” – to raise that up into the mind and then to simply recognize that “This is what disaster feels like – it is like this.” We are not pretending that it does not matter, but by making it conscious and bringing it up into the mind in that very clear and distinct way, we are able to free the mind of it. It becomes an object; it goes from being “what I am” to being part of nature.

Just like the people in Broadmoor, or in listening to different myths and legends, or reading religious scriptures and other tales, having these inner forces portrayed in an archetypal way and brought up into consciousness so graphically enables us to digest them, it enables us to say, “This is part of Nature,” or “I have done something terribly wrong with my life, I have made a terrible mistake,” or



“I am a great success; this is absolutely glorious, my life is fantastic.” By having it portrayed in front of us we can see, for example, “Here is someone else who has had a fantastic victory, but look at what happened to her!”

So we can objectify the events of our life and understand them as a more comprehensive picture, rather than being swirled around as if we were in a whirlpool, being carried around by the successes and failures, the pleasures and pains of what we experience. We are not a victim of life, we are able to see it in a more clear and objective way and thus not suffer over it.

This is an aspect of Buddhist meditation that is often neglected, but it is something that Ajahn Sumedho often teaches about; personally I have derived an enormous amount from developing this approach. It makes such a difference to look upon our life in this reflective way, to bring it all into consciousness. The role of this kind of portrayal in stories, myths, dreams, poems, etc., is a very powerful medium for us. It may seem of secondary importance, but if we do not bring these same things to light, what we find is that we are very ill-equipped to deal with life. If we have not done that somehow then, when we meet with tragedy, it is *my* tragedy, it is not just Nature; if we meet with success then it is *my* success, it is *my* glory, and we get carried away by it.

There was a very interesting study done once by a psychiatrist called Bruno Bettelheim who did a lot of work with autistic children. This was in the 1960s and, at that time, people were very concerned to have everything politically correct and modernized, civilized and egalitarian. So they started to straighten out the fairy-tales that they were telling the children in the hospital unit where they were working. They re-wrote all the fairy stories – they took out all the violent ogres and witches that ate children’s heads, together with all the ghastly, unfair, cruel and shocking elements. They dressed them up and made them a little more nice and polite.

They ran this programme for quite a number of years, but there were other centres that they were looking after where they did not use this approach. About twenty years later they made a psychological profile of these different groups of children and they found that the ones that had had the sanitized fairy-tales were much more helpless in terms of real life; they were much less able to cope. The ones who had had a full dose of evil dragons, gore and rough justice knew, when the boss came at them in a rage, “Do not panic. Reach for the magic feather! There is a way out of this.” This struck me as being a very good way of understanding the process.



The situation that we have in the West nowadays is that we are losing our myths, and the ones that we have do not really apply so well. Because of this we find ourselves adrift as a society, we find ourselves very much at a loss as to how to steer ourselves. There are whole areas of our life in which we simply do not know what to do. In Asia many of the ancient myths are kept very much alive through dance, classical music and theatre. Just yesterday I was at an event in Leicester at a Hindu temple; it was part of a conference on religious faiths and the environment. They did a puppet show of the *Ramayana* and the woman who was narrating was a very gifted storyteller. She got to the place in the story where Rama and Sita and his brother Lakshman are living in the forest together. The evil demons were coming to try and trick them and carry Sita away. One of them appears as a beautiful golden deer in the forest; Sita sees the golden deer and says, “Ooohh! How beau-ooo-tiful, oh! I must have it...,” and the storyteller modulated her voice into the unmistakable sound of an Indian woman walking past a jeweller’s shop, pointing out a golden necklace to her husband, “Ooohh! I must have it!” All the women started chuckling and so did the men – it was so familiar! One could see very easily how something in the tale was portraying a very everyday occurrence for them – and the dangerous results of deliberately following desire!

I find it a shame that our culture has lost a lot of its old myths even though, as I was describing, we do still produce them, our minds still naturally formulate them. In the media sometimes stories that capture the imagination are portraying our experience as human beings and as a culture. Occasionally these can have a great effect in helping to heal or steer the society; for example, Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* in the 1950s shed a completely different light on the American Dream. I was also quite struck last year how people became obsessed with the film *The Silence of the Lambs* – everyone was talking about it. When I read about what the plot of the film was and saw the kind of fascination, obsession or horror that people had with the film, what arose in my mind was that this is actually a very clear and graphic portrayal of Western life today. Western civilization is embodied as the eloquent, polished doctor, one who understands the body and the mind and yet is completely mad, and devours the very thing which it is his duty and his occupation to cherish and protect. Isn’t this a portrayal of the present state of Western civilization? We are like a brilliant, deranged being



who is coolly devouring and despoiling the very life it is our duty to protect.

I do not know how one can go about creating helpful new myths, but it struck me that one thing we are particularly lacking in the West, and what we lack a mythology for, is spiritual heroes. Our heroes seem to be people like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Madonna, Clint Eastwood and Kurt Cobain – these are our society's public heroes. Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King and perhaps the Dalai Lama are given some prominence, but we lack much in the way of spiritual heroes for the manyfolk.

We also lack any mythology for death now. Death is looked upon as a life having failed. A society that rejects death has no way of understanding and accommodating the fact of it.

The other great area of lack that springs to mind is that we look upon elderly people with disdain; they are seen as young people who have failed – if we are old, we are a failed young person. We are looked upon as a spare part in society. We have lost our mythology of the old as being worthy and wise; we have lost our sense of the older generation being our sources of wisdom. I was talking yesterday with a representative of the Sikh community at the conference I mentioned; he was saying how he likes to hang around with the old people, the old members of the Sikh community, just because he soaks up so much goodness and wisdom from them. I thought, "How rare!" One just does not find that in Western culture very much; even elderly people themselves are so indoctrinated with this attitude that they too think, "I don't want to be a bother, please put me in a home, your life is more important than mine." One understands the practicalities of it, but it is a shame that we do not look upon our elders as our guides and our sources of wisdom.

Yesterday I saw an advert for a Building Society in which there was a white-haired man in a leather jacket standing next to a very fancy Harley-Davidson motorbike. The heading was, "Grow old disgracefully." This seemed to say it all – do not let yourself grow old, fight it, "rage, rage against the dying of the light"; fight against old age rather than see that oldness and the kind of wisdom and sagacity that come from having lived for many years is a beautiful and worthy treasure. To look upon old age as a time when you can and should carry on playing at childhood is a great shame. I do not know how one can turn things around, but I see that until we do develop ways of generating respect and value in these areas, our society is going to continue to drift, degenerate and wander off course. So I leave these thoughts for you to consider for this afternoon.



The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...”

Part 6: Luxor, Abydos & Dendara

Luxor ~ December 9th

WE ARRIVED HERE in Luxor, one of the ancient capitals, after the short drive from Esna. The name (“Luxor” is the Arabic name; it was known as “Thebes” in Greek) means “City of Palaces” and is possibly where we get the word “luxury” from in English. The Oxford English Dictionary says “luxury” comes from the Latin *luxus*, meaning “abundance”; the Latin *luxor* itself translates as “to live riotously.” Both abundance and riotousness are characteristics of many capital cities of wealthy and powerful nations, so perhaps the Latin acquired its terms from this very place.

Regardless of associations with its name, this great city is also the home of the Karnak and Luxor temple complexes, the former being the biggest religious building in the world, at some 61 acres. The Luxor temple seems a little paltry in comparison at a meagre four and a half acres.



The nights are chilly on the river; it was 58° F at 5:00 this morning. Like Mendocino County, it also has the pattern of climbing into the '80s by midday – one has to be prepared to dress for several climates.

The sun rises – the eye of Ra, at least his image in the world, bursts up from the womb of Nût to begin his run for the day, rolled by the sacred scarab Khepri into life. Even as it comes up behind the palms across the Nile it is flaming bright, alive. It is easy to see how it became the central image of Reality and the source of creation; it's also easy to see how the eye – that circular counter-



foil of the great light-producer – became so iconic in their symbolism: the Eye of Horus that watches over the world as well as the sun, the Eye of the Day. It's even echoed in the manga cartoons on the TV – the screen-filling eye is an endlessly repeated motif of feeling and power.

Last night was the final one on our ship, the Oberoi Philæ. We gather in the lobby, “I don't want to leave,” says Luang Por “let's just go back to Aswan!”

“I can't believe it – they're preparing for another group already!” bewails Edward, “Was all that kind service just pretense? Don't they really care about us? It's like going through someone's belongings before the funeral is done...” Banter and meaningless meanderings – of no worth other than to share our general bonhomie, rejoicing in being together at this time.

We say all our farewells and pile into the bus. As it's Saturday the kids are back at school (Friday is the Sabbath in Muslim countries) so clusters of children in their uniforms, girls with white-shawled heads, pile out of the pickup truck buses and saunter along by the road, chatting in groups. Old men puff on hookahs in the roadside cafés.

Women move with their firm, independent stride in the black *burkas* that are their standard kit. They have a vividly different role in society – even with all of the school groups we have seen at the tombs and temples, the boys and girls are very strictly segregated. I wonder how the women feel to be relegated to such an inferior state? Do they feel more comfortable isolated in their women's world?

Coming from the West and having so many Westerners here as tourists and visitors, it is a strange feeling to be in the middle of the mingling of these worlds. The European families wander freely around, with women and men, girls and boys mixed haphazardly and engaging with each other easily and openly all the time – this melding right in with the djellabahed and turbaned dad walking with wife well behind, and both groups at home with the way they do things. It's mysterious how it all fits in together.



A gibbous moon drops in the western sky. The world warms up visibly as the sun ascends. We reach Luxor by 7:30 and head directly for the great temple of Karnak. This is such an attraction for visitors that Luxor has its own airport and there are package-holidays from Manchester, England, and like locations, that make it the easiest thing to hop on a plane and fly here. Signs on the main thoroughfare advertise “The King's Head,” with a Pharaoh on the

sign, “Yorkshire Bob’s – The Jewellers,” “Murphy’s Irish Pub – restaurant and basement disco,” and so on.

Notwithstanding any of this element of easy and broad access, the two temples were stunningly impressive: the huge obelisks of Hatshepsut; the endlessly repeating statues of Rameses II, erected to glorify His Divine Presence; the lines of sphinxes which, once upon a time, paralleled the entire three kilometre processional road between the temples of Karnak and Luxor; the hypostyle, the hall of 134 columns, each as wide as a 1000-year-old redwood tree – all of it put a crick in the neck from gazing upward, and a profound sense of awe in the heart.

Here too were countless examples of the lotus and the papyrus being depicted in tandem; one quietly notable relief, near the hall of statues of Rameses the Great, depicted two male figures, mirror images of each other, adorned with pharaonic headdresses and fake beards, each tying the stalk of a plant around a pole to form a single knot. One is standing in a bed of lotuses, the other in a bed of papyrus and one of each has been tied together to make the knot that symbolizes the firmly unified kingdom. (See the drawing on page 100.)

Luxor was the capital of the New Kingdom and was developed from 1500 to 1100 BCE (18th to 20th Dynasties). Both of these temples were dedicated to Amun-Ra, and Karnak alone required thousands of priests to run it. Every generation of Pharaohs added some pieces on, to bring the complex to its final state of vastness.



After the temples we made our way to our next abiding for the night. “We’ll be staying in the Old Winter Palace Hotel in Luxor, Luang Por.”

“Well, I’m not sure I like the sound of that – some of the palaces I’ve seen around here are in need of a bit of repair. And the furnishings... well, they’re somewhat lacking, too.”

The Old Winter Palace Hotel (a former palace indeed, built by the famous Pasha Mohammed Ali in the 19th Century) was situated on the promenade by the river, a few hundred yards south of the Luxor temple.

It is a fine and stately place, rich with Saudi rococo, high ceilings, and hung with old prints of Egypt as it was in the 18th and 19th Centuries, as found and recorded by the Napoleonic expedition.

The only restaurant operative at present is out by the pool – with copious



pale Mancunian, Düsseldorfer and other Euro-skins soaking as much sun into their December pallors as possible. It certainly is a paradise: fountains, neatly trimmed lawns, waving palms, glittering pools, shady arbours, pied kingfishers and purple bougainvillea. Of course it would be preferable to be somewhere away from all the sunbathers, however, most of our fellow tourists are of such an age and size as to render the acres of skin more a source of *asubha-kammathāna* – contemplation of the unbeautiful aspects of the body – rather than sensual desire.



Come the evening, the sun having fulfilled its journey through the sky and now facing its 12 trials of the night, we head out to the world-renowned Luxor museum. There are pieces there, Ajahn Vimalo tells us, that were only found and thus exhibited since he was last in Egypt, 20 years ago.

Apparently some workers were taking soil samples in the outer courtyard of the Luxor temple when they found a well-finished stone slab beneath the earth – this proved to be the top of an oubliette, constructed to hide some 24 of the finest statues, possibly from raids being made by aggressive tribes – particularly the Assyrians. Anyway, they were hidden, forgotten and only found in January of 1989.

The museum is exquisitely arranged and Ajahn Vimalo is transported, as one might have suspected. For not only are these pieces of the highest quality of craftsmanship, but they are ones that he has never seen outside of photographs before. He is in heaven, and as we wander slowly round he gives thorough explanations – thick with marginalia – about all of the characters gathered here to meet us.

Their faces, like those of the finest Buddha-rūpas (such as the Sarnath *Dhammacakka* image), are truly peaceful and serene, powerful – especially those of the Pharaohs of the New Kingdom. One that is given pride of place, at the end of the hall exhibiting the 24, is a granite statue of Amenhotep III, Ajahn Vimalo's hero and favourite of all the Pharaohs. "If I was on me own 'ere, I'd bow down three times to this one," he says.

"Why's that?"

"It's so perffick!" ("Even though he was a little goofy in life," Ajahn Vimalo added later on.)

And it is – the face is one of security and peace, great strength – the eyes are huge and eerily spread just past the normal breadth. The one that arrests us

The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...” – Part 6

all, however, is an image of the young Tuthmoses III, made from a dark slate-grey stone. It is the image of humanity perfected.

Despite his being a warrior, what is depicted here is the combination and integration of perfect peace, infinite power, harmonious balance and pure beauty. It is the embodiment of what the heart aspires to. Furthermore, an interesting addendum to this appreciation is that, we are told, this statue is made of a stone so hard that it is beyond anyone's understanding today how the artist could have worked it to such a flawless perfection. How could the skin be so smooth? The expression so lifelike? There's not a chisel mark on it. It looks as if it were moulded from clay yet it is harder than the toughest granite...

For a moment all ceases, and there are no words as the eye takes it in. Epiphany is the heart's apprehension of its own nature and the joyous grandeur, vibrant peace, that comes from that. And, just as with the Prajña Pāramitā image that Ajahn Vimalo has recently finally completed after almost 20 years (and which he generously adjudges to be in a lesser state of perfection), this rūpa of Tuthmoses III catalyses that very epiphany. Pure and perfect – this is what we truly are.

Luxor ~ December 10th

DAWN COMES with a raucous clamour of birdsong outside the front of the hotel. They seem like sparrows, humble unexotic sparrows, when they finally burst forth and hit the air, the vast flock moving as a single body.

The halls at the Old Winter Palace are so cavernous that the closing of the door to your room booms like indoor thunder. The ceilings are at 14 to 18 feet, red carpet lines the stairs and the chandeliers almost certainly date from the time of Muhammad Ali. The plates are all monogrammed and dated 1886. An aura of slightly faded grandeur pervades the spaces here. All is splendidly formed but there is a gentle decrepitude and non-functionality in the air. The staff don't quite seem to understand the guests, or they quietly resent their presence; there are systems at work to help the place run but the visitors and guests sometimes seem left out of the equation. I feel an inner chuckle at the hints of Fawltyness that are our regular companions here.





Our guide for the day – Mohammed Abdouh Ahmed – meets us in the lobby and immediately endears himself to the whole party. He is an energetic gem – a large piezo crystal – modest and restrained but throwing off sparks of enthusiasm and knowledge left and right. We also find out that he’s from a very distinguished Muslim family; his grandfather (El Sheikh al-Tayeb) was known as “the most religious man in Egypt” and his uncle, formerly the Grand Mufti, is now the chancellor of a major Islamic university.

As we are heading into areas that have suffered from some bombing and killings in recent years, we need to head up to Abydos in a convoy. We thus gather at the appointed spot, with about 40-50 other vehicles, pick up our armed police escort and, sometime after 8:00, wagons roll.

Abydos is the place where, after Seth murdered Osiris and cut up his body, Osiris’ severed head was buried. It thus became “the Mecca of Egypt,” even before the time of Narmer (aka Menes, or Mina), the first Pharaoh, in 3100 BCE. The road there runs northwards alongside a canal for, in Egypt, the formula is: where there is water, there are people; where the people are, that’s where the road goes. We pass through many villages of mud brick houses, often with their yards ringed with a stucco wall of a palm-leaf weave plastered with the same mud that the bricks are made from. Often shutters are vivid purples and turquoise, or else the whole house will be painted lime green or mauve, baby blue with emerald woodwork – like many desert people they love their colours vibrant, a natural counterpoint to the infinite sea of grey-brown surrounding them. Blood-red wraps flap from washing lines, flaring in the brightness of the early day against the greens and blues of the painted houses.

Bare rebar crenellations rise from the roofs of most concrete buildings – like some pharaonic crown of the modern age, this pervasive style, Unfinished Egyptian, is courtesy of the current tax-law, as we keep hearing.

There is no oncoming traffic as it has all been stopped at the regular police posts, halted to let our convoy through. Every bridge, lock and railway crossing is guarded by at least one man with a gun – the larger and more sensitive junctions have a substantial army detail firmly evident. Green fields of sugarcane

more than twice a person’s height and eggplant and other crops sprawl in lush abandon by the canal’s margins on either side.

We reach Quena – a city of a million people, and the home of the mausoleum of the Sufi saint Sidi Abdul Rahmin el-Quena-i, a Moroccan who settled and eventually taught here in the 11th Century. Most of the convoy breaks off at a junction and heads for the Red Sea resorts. We carry on north, with about a dozen other vehicles (and a new police detachment). Groups of two or three old men squat up against the house walls, sit on benches under a tree, and watch the day begin, discussing.

The ancient Egyptian name of Abydos is Abijou – simply meaning “the place of the burial of the head of Osiris.” The main temple here was built by Seti I, father of Rameses the Great, and was completed by his son, as Seti died before it was all finished. The raised-reliefs commissioned by the father are some of the very finest of carvings we have seen. It is truly inspiring and enchanting to see such refined work, of 3300 years ago; the figures are so elegant, alive upon the walls, even though the faces of the majority have been mutilated by the Christians who came later and used the temple for themselves. The reliefs have literally been “de-faced.”

By the time Rameses II took over, the standard of carving had dropped a little and the people and creatures, deities depicted in his sections of the temple are noticeably less precisely formed.



Reeds blow on the rooftops of Abydos, next to the satellite dishes. Stiff winds cool the skin under the brilliant sun. The goat that was repeatedly trying to nibble at Luang Por’s robe has given up for richer browsing elsewhere. Palm-tops whip in the wind, fronds rippling fiercely in the wake of the flowing air.

We set off for Dendara, back to the south; miles and miles of sugar-cane on both sides of the canal. Soon the fields narrow as the blocks of vertical mountain faces draw closer to us – the cane-fields about the cliff base and the world of utter barrenness: water, earth, rock, sky – it’s an essentially simple land.

All along the road little kids and sprightly teens wave to the convoy, cheering, smiling broadly, rushing out from their mud brick homes or standing up in the fields – the passing of this great snake of vehicles giving them a moment to pause from work, stand and stretch their legs as well as to offer such friendliness to us foreign wanderers and (albeit benign) invaders.



Many folks are out in the fields cropping the eggplants close to the ground – at least that is what we are told they are, by Mohammed, our guide – donkeys are then laden with the lush produce of the loam. In all this time only one tractor do we see – all the work is done by human hand and by animals. Away from the racket of the motorized vehicles it's a quiet world here.



Dendara is an entirely Greek and Roman temple, started in 135 BCE and completed in 50 CE, although it was built on the site of a temple Amenhotep III once constructed, back in the 18th Dynasty (in 1350-90 BCE). It has an ambience – and a silhouette – quite different from almost all the temples we have seen so far.

Even though Alexander and the Greeks had their own gods, they still built such places as this to embody their empathy for the occupied peoples that they were ruling – a respectfulness that was also politically helpful and expedient. They didn't try to turn the Egyptians into Greeks – they simply built such temples as this and dedicated them, in this instance for example, to Hathor for the locals and to Aphrodite for the colonial occupiers. All the internal imagery (apart from the nakedness of the gods) is, however, fully Egyptian. Also, five Roman emperors and Cleopatra are depicted here: Tiberius, Claudius, Augustus, Caligula and Nero, making offerings to Hathor and the other deities.

Among the many scenes depicted on the walls is the formal laying of the foundation stone of the temple – and there they all are: the imperial sponsor, the high priest and the local worthies, all lined up by the beribboned stone to have their picture carved – so that was another of today's customs and styles that began here on the Nile, so long ago.

Much of the ceilings have been heavily blackened as this temple, too, was occupied by the Christians, who lit smoky lamps and thus besooted the place. If they had known to put just a little salt in the mix, the smoke would have been vastly reduced, for that's what the priests and builders did, both during the countless hours chiselling the acres of reliefs and hieroglyphs and during the centuries that they held their ceremonies here.

We head up the staircase, worn completely smooth at its centre by 2135 years of use, and enjoy the last moments of our visits to the temples of Egypt on this rooftop. As an American tourist fell off last year – and predictably died from the hundred-foot fall onto the stone slab surround – we couldn't go up to

the parapet; however, we were able to explore the Kiosk.

Ajahn Vimalo explained that, by the later date of this temple’s construction, the 820 characters of classic hieroglyphics had expanded to 5000 or more. The walls of this upper space were duly covered top to bottom with what seemed to be an embodiment of proliferation for its own sake – it was yard after yard of dense and intricate verbiage, no doubt very meaningful to the carvers but, to the uninitiated, more a mind-boggling wall of words, bereft of worth.

A similar, but less densely packed wall at Abydos – where Seti I was shown introducing his teenaged son Rameses II to his ancestors – was not only meaningful but the very “king’s list” that enabled most of the succession of Egyptian royals to be figured out. Interestingly enough, a few of the real list had been “non-personed” and left off the roll at Abydos, for example:

- Hatshepsut: because female;
- Akhenaten: the heretic – a Martin Luther-type reformer, who offended everyone by trying to revise the entire deity system to worship only Aten, the god of the sun disk;
- Smenkhkare: who was long thought to be Akhenaten’s older son, but recently some evidence has emerged to show that “he” may actually have been Nefertiti, Akhenaten’s widow, who had taken to cross-dressing to fulfil the role of Pharaoh;
- Tutankhamun: because he followed Akhenaten and the succeeding kings wanted to wipe out all traces of what became known later as the Amarna period, the period in which the new religion promoted by Akhenaten held sway; and
- Ay: the minister who inveigled King Tut onto the throne and then, after the king died, married King Tut’s widow and claimed the title.

So here, excisions notwithstanding, was a voluminous text that carried great and potent meaning. Large quantities of words are not always out of place.



It was a poignant moment, up on the rooftop.

Ajahn Ñānarato asked, “Are you aware that this is the last temple for us?” A sadness ringed his eyes and his voice was a little strained. We have been immersed in the richness of the ancient Egyptian spiritual realm for the whole of this last week, spending time in an array of temples and tombs that only a



few Egyptians of olden days would have been able to visit during their lifetimes and certainly not in the tiny interval that we had had. This had become our world – sheltering vultures, overarching sky goddesses, the animal-headed deities – now is the time that we have to bid farewell to them all. It's sundown and we are the last back to the 12 buses of our convoy to Luxor.

Geb, the earth, swallows the sun again. Gourds are for sale at the roadside. Conversation has ceased between us – we let the world of the Egyptian spirit unravel behind us, quietly exhausted from the length of travel this day. The drainage factor was also somewhat due to the absence of lunch, owing to the travel rep's wrong information. Still we snacked happily on crisps and cokes and M&M's – all that could be obtained at the convoy head – these plus Mohammed's sandwiches, that he very kindly divided up between us.

The ending of the day. One last digression takes us into the Papyrus Institute and some unplanned purchases of paintings, mostly as gifts for family. The spunky Maria closed in on my elbow almost as soon as I reached the display on the first wall. A highly accomplished salesperson, she worked vigorously and skilfully, nay flirtatiously, creatively enacting around my choices: a) larger pictures than I had chosen, b) extra hieroglyphic names to be inscribed, c) birthdates of my sisters, and d) the location. All my pleadings that the others were waiting, that I didn't need dates on the works, etc., fell on studiously deafened ears. Still, these little treasures now travel with us and will be there to generate resonances of this day, these times, wherever they are looked upon and contemplated, in whatever future life they might have.



Tea in the Victoria Lounge, served by a brocaded old retainer, is the day's last hurrah. We are all weary and grimy after many hours in wind and sand. It's time to put things down and let it end.





*p. 91 - a camel chews
her breakfast*



*p. 91 - kids wave frantic
cheerful hellos*

p. 92 - The succession of spaces, as one enters...into that innermost chamber



p. 93 - water, rock, greenery between, cyan cupola above





p. 96 - Sky light reflects in the mirror-water of the canal



p. 99 - the twin statues – the Colossi of Memnon



p. 99 - local workshops are painted with murals as bold as in the tombs and temples

p. 119 - Women move with their firm, independent stride in the black burkas





p. 119 - Signs on the main thoroughfare advertise "The King's Head"

Entering the Temple of Karnak



Ajahn Nānarato at Karnak



p. 120 - all of it put a crick in the neck from gazing upward



*p. 120 - the hypostyle, the
hall of 134 columns, each
as wide as a 1000-year-old
redwood tree*



*p. 120 - The Old Winter Palace
Hotel... rich with Saudi rococo*



p. 121 - Come the evening, the sun having fulfilled its journey

p. 123 - Bare rebar crenellations rise from the roofs of most concrete buildings



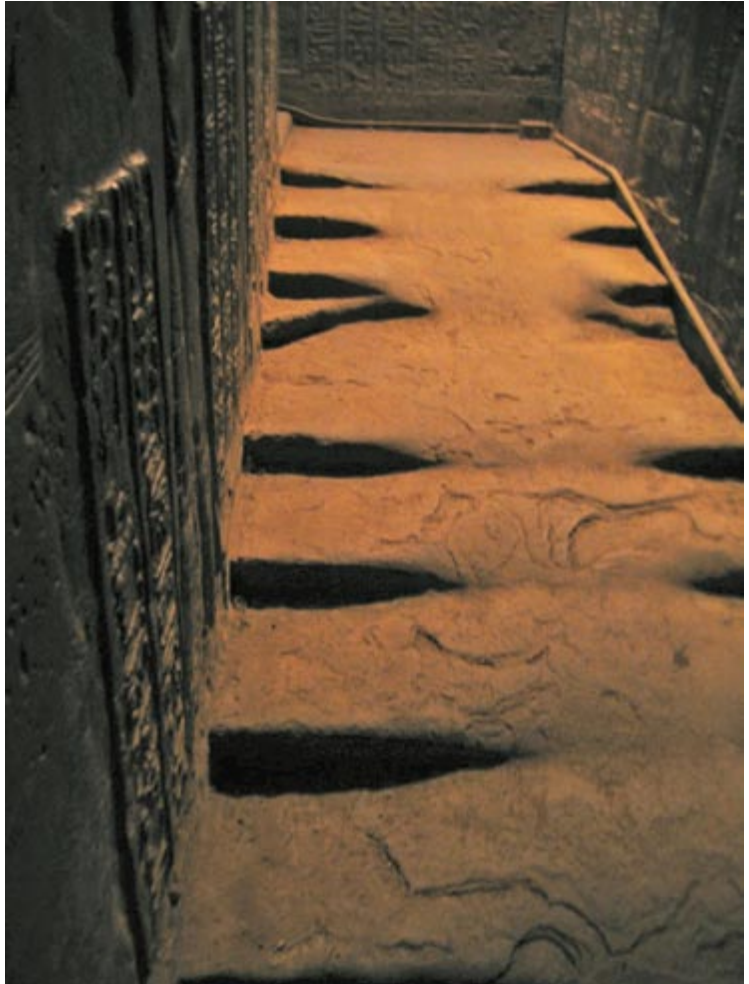


p. 123 - Every bridge, lock and railway crossing is guarded by at least one man with a gun



p. 124 - The raised-reliefs ...are some of the very finest of carvings

p. 124 - All along the road little kids and spritely teens wave to the convoy



p. 125 - the staircase, worn completely smooth at its centre



p. 126 - Are you aware that this is the last temple for us?

p. 127 - it's sundown and we are the last back





p. 127 - One last digression takes us into the Papyrus Institute and some unplanned purchases of paintings, mostly as gifts for family



*p. 143 - We fly over Sinai, high
above the barren mountains*

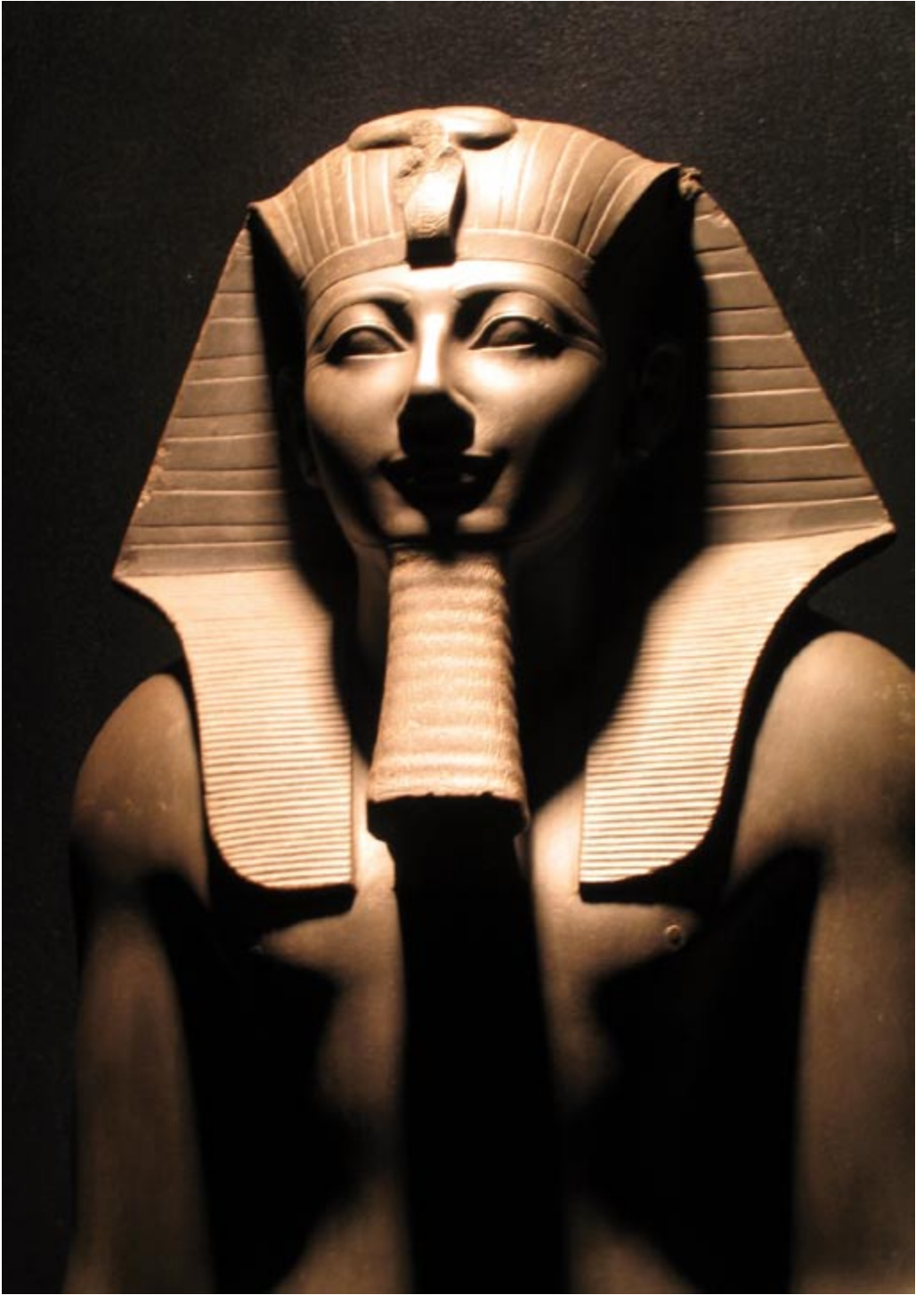




*p. 144 - The Red Sea is
blue blue blue*



*p. 146 - The main door of the
structure ... 30 feet above the
level of the desert, with no stairs*



Tutankhamun, Luxor Museum



Prajñā Paramita, sculpted by Ajahn Vimalo, 1986-2006



The Lesser, the Greater, the Diamond and The Way

*A talk given on a retreat held at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas,
Ukiah, California, July 1991*

HISTORICALLY THERE HAVE BEEN DIFFERENCES of opinion about the relative merits of Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism and, if you read much of the literature, they would seem to be quite divergent in their approaches toward Buddhist practice – yet there also seem to be some tremendous affinities.

When I arrived at the International Forest Monastery in Thailand, I had never read any Buddhist books and I wasn't actually intending to become a Buddhist monk. I was a wanderer, a free-lance spiritual seeker, and I just happened to turn up at this forest monastery that Ajahn Sumedho had established a couple of years before, basically as a place for a free meal and a roof over my head for a few nights. Little did I expect, some twelve or thirteen years later, that I would be doing what I am doing now. But when I went there and asked the monks about Buddhism, to explain things a little bit for me so that I could get a feel for what their life was about, the first thing one of them did was to give me a copy of a book of talks by a Zen Master, and he said, "Don't bother trying to read the Theravāda literature; it's terribly boring, very dry. Read this, it is pretty much the same thing that we're doing, and it will give you a sense of what our practice is about. And I thought, "Well, obviously these guys are not too hung up on their tradition." The book was *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.

So, one could see right from the beginning that, even though there is a strength to the particular form within any Buddhist country, one is not necessarily constricted or limited by that. I was there for months before I even heard of "Theravāda" and "Mahāyāna," let alone the differences of opinion between them. It seemed that when you actually lived the life there really wasn't any great disparity, but if you thought about it a lot, and if you were the kind of per-

son who wrote histories and books and had got into the political side of religious life, then that was where the divergences occurred.

I have heard Ajahn Sumedho recount a few times over the years that, for the first year of his monastic life, he had been practising using the instructions from a Ch'an meditation retreat given by the Ven. Master Hsü Yün, and that he had used the Dharma talks from that retreat given in China as his basic meditation instruction. When he went to Wat Pah Pong, and Ajahn Chah asked him what kind of meditation he had been doing, at first he thought, "Oh no, he's going to get me to give this up and do his method." But, when Ajahn Sumedho described what he had been doing and mentioned that it had had excellent results, Ajahn Chah said, "Oh, very good, just carry on doing that."

So, one sees that there is a very strong unity of purpose; even though there might be historical differences between the two traditions, they are very much in accordance with each other. And one begins to see what the different Buddhist traditions are talking about. They get sectioned out into Hīnayāna or Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna, as different types of Buddhist practice, but they are basically just different labels which are talking about attitudes of mind and, when the traditions are used wisely, then they will address all aspects of our mind, from the most selfish and mundane to the most exalted. They address all the different levels of our life, and it's only when they are not understood, when people take them as fixed positions, that there is any conflict amongst them.

Theravāda Buddhism, for instance, is often taken to represent the Hīnayāna position, the self-concern of, "Quick let me out of here, I've had enough of this mess; I want this to be over as quickly as possible." One can see that that represents a very definite stage in one's own spiritual development. For example, we start out with just a worldly attitude; basically we're not interested in spiritual development at all. We just want happiness, however and wherever we can find it. We have a worldly outlook and no real spiritual direction at all. So then our first awakening to spiritual life is when we start to acknowledge suffering. We recognize the need to rescue ourselves, to help ourselves.

So, the Hīnayāna refers to this initial stepping onto the spiritual path and seeing that there's something that needs to be done to sort out our own life. It's a natural self-concern; you don't set about helping other people or being too concerned about the welfare of others if you yourself are drowning. You have to get yourself to some firm shore to begin with. But then basing your spiritual practice around self-concern, and just trying to make your own life peaceful and



happy is obviously of limited worth. We can see that if we do get stuck at that level, there is a certain aridity and barrenness that will set in.

I had an interesting experience concerning this recently. Normally my personality is of a friendly, generous, outgoing type, and I've always had quite a fondness for the Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings. However, I found toward the end of last year that a certain nihilism was creeping in. The abiding mental tendency was one of, "I've had enough of this; I want out." This was really quite unusual for me and it started to come on *very* strongly. The idea of living into old age and having to cope with human existence and the trivialities of life and the tedium of a boring monastic routine was *no fun*. It all started to look incredibly uninviting. It was like being stuck out in the middle of a salt flat with no horizon visible. It was a strong, grinding negativity. I didn't feel friendly toward anyone; I felt no inspiration toward monastic life. The whole thing was a tedious rigmarole.

Every two weeks we have a recitation of our monastic rules and it takes about 45 minutes to chant. This is the regular refreshment of the spirit of monastic community – renewing our aspiration and our dedication to our discipline and our life-style. And I'm sitting there reciting these rules and my mind is saying, "What a total farce, what a waste of time this is" – and trying to remember the words I'm supposed to be chanting at the same time. Also, this was at the beginning of the monastic winter retreat that I was supposed to be helping to teach; I thought, "This is *really* going to be difficult." I was supposed to be inspiring these young monks and nuns and my mind was going through this very negative state. I was watching this, but there seemed to be a lot of justification for thinking in this negative way. I thought, "Well, maybe I had it wrong all these years, maybe I was just being an empty-headed, overly optimistic fool and maybe being a bored cynic was actually the right path all along."

Then one night I had a very vivid dream, in full colour. In this dream I ate my hands, finger by finger. I pulled off my thumb and then each finger and ate them. It was so vivid I could taste them and it was even a bland taste. I ate the whole of my left hand then started on my right hand; I ate the first three fingers of it until there was only my index finger and thumb left. Then something in me said, "Wake up!" I did wake up and there was a very, very clear memory of this dream. Instantly I realized what I had been doing. Out of heedlessness I had been destroying those very faculties that were my most helpful friends and assistants. The negative and self-destructive attitudes were covering up and burning away all of the good qualities. The spiritual qualities that were there were being

destroyed. It was really a shock to the system, and I realized I had been taking the wrong track. Then something else happened spontaneously. I had not really been thinking about Mahāyāna Buddhism or the Bodhisattva ideal, but what happened was that I started to say to myself, “Well, I don’t care whether I feel even one moment of happiness for myself in this life; I don’t care if I have to be reborn ten thousand million times. If I can just do one kind act for one other being in ten thousand million lifetimes, then all that time will not have been wasted.” Thoughts like this began to come up spontaneously in my mind, and I suddenly felt an incredible joy and happiness, and a feeling of relief; which is strange if you think about it rationally: ten thousand million lifetimes of ineffective activity and complete pain and boredom. But the result was a vibrant joy and delight. It was the breaking out of the prison of self-concern.

When the mind goes into that kind of death-wish mentality, just waiting for it all to be over, then all you’re concerned about is yourself. You become blind and immune to other people. Even if you don’t want to be, you find that you’re building all sorts of walls around yourself. And I could see that this was very much the cause of the spirit of the Mahāyāna tradition and teaching: to arouse that unselfishness, that readiness – even if it is a pointlessly vast task to take it on anyway. It then releases the natural altruism and affinities we have for other beings. We recognize our interconnectedness with all other beings, all other lives, and out of respect for that, one feels a sense of joy in being able to give, to help and to serve.

It is interesting that, at about that same time, someone gave me a book which showed me that this principle was found not only in the Buddhist tradition. The author was talking about this principle and gave examples from both the Hindu and the Judaic traditions. He told the story of Sri Ramakrishna and how, before he and Swami Vivekananda were born, he had tracked down Vivekananda (who was his chief disciple) up in one of the high Brahma heavens – he was absorbed in meditation, utterly disinterested in the world, “close to the mountain of the Absolute.” What a great phrase! Anyway, Vivekananda was seated there, totally enraptured in bliss. Then Ramakrishna took on the form of a little child; he wove the body of a golden child out of the atmosphere of this high realm and he started to sing and play in front of this sage.

Eventually, after some time, the sage’s attention gets caught and he opens his eyes and sees this incredibly charming little child, playing and cavorting in front of him. And finally, with his eyes completely opened, he is looking at the child, and the child says to him, “I’m going down; you come with me.” So,



Vivekananda went down and joined him.

The other example was of a Jewish elder named Rabbi Leib. He was telling some of his disciples, “Before this life I did not want to be born; I did not want to come here. This human world is so full of foolishness and crazy, idiotic people. I had had enough of the whole thing and just couldn’t be bothered with it. And then one day this fellow comes along, he looked like a peasant, with a shovel over his shoulder, and he says to me, ‘Haven’t you got anything better to do than to lie around here all day just enjoying the bliss of eternity. I work non-stop just trying to bring a little happiness, a little more joy, into the lives of other people, and what are you doing? You’re just hanging around!’” He said that he was so touched by this person that he agreed to go along. This fellow with the shovel was the Baal Shem Tov, one of the founders of the Hassidim. It is said that he roams around the upper realms of the cosmos looking for likely characters whom he can dispatch down to earth to take care of the likes of us. So, it is interesting to see that this same principle exists in human experience in different traditions.



Self-concern takes us into a desert experience – even when we notice that the more coarse defilements of mind have abated or have worn themselves out, when we’re not possessed by too much anxiety or lust, greed, aversion, jealousy, or whatever, and the mind is quite peaceful. As you may be aware (now that you’ve been a week into the meditation retreat) you can be sitting there with your mind quite concentrated, quite still and, rather than feeling rapture or a sense of wholeness and totality, the feeling is one of, “So what? Is this really what the Buddha built his teaching around, this blank mental state, with nothing much happening?” With nothing much in the way of thoughts and feelings, no great passions to wrestle with, it’s like being in some little grey room. It’s not disturbing in any way, but it seems a pretty tame experience to build a world religion around.

You think, “This is a rip-off! I’ve been struggling away for five or six years with fear and lust and so on, and now I get to the free space – here we are out in the open – and it’s a desert. This is not right!” But then, what you realize is that this is not what the Buddha was pointing to as the goal of the holy life, because even though one can’t see any outstanding objects causing obstruction or defilement, what is there is *you*, or in this case, *me*. There is the sense of *I* – someone

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here experiencing – there’s a person. This sense of identity, even though it is not outstanding, leaping out making itself vivid, is a constant presence. The ego is a psychological structure that is there like a wall around the heart, like a prison. And because we are so caught up with life in the prison, we don’t notice that we are actually hemmed in. It is only when everything has cooled down and one has a chance to look around and take in the surroundings that one has a chance to feel the sense of limitation, barrenness; there’s a boredom, it’s just *bleaagghh!*

Even in Mahāyāna Buddhism – which is outgoing, geared toward altruism, generosity, compassion, developing a spiritual life for the sake of all beings – if our practice stops at the state of “me giving my life to help all others,” even if this is highly developed, at the end of it there’s still *me* and *you* – “me” who is helping “all sentient beings.” Even in that respect, even though there can be a lot of joy, you still find this barrier, a sense of isolation or meaninglessness. There’s a separation there. So, it is important to use the meditation practice not just to absorb into altruistic thoughts and feelings, because, if you notice, a lot of the Buddha’s teachings revolve around selflessness, around emptiness, like the teachings on anattā. If there is no self, who is it who’s going to be radiating kindness over the entire world? If there’s no self, then who is sending mettā and who is there to send it to?

One then sees that there is a level of understanding, of being, which is beyond that which is tied up with self and other. No matter how high, refined and pure our aspiration might be, unless we go beyond that sense of self-identity and division in that respect, then there will always be that feeling of incompleteness; the desert experience will creep in.

So, if we pass through that grand-hearted attitude of mind, then we realize that which pertains to the wisdom of ultimate understanding, of Ultimate Reality, that which is called the *Vajra* teachings. *Vajra* means diamond or thunderbolt, indestructible, supremely powerful, the adamantine Truth. This is the understanding of selflessness. When the attention is put onto the feeling of “I,” one uses the practice to illuminate the assumptions we make about our identity. We have to turn the mind around from external objects, to shine it back upon the assumptions that we make about the “subject.” When the mind is calm and settled, it’s very helpful to start inquiring, “Who is the person that is the centre of all of this?” “Who is it that is meditating?” “Who is it that’s knowing this?” “Who is the one who knows?” “What knows thought and feeling?” It’s when we look and challenge the assumptions about there being a discreet entity here, then suddenly the prison walls collapse.



I had an experience of this some six or seven years ago – when I first started using this kind of meditation on a long retreat, asking “Who am I?” or “What am I?” and using that to create a hesitation in the mind, to put the sense of self into perspective; it felt like stepping out of a grey prison cell into sunshine and a field of flowers. It was a tremendous feeling of refreshment and relief, like coming across an oasis in the desert.

The Buddha said that the greatest happiness of all is to be free from the sense of “I am.” Now, this might seem to some people to be a bit farcical or pointless, because our self seems to be the most real thing in the whole universe: “If anything is real, I am.” But it’s only because we have never really looked, or inquired into the feeling of *I*, of *me*, of *mine*. It’s only because we have never really studied that and seen it clearly that that illusion is maintained. Once you look at it closely, then the illusion falls apart. You can’t be taken in by that.

So, one uses enquiry to challenge the assumptions that we are making and the walls that we create within the mind. That challenging of those assumptions is what dissolves the illusion. The instinct of the ego, however, is to start creating things immediately which produce activity elsewhere so that our attention will be distracted, so that we will stop doing this. The ego is like any creature that is frightened of dying, and as soon as we start to challenge the supremacy and the centrality of it, then a panic reaction gets going. You will find that the mind can throw up all kinds of interesting and compelling thoughts to persuade you to engage in something else quickly. So, one requires a great deal of resolution just to say “NO!” and to bring the mind back to asking, “Who is this?” “What is knowing this panic?” “What is knowing this feeling?”



In the *Vajra Prajñā Pāramitā Sūtra* you find statements like, “No mark of self, no mark of other, no mark of living beings, no mark of a life,” or “All conditioned dharmas are dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows, like dew drops and a lightning flash, contemplate them thus,” or “Everything is made from mind alone.” And in the *Heart Sūtra* as well, which they recite here at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas every day, there are sections of it which go, “There is no form, no feeling, no perception, no mental formations, no consciousness, no ignorance, no birth, no aging, no death, no suffering, no attainment and no Way.” What this is doing is stepping out of the whole conditioned realm, putting the whole conditioned realm into perspective – do not seek for liberation, for certainty,

for security in that which is inherently insecure, inherently bound and tied up with time, self, birth and death. As long as we are seeking for happiness in the conditioned sensory world, then we are bound to be disappointed. We cannot possibly find it there. And things like birth, death, self, other, suffering – these are relative truths but ultimately there is no suffering, no one is ever born, no one ever dies. All there is is “Suchness” otherwise known as “The Wonderful” or “Universal Mind” or any one of a number of terms that are used.

The interesting thing is you don’t find this just in the Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna texts. It is fully explained and spelled out by the Buddha also in the Theravādan scriptures, although it may not get emphasized enough. You even get teachers who say that anattā should not be taught, that it is a dangerous teaching. After a talk that Ajahn Sumedho gave once, a well-known Buddhist teacher who was there was incredibly upset and disturbed that Ajahn Sumedho was teaching anattā to lay people. He thought this was most irresponsible (although he himself was a lay person!). Also I’ve been told of an eminent monk in Thailand who feels the same way; he thinks that anattā is too potent a teaching to pass on to all of you people, but I don’t think so (*laughter*). This is the supremely liberating teaching, yet you find a lot within the Theravāda that is glossed over, even though it does continually push the mind to this point of ultimate wisdom.

For example, there is an inquiry made to a monk called Anurādha³¹ where he’s questioned by some Brahmin scholars on, “What is the nature of an enlightened being after death?” “What happens to a Tathāgata, an enlightened one, after the death of the body?” “Do they exist?”

The monk replies, “This is not spoken of by the Enlightened One.”

He is asked, “Well, do they *not* exist?”

“This is not spoken of by the Enlightened One.”

“Well, do they *both* exist and *not* exist?”

“This is not spoken of by the Enlightened One either,” he replies.

“Then, do they *neither* exist *nor* not exist?”

“This, too,” he says, “is not spoken of by the Enlightened One.”

So they say to him, “You must be a fool or one who is newly gone forth. You obviously do not understand the Buddha’s teaching or you would be able to give us a decent answer.”

Then he goes to the Buddha and tells him of the conversation he had with these people, and he asks, “Did I answer in the right way?” And the Buddha said, “Yes, Anurādha, you answered well.”



“Do you see the Tathāgata as *being* the five *khandhas*?”

“No, Lord.”

“Do you see the Tathāgata as *having* the five *khandhas*?”

And he says, “No, Lord.”

“Do you see the Tathāgata as *not having* the five *khandhas*?”

And he says, “No, that’s not true either.”

“Do you see the Tathāgata as being *within* the five *khandhas*?”

“No, Lord.”

“Do you then see the Tathāgata as being *separated from*, outside of, the five *khandhas*?”

He says, “No, not that either.”

“Correct!” said the Buddha, “Just so – what I teach, both now and formerly, is suffering and the end of suffering.”

The Buddha advises us not to try to define the enlightened in conceptual terms because any conceptual definition can only fall short, can only be relatively true. The Buddha made very clear in the Theravāda teaching just as much as in the scriptures of the Northern school that the ultimate perspective on things is the perspective of no fixed position, of actual realization of Truth, abiding in that position of Awareness, rather than taking any kind of conceptual or idealistic position. That is our Refuge. Taking Refuge with Buddha is being that Awareness. So that we see that everything to do with our body, our feelings, our personality, our age, our nationality, our problems, our talents, all of these are simply attributes of the conditioned world that arise and pass away, and there is awareness of those. The whole point of the practice is to abide constantly in being that quality of Awareness.

Life is going to be frustrating and painful if we are looking for certainty and definition in terms of being a person, being some place – a being in time. It’s only when we let go of the sense of *I*, *me* and *mine*, of the sense of there being a person here who has anywhere to go to, or anywhere not to go to, that there is the clear abiding in Awareness.

The tendency of the mind is often to conceptualize that. You say, “OK, I’m just going to be aware,” and you take that as an ideal and try to fill the mind with that thought. What will happen then is that the thought turns into an object, so rather than just resting in being the knowing, we try to see what it is that is knowing. As Ajahn Chah would sometimes say, “You’re riding a horse and looking for the horse.” We wonder, “Who is it that knows the knower?” “Who is it that knows the thing that’s knowing the knowing?”

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One can get the impression that there's some sort of infinite regression happening here, and that it's like falling off a cliff backwards. But it's not – because what happens is that when we let go of our sense of identity, then there is just the clear knowing. The mind rests in the bright, selfless, knowing, timeless state. And then the idea arises, “Oh, there is knowing.” So rather than just resting in that pure knowing, we attach to the thought that there is something that is knowing. We're just fixing on that thought and then stepping out into the conditioned world. As we attach to any thought we're stepping away from that sense of pure knowing. If there is just pure knowing it's like being up against the back wall. As soon as we hold onto any thought we walk away from the wall. We're going out into experience, going out into attachment to some condition.

If we just allow the mind to relax and rest in that sense of knowing, in that purity of being, then there is liberation, there is freedom right at that point. At that point, the mind is aware of the sense of unity, of Suchness; there is the unifying vision which in Christian terms they call beatitude. The beatific vision is the vision of totality, of wholeness, the disappearance of any separateness. In this realization there is no self – it's not you being with Ultimate Truth – there's just *this*, the mind in its pure awakened state, Dhamma aware of its own nature.



With the early presence of Buddhism in America in the 1950s and early '60s, there was a tremendous amount of use of this kind of understanding; people were saying, “Everyone is a Buddha,” “We're all Buddhas,” “Everyone is perfect.” And, instead of this giving rise to people having the conduct of Buddhas, which is modest, gentle, and restrained, what this was sometimes taken as was a justification of license. Whatever you do, it's perfect – sober is perfect, drunk is perfect, to do whatever you feel like doing, whatever you're inspired to do – it's all empty. It's all Suchness. For people who took that highest principle as a fixed position or identity to hold onto... You can see that just the idea of it was not enough, and it caused some of the brightest Buddhist lights of the Beat generation to die as alcoholics. There was a great sense of freedom of spirit that was inspiring it, but the idea of us all being Buddhas and everything being perfect is not exactly the same as the direct realization of that. When the mind truly rests with that realization, then what flows forth from it is a purity of conduct, a purity of speech and action, a gentleness, a harmlessness and simplicity. The



Buddha's response to his enlightenment, being totally free and beyond any suffering, was not to pursue physical pleasures or seek intoxication. His response was to live incredibly carefully and modestly, using the things of the earth with frugality. He could have conjured up anything he wanted, but he chose to live as a barefoot renunciant, a peaceful, harmless being.

One can see that some Buddhist traditions over the centuries have become caught up in this problem, whereby the principle is attached to and then taken as an identity: "I am a Mahāyāna Buddhist," or "I am a Theravādan Buddhist," or "I am a Vajrayāna Buddhist." That's like wearing a badge that gives one a certain credential, rather than seeing that the terms referred to are attitudes of being. For instance in England, at the Buddhist Society Summer School every year, one group would go and have their evening meetings down at the pub, ostensibly because they had "got beyond form." So, they would have their evening Dharma discussions down at the pub, which is all right; they are free to do what they want. The Theravādans just sit around, chatter and drink tea. But you could see that the attitude was, "Well, we're of the Supreme Vehicle. We don't need to be bothered with the petty concerns of *sīla*, we respect the ultimate Buddha nature of all beings." And one could see that a lot of their inspiration and noble energy was getting side-tracked into justifying the simple quality of preference: that they found it enjoyable to have a drink or two, fool around and have an unrestrained time. Again, they are free to do as they choose, but it's a sad mistake to label this as the practice of Buddha-Dhamma.

The result of this – trying to realize emptiness within a free-wheeling life – means that we then have the challenge of realizing the emptiness of the despair and depression that comes from following those desires. People are free to take on the challenge! But it's a related thing; we can't just absorb into pleasure without getting the other side of it as well. It's as if we're holding onto the wheel as it goes up the pleasure side, but we're still holding onto it as it goes down the other side. I'm not saying these things as a put-down but, having done this quite a bit myself, I realize that we just don't have the presence of mind to let go at the top. It's the way we'd like it to be but it doesn't operate like that.

At the beginning of the retreat everyone took the Refuges and Precepts. This symbolic act is to refresh our aspiration toward being a Buddhist, toward being Buddha. It's not a ceremony that one goes through to *become* a Buddhist, like a baptism. It's much more that it's up to us to refresh our aspiration within ourselves. Externally, we can adhere to a form, to a tradition, to a pattern, but if we don't eventually internalize that, if we don't bring that within ourselves and

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make being Buddha, being The-One-Who-Knows, the aim, then any amount of external dedication to a particular form or tradition will not avail us very much in the long run.



One final point that we tend not to understand is that – if there is no self, if one is aiming to come from this position of ultimate wisdom, then why do we bother with things like spreading mettā? If there is nobody here and nobody there, then why go through all the trouble of sending mettā across the universe? Or the sharing of merit: you know there's no one *here* and there's no one *there*, so what's the point? Wouldn't we be better off saving our energy and doing something else? This is important to understand – how the different levels of our life interplay with each other – because even though at some moment we might be seeing life from the level of pure wisdom, from that place of timeless-spaceless-selfless awareness, the rest of the world is not necessarily seeing things from that point of view. What you have within Buddhist practice is a way of tying together all the different levels of our being.

The Buddha used conventional forms, he used personal pronouns. When people asked him questions such as, “If there's no self, why do you refer to yourself as an individual? Why do you say ‘she’ and ‘they,’ why do you name people?” And the Buddha would respond, “These are merely names, expressions, terms of speech, designations in common use in the world, which the Tathāgata uses without misapprehending them.”³² So, when we are thinking about things like spreading mettā, creating good karma, sharing the blessings of our life, one puts forth the effort to do that. You put your heart into spreading loving-kindness. You *do* it.

We set up monasteries, we put effort into creating opportunities and environments for people to learn from. We teach, offer guidance and support and instruction. But, having brought those forms into existence, then one dissolves any attachment to them. We bring forth wholesome principles and energies into people's lives, but we do not give them a sense of ultimate substantiality. We see that they are merely shapes, forms, patterns of consciousness. The sounds that I say, these are ear-consciousness, sounds that you all are aware of. There is the expression that the Buddha was the supreme weaver of dreams in order to wake up the dreamers. His teachings, his words and actions, are a system of dreams. Dreamstuff. But the mastery of the Buddha was that he created dreams which



enabled the dreamers to awaken; to lead us out of the dream world into real life, into the true world.³³

As an example, for many years I had no feeling at all for devotional practice. “Anattā, that’s what it’s all about!” Every morning and evening, as we did our traditional chanting I would go along with it, try to stay in tune and so on, but basically I felt it was all pointless. Then I began to realize that I was missing the spirit of the whole thing – if we have right understanding, then we can bring forth those energies into words, bring forth kindness and benevolence, bring forth things which are useful and helpful into the world – but then not to own them, to leave them as they are, that is the great art and it is also the greatest blessing. You can see why the Buddha taught in the way that he did. It wasn’t for him. It was to provide things for those of us who would come after: forms, patterns, traditions, ways of living that help to spur us on; ways to encourage us, to inspire us to wake up, to break through the illusions that bind us so that all can experience the true joy of liberation.





The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...”

Part 7: Luxor, Sharm el-Sheikh & Mount Sinai

Sharm el-Sheikh ~ December 11th

I AM OUT ALONE in the cool of the garden, at the Old Winter Palace, until sunrise. Not too many people here seem to rise early, or to walk this way. The dew is heavy on the close-cropped lawn, doves coo and the great flock of sparrows murmurs intensely overhead, filling a clutch of three or four trees. The sun rises through the palms and it's time to gather with everyone for breakfast.


It seems that Pinochet died yesterday, so the discussion easily moves to the subject of good and evil and an appreciation of how, within Egyptian mythology, evil was seen as an inescapable part of life – Seth keeps being defeated by Horus, but is never killed, just as Māra, “Death,” is continually bested by the Buddha and keeps coming back to try again. “You can't have birth without death” is another aspect of the reality of things. Luang Por recalled how, as a child, he used to wonder, “Why did God create pain? Why did he not just make us so that we are happy and comfortable all the time?” This made him resentful and prone to doubt God's wisdom and kindness.

“Then, when I discovered Buddhism, it was clear that it's *supposed* to be this way – you can wonder, ‘Why does something *always* go wrong? Why doesn't God make everything flow smoothly?’ But when you realize that Nature has to be this way (and the God idea is taken out of the picture) it's a relief.” It's always a mixture – we are seeing the beautiful, entrancing side of Egypt, and enjoying the delights of the privileged, however Egypt has its dark side also: the US has outsourced much of its torturing of prisoners from Afghanistan and Iraq to both here and Syria. In the columned halls of Karnak and beneath the chandeliers of the Winter Palace those shadows are not ap-



parent – but they are here. Once or twice we have driven by large prisons – on the road to Wadi el-Natron for example – and a shudder has gone through the *citta*. “You wouldn’t want to end up in there – Egyptian prisons are a right ’ell-realm, so I hear,” said Ajahn Vimalo. And intuitively, and through reports in the news, one could easily believe it.



We pass through a different kind of hypostyle, a hall of columns at Luxor airport and, once checked in, we sit in the “Horus Lounge” (i.e., the corner of Departures with the cafeteria). Luang Por explains the meaning of “goopy” over a slice of cream-filled chocolate and cherry layer cake – an Egyptian *Schwarzwälderkirschtorte* and just as rich as the original. Ajahn Vimalo categorizes the cake under the heading of “pornographic pastries” and we develop a new hieroglyph, , to add to the 5000, so that one can properly write “goopy” in ancient Egyptian.

Luang Por has been somewhat laid low by a throaty cold but he’s revived by the sugary morsel, “That cake really picked me up! Do you want me to do a tap-dance?”

It has been a great joy to travel and visit so many of these sacred places, the sources of so much of our human culture – however it’s also very draining and, at 72, Luang Por’s resources are not what they used to be. He’s run down from being on the go and taking in so much during this last week. We also haven’t had a proper meal for a few days, snacking at temple sites and relying on large breakfasts to get us through. When you’re spry that is all easily carried out – the body adapts and endures – but when it gets past a certain age it needs another quality of caring. It is just not as adaptable any more.

We change planes in Cairo and cross the tarmac under patchy clouds, brushed by a cool breeze. We fly over Sinai, high above the barren mountains, combed in rugged furrows, across the turquoise Red Sea shallows, and descend to Sharm el-Sheikh – now a major tourist resort. The Plan has been to rest here for the afternoon and then to set off in the late evening to drive to Mount Sinai, of the Ten Commandments fame, and climb it to arrive at the summit just before dawn.

It is very rare that Luang Por makes any comment about physical needs or like concerns, but he makes the point of saying, “We’ve got to climb that mountain without even having had a meal...” and when it’s pointed out that,

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if we visit St. Catherine’s monastery, near Mount Sinai, on the way back, and linger on our tour, we’ll have to scramble to get back to the hotel within time, it all starts to sound like an endurance test. The last proper meal we had was on our arrival in Luxor – so we make arrangements to ensure we get back in time, “*insha’ Allah.*”

We pull into the Hyatt Regency and are greeted, at the security gate, by a Brit of substantial girth who, as per the form, asks us where we’re from. Once it’s established that we’re Buddhists he asks, “If you don’t mind me sayin’ – you Buddhists are supposed to be modest people so ’ow come you’re staying at the smar’est ’otel in Sharm el-Sheikh?” He’s friendly, but there’s a fraction of him that’s ready to get accusatory.

“Because we were invited here by our friends.”

“That’ll do – I’ll go for that. Enjoy yer stay!”

Our lobby is of a Byzantine-modern flavour – round arches, straight columns and a marble floor that shines like water.

The Red Sea is blue blue blue. Its horizon stretches unbrokenly, parallel to the space we sit in. An electric wagon winds through the lanes of the hotel down to our rooms, which all face the water. A little later a slightly luxury-shocked Ajahn Vimalo pops his head round the corner of my room’s French windows, leading out onto the communal lawn between us and the sea, “It is allowable for us to stay in a palace, innit?” He’s half happy and half overwhelmed; the place is certainly a paradisiacal one but, like all situations, many conditions needed to come together to enable paradise to be truly enjoyed. If you’re ill, or in a state of contention of some kind, or if you didn’t get the room you wanted *and* reserved, the shadow is what one receives rather than the light.

Sharm el-Sheikh ~ December 12th

*That is no country for old men,
The young in one another’s arms...*

W.B. Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*³⁴

It seems as though this little realm is all resorts and no town – the brochure on the plane had indicated the fun-seeking ambience of the place and this is vividly confirmed as we get used to being here.



There are coral reefs off the coast which provide what is regarded as the best scuba diving in the world. The other parts of the day, for most of the visitors here, are spent either on the beach or night-clubbing or cruising the hundreds of shops and restaurants. The air is 80°, the sky clear, people wander the lanes in bathrobes and bathing suits – this is no country for old men...

The reason we are here is that, along with providing the best accommodations in the area, Sharm el-Sheikh is also close to Mount Sinai. In the past, if anyone from Cairo or Alexandria wanted to journey there, it would take them days to travel by jeep, and in the pre-mechanized era, it would have taken weeks by horse and camel, or round the coast by boat. However, from Sharm el-Sheikh, it's a quick two-hour drive into the desert, and there you are.

Somewhere in the planning for our adventures here, the idea arose to climb to the summit of Sinai, which is also the highest mountain in Egypt. Ahmed, our guide, meets us in the lobby at 10:45 p.m. as, following current customs, we have decided to climb during the night and to be on top to greet the dawn. We roll out at 11:00 and are swiftly swallowed by the darkness, for, once we are away from the developed coastal area, all there is is the level desert, the mountains and the road. The half-moon lights the distant hills with a soft brown-silver sheen.

The road climbs, heading for St. Catherine. The city, and the monastery from which it derives its name are at about 1500 metres above sea level. It's a fat smiling moon as it rises 🌕, dust-coloured, as we roll along. It rises higher, loses its colouration as our journey progresses – it's smaller, brighter, more icy. The temperature drops sharply; this is the effect of both leaving the sea and rising to the cooler altitudes. By the time we have passed numerous police check points and reached the cafeteria below the monastery, it's only a few degrees above freezing. All of us have donned our down waistcoats, socks, gloves and hats, and are glad of a warming cuppa before we set off on the climb.

There are about 100 other visitors and pilgrims gathered with us this evening – the majority of them seem to be Russian. This ancient orthodox monastery, founded in 527 CE by the Emperor Justinian, was built on the spot where Moses saw the burning bush and where, according to the legend, The Authority spoke to him.

The monastery possesses huge looming walls 30 to 60 feet high. Like the fortresses of the monasteries of Wadi el-Natrun these ramparts were built to protect the monks, who had been assailed in various ways up to this point, as were Christian lay people who had also fled to the desert. The main door of

the structure had originally been set 30 feet above the level of the desert, with no stairs; all was winched up in baskets from below, including every monk that came and went from this isolated sanctuary.



Moonlight and rock. The dimness and the need to watch your step means that we only rarely look up. Torchlight illuminates the few yards ahead. There are presentiments of the bulk of mountains, walls of rock that surround us; there is a rough idea that we will climb a lot – Mount Sinai is 2286 metres, or 7500 feet above sea-level – but the eye and mind focus just on what is visible, the task to hand and foot. My own feet fly along the dusty track, dodging rocks and finding the most open path; others are soon treading with a laboured gait, particularly Luang Por and Khun Ead.

From the very base of the path up to the final steps, clusters of Bedouins are gathered to offer camel-powered assistance up the mountain, “You want to ride camel? Very good camel.” “You like camel, sir?” Some fellow pilgrims take up the offer early on, others further up as the legs begin to tire. The camel drivers easily spot those who are struggling and, like any hunter, they home in and follow close to these, their most likely game.

The progress up the mountain is mostly silent. A few of the Russian women repeat a mantra as they ascend – perhaps it is the prayer of the heart so beloved of the monk who is the subject of *The Way of a Pilgrim*: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me.”

By the time we reach the first pilgrims’ rest, after about 25 minutes of walking, it is clear that Luang Por can’t possibly make it on his own to the top. His breathing is very obstructed by his cold and, “We’ve not had a square meal in days...” so the energy that the body might usually have had is much depleted. A monastic debate ensues – that is, a few suggestions followed by pauses and listening, pondering, another suggestion or two... Eventually the option of stopping at this rest place with one or two of us gets laid aside and Ajahn Vimalo’s prompting of the allowability of riding a camel for medical reasons wins the day. One of the drivers, Suleiman, a leathery, pleasant fellow who has been alongside us for quite a while, finally gets his fare.

“Is this a good camel? It won’t bite him, will it?”

“This is the BMW of camels!” Suleiman replies, and Luang Por climbs aboard.



We all feel much more at ease as his breath had been so short and he had had to stop so many times to rest already. Now this trusty vehicle can help him on his way.

Being so anglicized these days Luang Por apologized repeatedly to us all for slowing everyone up, but we were here for him and *because* of him so, in truth, that thought never arose. The mountain would be as equanimous as ever if a few less people climbed it and we would simply have had an opportunity to see plans being shifted by the flow of life, once again.

Khun Ead is also slow of foot and another of the drivers hangs at her elbow for nearly an hour. She plods slightly awkwardly and I feel his presence like a vulture waiting beside a stumbling wildebeest. I stay close by; she is determined to do the whole thing on foot, and so she does. At last this one leaves her be and gives up, all his persuasions not having turned her heart.

At the base of the final climb, the 755 steps, we gather and say goodbye to the camel – this is too steep and awkward even for them and their sure-footed tread. It's still dark, about 4:40 a.m., and the rocky well-travelled trail springs up before us. Luang Por is weak but determined to go on – suggestions that he stay at this last coffee stall with the camels are gently dismissed.

My feet bound freely up the slope – hopping from rock to rock, sometimes taking two steps at a time. I'm not sure where all the juice has come from but it's certainly a bright charge at this time. The contrast of this energy to Luang Por's and Ead's difficulties puts it in perspective so, although it's handy and enjoyable to be prancing like a goat over the boulders, there's also the reminder that others don't have the same privilege and, more importantly, the day will come where it's my lungs that can't get enough air into the body and these legs will have turned to stone.

A local guy moves in on Luang Por and insists on “kindly” helping him along. We try to keep the path lit by our torches and offer all assistance, and, if truth be told, the Bedouin helper at his side was of great and real worth. The dark side of the help came when we finally broached the peak, in the form of his demand for US\$10, “Not Egyptian pounds!”

It turns into a scene – up on top of the holy mountain at dawn and wrangling over unsought aid; “You have a black heart!” said Ajahn Vimalo, “You are very greedy.” So, the freeing rapture of the rising light at the summit of the great mountain also had its own counterpoint – the grimy lust for maximum cash. This all underlines the fact that there is no *real* holy place in the sense world – there's always the dark that belongs with the light. Thus it's at times

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like this that the Buddha’s wisdom shines like the brightest of all suns, and illuminates the landscape of experience more beautifully than even this mid-December dawn over the barren granite mountains of South Sinai.

“One who relishes the six senses relishes dukkha”³⁵ – so it’s non-contention with a loud tout that is the holy place. If the heart gets carried away on, “Leave us alone! How dare you bother us when we’ve come to this sacred spot!” then you’re not on top of the holy mountain at all – you’ve just ascended to the platform of self-righteousness.

“When you realize that *samsāra* is *supposed* to be dukkha, it’s quite alright.” The challenging potential is not clinging to or creating contention against anything and, when we see things from that summit, the world that the heart knows is a perfect one.





The Ring of Fire

DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

*“Circles can be peaceful,
But they can also be vicious”*

Ajahn Sucitto

A talk given in Diamond Heights, San Francisco, May 1993

And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of the Arising of Suffering?

Dependent on ignorance arise formations; dependent on formations, consciousness; dependent on consciousness, mind and body; dependent on mind and body, the six senses; dependent on the six senses, contact; dependent on contact, feeling; dependent on feeling, desire; dependent on desire, clinging; dependent on clinging, the process of becoming; dependent on the process of becoming, birth; dependent on birth, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair come to pass. Thus does the whole mass of suffering arise.

This, monks, is called the Noble Truth of the Arising of Suffering.

And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering?

Through the entire cessation of ignorance, formations cease; through the cessation of formations, consciousness; through the cessation of consciousness, mind and body;



through the cessation of mind and body, the six senses; through the cessation of the six senses, contact; through the cessation of contact, feeling; through the cessation of feeling, desire; through the cessation of desire, clinging; through the cessation of clinging, the process of becoming; through the cessation of the process of becoming, birth; through the cessation of birth, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair all cease. Thus there is the cessation of the whole mass of suffering.

This, monks is called the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering.

Anguttara Nikaya 3.61

A LITTLE WHILE AGO when we were passing through Soquel, I was slightly surprised by a notice-board by the side of the road which simply said, “eschew obfuscation.” Which means, “Don’t be difficult to understand.” I couldn’t figure out why it was there but it was the most literary road sign I have seen in the whole United States. I realize that we are entering a somewhat technical subject this evening so you must forgive me if I get too obfuscatory and difficult to follow; I will try and keep things fairly clear, though, and give you symbols, explanations and imagery that are easy to follow.

Apart from being translated as Dependent Origination, this subject also has been rendered as “Conditioned Genesis” or “The Cycle of Subjective Captivity.” As well as in other places, this pattern of insight is contained in a number of the descriptions of the Buddha’s enlightenment. A week after the great Awakening, when he emerged from his absorption in the bliss of release, his first night was spent contemplating this. It is described that during the first two hours of the night, he followed it going in the forward order, “with the grain,” from ignorance through to birth, old age, sickness and death. In the second watch of the night he contemplated it in reverse order, “against the grain,” with the cessation of ignorance through to the cessation of old age, suffering and death. Then in the last watch of the night he contemplated it forwards and backwards, in both forward and reverse order.³⁶ His enlightenment was actually the process of understanding this pattern, so this is mighty stuff, these are the essentials of the Teaching. If we look we can see that it’s an analysis of the Second and the Third Noble Truth: the Second Truth being the cause of the arising of dukkha, of dissatisfaction, and the Third Truth being the ending, cessation, and fading away of dukkha.

Other descriptions of the enlightenment are in terms of insight into the Four Noble Truths and the Three True Knowledges, but obviously these are just different ways of looking at the same thing. What we have in this simple pattern of arising and ceasing described here is the journey from the Second to the Third Truth: from what causes us to experience dissatisfaction, alienation and so on, to what brings about its cessation, its transcendence.

The Buddha said, “Rather than trying to figure out a metaphysical structure for time, life, the universe and the mind, just put attention onto the essential elements of this vast subject because this is what is significant.”³⁷ If we can figure out what causes us to experience suffering and we can see what enables us to transcend suffering, then we are doing the best we can with human life. If we pick up information on how the whole machine works or came into existence, then that is fine, but it is an extra, because even if we can’t understand the nature of the universe conceptually, if we are in harmony with it, where’s the problem? There isn’t one!



The traditional presentation of this teaching can be read in a couple of different ways: on the one level, the external, we are talking about the arrival in the world of a human being, the arising of dissatisfaction and its effects; the other approach is to regard it as a pattern referring to the psychological domain – a pattern we are experiencing within ourselves on a momentary basis. The first one is what you find in most of the classical scriptures and commentaries, they talk about this very much in an external way. But more recently some, particularly Ajahn Buddhadasa and Ajahn Chah in Thailand, have taken this formulation and pointed out, “Well, if we talk about this just as how suffering arises due to causes before this life, this doesn’t give us a very good tool for meditation or for transcending dukkha right here and now.”

Ajahn Buddhadasa spent many years analyzing this and explaining how one can regard this same process as occurring in a momentary pattern. He gives a very clear description of how our experience arises and how it can turn into suffering – and how we can break that cycle of recurring habits and transcend the suffering that we create. He has received quite a bit of flak for this from more orthodox quarters but Ajahn Chah was very much taken by this approach towards understanding and using Dependent Origination, and this is what he used to teach himself.



The first type of interpretation is referred to as the “Three Life Theory,” described as taking place over three life-spans. The other is described as the “Momentary.” Ajahn Chah was very keen on the usefulness of it as a description of our momentary experience because, if one uses it in that way, it is a very immediate and powerful tool for working on our life and it shows us that our destiny, if you like, is not out of our reach. The first one tends to be more of a fatalistic interpretation.

The first interpretation is described in the way the Buddha arrived at this insight during the night of enlightenment, where he sat down and considered, “Why is there suffering?” This rendition is from *Oriental Mythology* by Joseph Campbell:

Where there is birth, there is inevitably old age, disease and death.

Where there has been attachment, then there is birth.

Where there is desire, there is then attachment.

Where a perception, there desire.

Where a contact, there perception.

Where there are organs of sense, that gives rise to the contact.

*Where there is an organism, that is where the organs of sense
arise from.*

Where there is incipient consciousness, there, there is an organism.

*Where there are inclinations derived from acts, there, there is
created incipient consciousness.*

And where there is ignorance, that creates these inclinations.

Therefore ignorance must be declared to be the root.³⁸

So this means that, because of past actions, unrealized biases are carried on from a previous life. When a being dies there is a momentum of karma – attachment to “fear of that,” “desire for this,” “aversion to that,” – this is what is called “inclinations derived from acts,” the habits that we have built up over lifetimes. So that when a person or any being dies, the unfinished business and habits of a lifetime are like the momentum of a flywheel, they carry on, and when the body dies, there is still that momentum of karma. This is the first life.

This gives rise to incipient consciousness. This means that that momentum gathers together as some form of consciousness. Once the body has died, then of course there is a large part missing from your world! Because of the enormous attachment to the body for most people, when the body dies, then one of the

major inclinations is, “Find me a body! Give me a body.” Then that inclination is pulled towards a place of rebirth, either in the human world, the animal world, or heavenly world or wherever. (For the sake of simplicity we can just talk about the human world.) Then, having gravitated to the human world, we have the six sense organs. The process of contact and perception then proceeds, then desire, attachment and becoming – end of second life – and then birth again. Then, after this second birth we carry on into the future, living this life into old age, sickness and death again – end of life the third – phew!

Incidentally, the main propounder of this theory, Acarya Buddhaghosa, when he gets to the end of his explanation says something like, “Quite frankly, I don’t really understand this, but this is the best I can do with what I can figure out from the scriptures.”³⁹ I remember when I read this for the first time, I thought, “Well... it kind of hangs together, but of what real use is this to me? This insight is supposed to have been what liberated the Buddha? It’s a neat little puzzle that you can fit together (just), but so what?” Then in later times, when I came across the descriptions by Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Buddhadasa, it made a lot more sense because it is talking about something experiential and immediate. It’s talking about the effect of ignorance here and now.



To begin with, when considering the momentary approach, it’s important to talk about the fundamental nature of mind, Original Mind. To describe this one uses terms like “Suchness,” *tathatā*, but there are other descriptions also – this is from a Tibetan teacher, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche:

“This luminous, self-aware non-conceptual mind, that is experienced in meditation, is Absolute Reality and not a *viññāna* (partial, fragmented knowing). When the luminous Wisdom Mind is realized there is no seeing and seen aspect to that realization. This is the non-conceptual non-dual Wisdom mind itself, the Clear Light Nature of Mind, the *Pabhassara Citta*; it is also called the *Dharmatā* and the *Tathāgatagarbha*.”

Tathāgatagarbha means “the womb of the *Tathāgatas*,” which means the origin of the mind, the origin of awareness.

When we talk about ignorance, therefore, we are not talking about it as the basic nature of reality, but rather that ignorance is something which arises from Original Mind, which is the mother and father of everything, as Ajahn Chah’s



teacher Ajahn Mun liked to put it. Ignorance, and all perceptions of everything, arise out of that basic ground. Dependent Origination is thus talking about the arising of illusion out of reality.

In this respect we have a way of looking at what happens when the natural awareness of mind is clouded. When there is ignorance the mind doesn't see clearly – often, in Buddhist iconography, ignorance is represented by the blind leading the blind. When we lose our mindfulness this gives rise to *sankhāra*. *Sankhāra* means “divided,” “particular” or that which is compounded; it means the arising of self and other, any kind of polarity. So that, out of this mind which recognizes Suchness, we start to drift off to the sense of self and other. *Sankhāra* also means “thing-ness,” the “world of things” – the illusion of solid independent entities starts to arise. What we then have before us is a process of crystallization or complexifying, so that basic sense of division into this and that becomes strengthened and becomes *viññāna*, which means discriminative consciousness. The mind is not only just dividing “this from that” and “self from other,” but is starting to be able to conceive a whole variety of different elements, different things within the sphere of attention.

Viññāna leads on to *nāmarūpa* – customarily we translate this as “mind and body.” It's a more concerted diversification of consciousness into the physical body and into all the different ranges of physical and mental activity. It's a solidification – the mind is drifting off into a sense of separateness – then there is this body and there is this mind and the two are apart from each other. That leads on to the six senses, which means we are giving more reality to a greater field of perceptions. The whole world of sight and sound and flavour and smell and taste and touch comes alive and becomes far more real.

So the process is growing from a basic simple root, like a tree slowly branching, branching and branching, getting more and more complicated and multifarious, spread out and involved. Verse 42 in the *Tao Te Ching* says:

*The Way gives rise to the One,
The One gives rise to the Two,
Two gives rise to Three,
From the Three arise all 10,000 things.*

Out of the *Way*, out of Suchness, there arises oneness then twoness then threeness, and once you've got three then you have got the 10,000 things.

As the mind absorbs into perception of a form then life appears more and

more complex. Once we have a belief in the reality of the sense world, then all the feelings of pleasure and pain, like and dislike, start to arise and become stronger, more interesting and compelling.

The process then describes how a feeling turns into a desire, some kind of self-centered craving; then how that desire for one particular sight or sound leads onto grasping. If an interest arises, the mind latches onto it, we see something, that produces a feeling of, “That’s beautiful,” then the eye is attracted towards it and it says, “I wouldn’t mind having one of those.” Then the absorption goes further, to grasping, “Well, I *really* would like to have that, it’s a really beautiful thing.” This is grasping. Then the decision to act on that, “Well, no one is looking; here it is, a nice little fruit just hanging off the tree. After all, it’s only going to drop to the ground and go to waste.”

This is upādāna: grasping means going after something, taking hold of it. Bhava comes next: this is a word translated as “becoming.” It is a word that befuddled me for years and years: “Becoming, becoming, becoming what? What is becoming? What is this talking about?” It took me a long time to realize that “becoming” means the thrill of getting what you want. Becoming then leads to jāti, which means “birth”; this refers to suddenly realizing, “Oh dear, this wasn’t really mine to take,” or “Well, one of them tasted good but I’ve just finished my fourteenth, I can feel indigestion coming on.” “Birth” is not necessarily talking about physical birth, but rather the point of no return where we have created karma and there is no going back. Once a child is born there is no turning back. Once that situation has been born we have to live through the whole life-span of its legacy, whatever that entails. And any condition that has been invested in goes towards *soka-parideva*, etc. – grief, sorrow and despair – ego-death in other words.



There are different patterns that one can use to illustrate this. It struck me some years ago how the early part of this pattern very much matches the structure of the material world. Physicists talk about the basis of matter and energy as a unified field; they use terms like, “the sea of potential” or “the well of being” (there are quite poetic people in these laboratories!). An undifferentiated field which is neither matter nor energy but which is universal, timeless – and all matter, all energy is spun forth out of this “quantum foam.” One can actually watch a particle appear out of nowhere and disappear into nowhere. This makes



it a very clear correlate for the quality of Suchness or the Unconditioned mind, the Unborn – in a way it is unborn energy or matter.

We use the Unborn, the Unoriginated, the Unconditioned, as terms for the pure mind. Matter arises from this same field, formulating itself into subatomic particles, atoms and molecules. Nowadays more and more physicists are having to bring consciousness into the equations of their understanding. They are coming to the conclusion that all matter has some kind of rudimentary form of consciousness. They now actually have conferences on subjects such as “Can electrons think?” They are also coming up with ideas for virtual particles called psychons which are reputed to be the conveyors of consciousness.

Anyway, regardless of the precise validity of these ideas, the scientific world now seems to be realizing that as soon as there is any organization of energy, there will be some rudimentary form of consciousness there. With each shift beyond a certain level of complexity then the level of consciousness will go up a step. They are now making studies of how life comes into existence; they see that certain arrangements of molecules will start to produce life-like behaviour, consciousness-like properties that we would recognize. So in the same way, out of this ultimate field, prior to matter and energy, this Suchness, there is the basic act of formulation, things coming together. From that formulation, basic and rudimentary forms of consciousness arise until you get little creatures. The smallest living creatures are things like viruses, which are sometimes no more than a few strands of DNA.

As soon as you have even these tiniest organisms, then the organism needs ways of getting information about its environment. It needs to know, when it encounters an object, “Can I eat it? Can I mate with it? Is it going to kill me?” Even the tiniest, most basic of living creatures picks up this information. They have a consciousness, a physical form, the sense bases arise and they have a sense of their environment. As soon as the sense bases are there, then it’s, “Oo, food! Chase!!” Or “Oo, enemy! Escape!” Desire arises, desire leads to clinging, clinging leads to becoming, becoming leads to birth, ageing and death, and so forth.



There is also a reason why it is called a cycle: maybe we follow some desire and we feel wretched about having done that – having eaten too much or yelled at someone – then we feel remorse afterwards. We may think, “So what, it was a painful thing, but it doesn’t matter.” But the whole process of rebirth

The Ring of Fire

hinges around the fact that having done that, having followed that impulse and not having understood it, then there is that momentum of habit whereby we are likely to do the same thing again even though the results were painful. The habit is created because we don't understand the pattern; we find ourselves likely to pursue the same thing again. Say a similar situation arises – we are attracted towards seizing that thing or getting angry again. We think, “No, no, no, I shouldn't do this, the last time I did this the result was really bad. I made a terrible mistake, I shouldn't do it. I mustn't get angry, I mustn't say anything,” and we try to hold it down. But in that very act of suppression we are empowering the habit and we have created that as an issue in our world, we have given it life. That potential for action is still there, so as soon as our grip slips and we are not in control, then, *zoom*, up it comes, we do the same thing again, and again, and so it goes on.

Even if we don't try and suppress it, and we have got a very good rationalizing mind and we think, “Well, I've just got a problem with guilt, that's all; I should be able to do what I want to do and not look back. I've just got a heavy suppression problem.” Then we do the same thing again and we think, “You know this really does hurt; I guess I've really got a bad problem with guilt, I definitely need to learn how to never look back!” We overpower our sense of shame.

However we do it, suffice to say this is why it's called the cycle of rebirth – it's a vicious circle. Those very habits that we are still attached to by loving them, by hating them, by not understanding them, we tend to repeat and so create cycles of fear and desire – The Ring of Fire – and we go round and around and around. This is *samsāra*, and this is not something that is remote, or tied up with stars in the sky or anything far away from us, it is right here in the very innards of our own world.



The way out is the whole *nirodha* aspect. With meditation, one is trying to witness the arising of ignorance, or to become aware of what causes the mind to cloud – to see the drifting of mindfulness. However, because our minds tend to be so busy we have to work our way down the scale; that is to say, when we start practising meditation we start at the level of just witnessing the results of what we have been doing, all the pleasurable and painful results of our actions. Slowly we begin to see that difficulty comes into being because of our following of fear, aversion, and desire.



We try to recognize the feeling of clinging, then learn to be able to catch the mind as we grasp at something, then to respond by letting that thing go. The more that we refine the practice, the more we will find we can catch the process at the level before desire turns into clinging, when there is just a pull towards something: “Oh, that looks nice!” The wisdom mind then says, “Wait a minute, remember – remember where this goes to.” By developing this, the place where desire turns into clinging becomes a bit more visible. If one then refines the practice more, to be able simply to witness feeling, say, the feeling of pleasure, then that is something delightful: there is innocence, just as is represented by the mythical image of the original couple in the Garden of Eden – joy and innocence.

It is a very important thing to recognize that we can feel innocent pleasure; it is not a crime for something to be delightful. Sometimes people get the impression that Buddhists are not supposed to enjoy anything, but the art of being able to enjoy things skilfully is a lot of what we are about – to be able to enjoy and be with life as it is, at that level of having the senses wide open, alert and awake to the whole world, yet not turning into desire, aversion, or fear. The more we can establish things at that level then the more natural peace of mind we will know.

On a more fundamental level, in meditation, we begin to be aware of the Unconditioned, the primordial nature of mind, Original Mind – where there is no identification or grasping at all, where the mind just has the experience of Suchness. We can observe the patterns of sankhāra arising when the attention drifts; we can watch the sense of self and other, here and there, coming into being. This is something that we can do, this is not out of our reach. It is something we can directly develop in meditation. Ajahn Sumedho would often give whole Dhamma talks on this one subject, summarizing it as, “Ignorance complicates everything.” When the mind is clear, when there is an open view of things, there is a seeing of that complicating process. When there is no discrimination, when there is a realization of Suchness, then a world can be watched coming into being. The sense of “self and other,” “this and that,” through the act of awareness and being alert to it, we can let it all go.

This is where we can really witness the strength of karmic formations, the underlying tendencies and habits that we have. What is it that most rapidly pulls our mind away from any kind of recognition of Suchness into the world of diversity? What are the benign things that we can live with easily? What sucks our eyes right out? We get to know these because these habitual tendencies of the mind are what empower the very processes of ignorance. A lot of what we

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are doing is becoming familiar with what is deluding, defrauding and compelling to us. What are our favourite delusions? What is your flavour – pistachio or lemon sorbet?

It might seem like this is very remote and impossible to do, but I wouldn't be talking about it if it were; anyway, this is the only way we can fulfil our life as a human being. In this very act of letting go of division and, in so doing, recognizing what it is that continues to blind us and create obstructions to awareness, we can awaken to what we are, to our true nature. We are not trying to become something different or special, we are simply removing the obscurations from what we already are so that we can recognize the truth of our own and everything else's nature that much more directly. This is the only way our life can be consummated.

To some of you who are new to Buddhism and meditation, this might all sound totally bizarre and utterly meaningless. If that is the case, then I am quite happy to take the consequences: we live for so many years in a world of seemingly solid people and things, which we see as all normal and good, so this kind of talk is... "What on earth is all this about? What does this mean? Has this got anything to do with me at all? What has this got to do with real life?"

I would like to suggest that we can look at what we call real life with much more of an objective eye. To contemplate, "What is really going on here? What is this experience of being a separate person? What is the fabric of our world that we know? What has been going on for my whole life?" Through examining the process of experience itself we are confronted with many questions.

I came across an interesting exchange between a Western student and an old Tibetan master, His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche (who was actually the first Buddhist teacher I ever met when I was a student in London University, years ago). Somebody asked him, "If everything is actually intrinsically perfect from the beginning, and it all happens within the context of the Great Perfection, then how did all of this happen?" Dudjom Rinpoche looked at him and asked, "Did it?"

That gives a pretty awesome perspective on the whole thing! Although I'm not entirely happy saying that it's all an illusion, because we then tend to misinterpret that idea. It's better simply to have an enquiring attitude, "What is really happening here?" "Is the world of people and things, and time and space, presidents and governments, cars and freeways, gas stations and Taco Bells – is that the real world?" "Even the world of friends and trees and skies and rivers, pure water and love songs – is that the real world?" "Meditation retreats,



Dhamma teachings, life on the cushion – is *that* the real world?” One can keep shedding the layers. After a certain point we start to get a little bit quivery. That’s why this word *nirodha* is good to contemplate; it comes from the root *rud* which means to check or restrain. If you are riding a horse you keep a tension on the reins, it’s a check, everything is held in check – everything is *here*. When the world happens here – when we see that the world happens within our mind – then, in a way, the world ceases – it is held in check, it’s in its context. “When all the world ceases to exist only the Wonderful remains.” What that means is not that there is the sudden *zoop!* of a nuclear explosion, and then we don’t see or feel or hear or smell or taste or touch – the ending of the world doesn’t mean a wipe-out of experience. The ending of the world means it all happens here, within the mind, and is the experience of wonderful existence within true emptiness. It exists, but it doesn’t exist; it’s empty but it’s true. This is our abiding place.

When we contemplate the cessation of things and see it in this way, their apparent reality is punctured. One is seeing all things: birth, human life, relationships, the stars, the planet, the ground, everything that we are and live with; if we see it all in context, allowing it to cease means that we realize that it all happens here within the mind. Then only the Wonderful remains.

*Life is truly a dream,
All of its troubles I alone create
When I stop creating, the trouble stops.
With a single mind, with an unbounded heart
We can wake up to the Wonderful Existence
Within True Emptiness
That we are in the middle of right now.
When all the world ceases to exist,
Only the Wonderful remains.*

Bhikshu Heng Chau⁴⁰



One image that I like, one that I have used most often, is to think of the process like this: We are an eye in the sky, way, way, above the earth. Awareness and the infinite blue. Everything is O.K. Then our attention is caught by

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some movement in the blueness down below, the eye peers down and ponders, “I wonder what that is?” The attention starts to focus and draws close like a telescope on the surface of the sea. This is sankhāra, self having interest in the other. Viññāna is then the patterns on the water, the different shapes of the waves. We think, “That’s interesting – beautiful waves!” Then that complexifies and diversifies into different kinds of consciousness, into perceptions, thought, feeling, body, the six senses; we’ve drawn closer and closer, now hopping from wave to wave, dodging from this one to that one, having a great time. Different types of waves: sound waves, colour waves, smell waves, touch waves, thought waves – all very nice. Then suddenly there’s one we find *really* interesting; desire arises: “This is a great wave!” Desire turns into clinging and we think, “This one is rideable.” Suddenly, as if by magic, a surfboard appears and we are away! Clinging turns into becoming – surfing, riding the crest of a great wave is the perfect image for becoming. A couple of years ago I was down by Huntington Beach. They have a beautiful sculpture by the roadside, a big bronze of a youth, a teenage boy perched on top of his board riding high on the curl of the perfect wave.⁴¹ The heart of Southern Californian beach life seems to be the desire to become, epitomized by the riding of the crest. Bhava is the thrill of getting what we want – we are riding our wave and we’re right in the teeth of it – *total thrill*. Then bhava turns into jāti which means either, “I’ve run out of wave” or “This wave is taking me to the rocks” or suchlike. Suddenly the wave collapses, we are thrown through mid-air, do a few somersaults, mouthfuls of sea water, don’t know which way is up or down. Splat! We’re choking and spluttering and have been thoroughly dumped by the whole thing. So what do we do? Go looking for another wave, of course!



In the ignorance that implies impression that knits knowledge that finds the nameform that whets the wits that convey contacts that sweeten sensation that drives desire that adheres to attachment that dogs death that bitches birth that entails the ensuance of existentiality.

James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*⁴²



The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...”

Part 8: Mount Sinai & Sharm el-Sheikh

Sharm el-Sheikh – December 12th

THE SUNRISE ON MT SINAI is magical and colour-rich so high above the world, the air so clean. The 100 of us perch, scattered among the rocks, all along the eastern parapet, up as far as the little chapel that crowns the mountain. A cry goes up as the sun-disk breaks the far ridge-line. It rises fast, rapidly colouring the peaks around us with a peachy-salmon hue. The far valleys range to the eastern horizon in fading shades of blue.

“I think my mountain climbing days are over,” comments Luang Por. Ead sits nearby; she was dead on her feet for the latter part of the climb and now rests, her face washed by the dawn light, still in utter exhaustion. I am reminded of the time that Luang Por and I climbed Scafell Pike in England’s Lake District, with Nick Scott. We had been hiking through some arduous conditions for a couple of weeks; now we came up the rear side of the mountain, the highest peak in England (although only a humble 3200 feet), and had expected to be alone at this unique moment. To our surprise, when we crested the peak, we found about 200 other people up there – the road was only a few hundred yards below, approaching from the opposite side. Once we had adjusted ourselves to this shift of view, we settled ourselves down near the summit.

“Ajahn, do you realize that you are now the highest bhikkhu in England?” asked Nick, “What do you think we should call you?”

“Your Highness’ of course,” riposted Luang Por – I was very impressed with the speed of his wit, especially as we had just climbed from 1200 feet below.

Now, I was trying to lighten the mood a little, as the dominant feeling

was one tinged with defeat and loss, a moment when old age was known as no longer negotiable and the limitations of the body brought viciously home to roost. Of course those limits were well-known in one sense, but there's a natural sadness that comes when some useful faculty departs, probably for good.

It's only a moment that this mood contrives to dominate for, after a pause to recover and with the growing light, soon the grim ārammana has dissolved. Wonderment at the landscape revealed in its barren glory, combined with the quiet joy of companionship in the life of Dhamma, colours the space in a very different way. Needless to say, sadness and loss and joyful wonder are all simply mental states, however, the former tend to cloud the vision and the latter to clarify it. It's natural for the heart to delight in positive states for these make the Truth easier to recognize.

It is very still on top – no wind.



The descent is a lot easier for everyone. We can see where to put our feet and the force of gravity carries us in the desired direction – down, down and more down. In fact it also becomes somewhat shocking, as we drop ever lower, to see just how high that mountain was; “If we had been able to tell the height we had to climb, we'd have turned back down at the bottom,” was said by more than one of us.

Down and still down – it seems much further than when we ascended, the eye giving visual cues to the land we never had before. Ahmed leads the way and chats about his life as we make our descent – he's actually an accountant by profession but the money he gets for tour guiding is roughly three times the salary he'd get for following his chosen *métier*. He, too, is weary with the long road to St. Catherine's; we see the tall fortifications from afar but, as we walk, it never seems to get nearer.

Our group is far and away the last down – Luang Por and Ead are both a little slower than the rest of us but finally we're back beneath the giant sand-coloured walls, and the granite V of the valley soars away and above us on either side. Here are trees, flowers, colours other than those of dust and rock. Richard and I are feeling bright and energized so we end up leading the way to the cafeteria to have our breakfast. Many monastery cats attend us and Ajahn Vimalo and Ead feed them continually – we're all ravenous after the output of the night and the food provided by the hotel gets inhaled.



Weary feet carry us back to the bus after an abbreviated tour of St. Catherine's Monastery. We're all a little glazed by the time we walk through the precincts and it's hard to give the wonders of the place our full attention – the ossuary of dead monks' skulls and bones (too dry and rocky for a lot of burials), mostly from the 10th – 14th Centuries when the population here was 300–400 – now it's more like 20, mostly Greek; the burning bush of Moses' fame, of a unique species, unknown elsewhere on earth – so they say; and the church bedecked with icons that are serene and exquisitely formed. Yet the lack of juice in the observers renders all a little paler and thinner than they would be in other circumstances. This is also a great holy place, but without energy in the pilgrims, it all remains somewhat remote, without impact. Even the fact that this Christian monastery mysteriously contains a mosque hardly registers.

The many Russian visitors look at us askance and with curious stares; even more pictures than usual are taken of us. This is not what folks expected to find at the site of the burning bush and where the holy relics of St. Catherine are enshrined: four Buddhist monks – and a little dust-stained and begrimed at that.

As the bus pulls onto the road all of us are soon dozing, however the daylight now reveals the land that we traversed under the moonlight. The rocky valleys are flat-floored; the mountains are striated with bands of umber through the craggy stands of rusty ochre. It's like Mordor and, for many miles, there is not a living thing to be seen – no blade of grass, no desert scrub or chaparral, let alone any animal or bird – just burned rock and sand, sharp mountains.

There are stops at the many police checks and, eventually, some small wiry trees appear in the open flats – lonely, straggling, bush-topped acacia, at most reaching ten or 15 feet – brave souls, managing to find a way to survive in this blasted land. The road is well-made, a dual carriageway, and it helps us get back to Sharm el-Shiekh in record time.

We find a place for the meal in the thick of Narma Bay's shopping district – it's a "Thai" restaurant but it's soon clear that this is just a name. It's all a little surreal, after the long and arduous night, and most of us are weary beyond really caring – it's just fuel to sustain the body, after all.

Once we step out onto the pedestrian precinct street, the full character of this resort city becomes more apparent. Within minutes I feel that sinking contraction in the heart that comes with the presence of an all-encompassing promise of stuff to get – Colourful! Exciting! Interesting! Now! – all the nonsense and garbage that most of the world calls paradise. It seems to be proportional: the brighter and more compelling the promises, the greater the

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disappointment is going to be and the greater the addiction to the next great thing in people's hearts. It's exactly this intuition of the incapacity of the sense world ever to truly satisfy that brought me into the monastery in the first place.

"*Odi profanum vulgus* – I despise the vulgar herd – although," commented Luang Por, "it is good to see this kind of thing once in a while, isn't it? All the pretty people and their beach things, the shops full of useless glamorous stuff... It shows you just how meaningless samsāra is."

This array of dispassion-inducing elements on the street was in stark contrast to the chemist who ran the pharmacy where we went to find some cough medicine for Luang Por. He was just performing his prayers when we walked in. We waited and, when he rose and asked what we were, and we said, "Buddhist monks," his face lit up and he eagerly shook each of us by the hand. He was fascinated and inspired to hear how our discipline was arranged, as he was a devout Muslim and, as had been the case with Ahmed, Eman and other guides of ours, our brief contact had made his day. This is the great joy of life as a devadūta.



We met Edward, by chance, as we passed the Baskin-Robbins ice cream parlour and all of us piled into a couple of taxis to return to the hotel. The sight of my door and the solitude of the room brought a sweet rush of happiness – returning home! That cherished feeling of protection and all good.

Sharm el-Sheikh – December 13th

I WAKE FROM THE FIRST dreamless sleep in ages – tonight there were none of the strange hallucinatory, hypnagogic visions that I have been experiencing for the last three days: apparitions of gods and Pharaohs flowing by in strange serene processions, vivid, lucid, full of waking thought and clear reflection. Last night naught but the head touching the pillow and now the brightness of dawn behind the curtain.

Luang Por is still chesty – I hear him coughing hoarsely in the next room – but at breakfast he seems a little more comfortable. The presence of his cough, and the weakness of the body generally, underscores the same insights that have been impressing us these days: here we are, surrounded by the full



splendour of what humans can create in the way of beauty and comfort, yet the perfection of it is utterly dependent. This is the land of the lotus-eaters and as Luang Por said that morning, “This is paradise, Edward.”

Richard responded, “Yes, Luang Por, but don’t forget, it would soon get *very* boring.”

“He just said it was paradise, he didn’t say it was ultimately satisfying!” I added, offering my own ten pence worth to the conversation.

Following the rigours of the climb up the mountain the previous day, and the presence now of this idyll, among the lords and ladies of Byzantium, *The Oasis of Sidi Khaled* by Wilfred Scawen Blunt, one of Luang Por’s favourite poems, comes to mind. He said he was trying to recall it as he trudged along the rocky path – I also thought of it, particularly as we plodded those last endless miles down to St. Catherine’s Monastery:

*How the earth burns! Each pebble underfoot
Is as a living thing with power to wound.
The white sand quivers, and the foot-fall mute
Of the slow camels strikes but gives no sound,
As though they walked on flame, not solid ground.
'Tis noon, and the beasts' shadows even have fled
Back to their feet, and there is fire around
And fire beneath, and overhead the sun.*

*Pitiful heaven! What is this we view?
Tall trees, a river, pools, where swallows fly,
Thickets of oleander where doves coo,
Shades, deep as midnight, greenness for tired eyes,
Hark, how the light winds in the palm-tops sigh.*

Oh this is rest. Oh this is Paradise.

We sit and enjoy the view over the water – tall trees, pools, thickets of bougainvillea where doves coo... It’s all here: paradise – but how easily it bursts and disappears.

Once we’re all packed up and ready to check out we gather in the lobby on some seats on the lower mezzanine – from a door on our left a troop of glamorous young women, mostly in tight, expensive and scanty clothing sud-

denly appears. They arrange themselves along the semi-circular bench above our heads, backs towards us, although a few, predictably, seeing the four of us robed and shaven-headed ones, stare and steer a small video-camera toward us. They form like a colourful bubble; they swirl and flow for a moment – decked with the colours and patterns of their own deva-diva world (one sports a pink waistcoat with a playboy bunny, ringed by rhinestones, on the back) – and *bouf*, then they're gone. There's nothing there.

Just as with Luang Por's cough – he's in amongst the glories of Byzantium but, with clogged tubes and a roughened throat, what is it worth?

We are devadūtas in the land of the lotus-eaters. Some recognize what the robe means (like the pharmacist) and rejoice; some see “foreigner”; some a monk. Some think, “Wow, that's cool and those robes are pretty neat – I wonder where they get *them* from?” and some, “Who are these jokers? What kind of idiots do they think they are?” Others, “Don't look, it's rude to stare...” Like the blind people and the elephant we easily see only our own presumptions, or, more to the point, “When a pick-pocket meets a saint, all he can see is pockets.” The messengers are out there but only a very few can get the message that will truly free them.



We have the meal at the hotel restaurant. Only two are open, one at the pool, one at the beach, so we opt for the beach, this one offering the chance to dip our toes in the Red Sea – stunningly blue in the midday sun – and to see the rainbow fishes and corals in the turquoise waters. There's a floating dock out over the reef – we gingerly tread our way, Luang Por, Ajahn Ñānarato and I, and gaze down into those fertile, pellucid spaces. We sit down carefully – mindful of the fluid lurches of the bobbing jetty – and dangle our feet in the warm blue bath amid the softly folded submarine landscapes, our eyes transfixed by the darting forms and gently wafting fronds of the world below. Fish that are dark and tiny, brown and blue-striped, orange and yellow slide by, this way and that. Fat sea-anemones bloom in purple clutches, deep patches of sand spread in pale perfect aquamarines – colours that gave origin to the name.

It's a strangely fertile wonderland and, ironically, it's the very barrenness of the land mass and its absence of rivers that is one of the prime causes of the clarity of the sea here – no silt and river-wash to disturb or turbidify it. Things create their opposites: the burned rock of lifeless desert, the rich coral strands,



and then the tourist idyll that's grown in the littoral zone – that domain where the meeting of opposites bears its fruit.

Promise creates disappointment.

Vigour's delight creates weakness's despair.

The comfort of a schedule creates the fear of being late.

Exhaustion and grime creates the delight of a shower and a bed.

You give up the world to become a monk and you find yourself feeding on gouts of honey-dew and supping the grapes of paradise.

Things always create their opposites: good/bad – light/shadow – happiness/sorrow – the trick is to cultivate the littoral, that transcendent Middle Zone of real life, the place of clear awareness where those opposites inform each other, and that which goes beyond them is revealed.

It is the Middle Way which is the resolution of opposites. It's not just half way between indulgence and suppression – half happiness and half suffering – it is the pivot that the pendulum swings from, not the half-way mark at the bottom of the arc. It's by knowing the extremes, of hell and paradise, and not being confused by either, that the heart opens to that dimension that is free of all ups and downs, pasts and futures, gains and losses, and that is truly free of all dukkha.

This is the heart at ease in hell and in paradise – and this is the place to enjoy a true holy day.



Life Without Sila is Like a Car Without Brakes

A talk given in Diamond Heights, San Francisco, Summer 1992

THE SUBJECT OF SĪLA, OR VIRTUOUS, BEAUTIFUL CONDUCT, is a very tricky area which people often misunderstand. It is therefore an area where we can benefit from some guidance and instruction – some understanding about how best to conduct ourselves in the manner in which we relate both to our own life and to other people.

Often, we are attracted to the Buddha's teaching because it cuts right to the very heart of our experience. I was certainly drawn by the ultimate and incisive nature of it – in particular, the teachings on emptiness. This seemed to be one of the most important aspects of the teachings – i.e., that which pertains to transcendent, ultimate reality.

In Western culture, we tend not to want to settle for second best. We want to aim for the top and we can tend towards the same kind of attitude in our approach to religious life. Why bother with the provisional teachings, the kindergarten stuff, when we can go for enlightenment just by the use of these powerful insights into selflessness and emptiness, or into the essential Buddha nature of all beings? You come across this in different Buddhist traditions, particularly Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. This aspect of the teachings, that all beings are Buddhas and everything is perfect just as it is, was stressed in Buddhism's early years in the West: "We just have to awaken to the perfection that comprises everything around us. And once we have that realization we can act in whatever way pleases us. If we are all Buddhas, then we act as Buddhas and everything that a Buddha says and does is perfect." So, the teaching was often interpreted in a way to justify any kind of activity. With the back-up of Ultimate Truth, everything is perfect. So, no matter what I do or how it looks to you, or to the police, it's all perfect.



On an ultimate level this is true. But this truth is something which has caused a great deal of confusion in the Buddhist world. Even though it's a very attractive, powerful, and liberating aspect of the Buddha's teaching, it can be badly misunderstood. I remember years ago being given a book called *I Am That* by Nisargadatta Maharaj. Reading this book is like listening to God speaking – mighty stuff. In one passage somebody asked Nisargadatta about his own spiritual training. He very rarely referred to any kind of training at all but just to the act of being awake. He said that if you just wake up to the reality of what you *are*, then everything is fine. The questioner persisted and eventually he said, "The teacher told me, 'You are the Ultimate Reality – do not doubt my words.'" Nisargadatta's comment then is something like, "So, I just acted accordingly." End of subject! I remember thinking, "That's it? That's all there is to it? Maybe *he*, as some special kind of person, was the Ultimate Reality, but what about all the rest of us?" It was so raw and direct, but, eventually, something in my heart said, "Yes, it's true – for everyone. That's all there is to it."

But then we tend to find that what may have been a valid insight, after a while, just becomes a memory of some thing that we believe we have accomplished. We take it as some kind of credit card that we can keep spending on and never pay the bill – because there's no one there to send it to. It is just as if you received your account from Visa and returned it to them saying, "There is no one here. No one actually owns this card. Therefore here is your bill returned." If you did this you'd soon receive a visit from someone in a uniform!

This interpretation has been a common occurrence in the West, causing a lot of distress: people have taken some big mystical experience, or ratification by a spiritual authority (such as being named a Dharma Heir), or some approval by a teacher of great reputation, as an indication of their enlightenment. I've heard of people saying, "You don't understand what I do because I'm enlightened and you are not. Therefore, you can't understand the motives of my actions. You should not question what I do." *Anything* can be justified by this outlet.

In Christian history something very similar to this was known as the "Antinomian Heresy" (literally it means "exempt from the law"). This referred to a group of early Christians who believed that anything done in the name of Christ was a pure act. They caused a lot of trouble and were eventually squashed by the church. I find it interesting to see that the same dynamic occurred so long ago (and has done a few times since then) in the Christian world. Individuals thinking that, if they have some kind of credential or authority behind them, like Jesus or a great guru or Roshi, who says, "Okay, you've got it. Well done, I'm

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right behind you. You are the owner of the lineage. It's not you acting, it's just the Buddha nature within you" – they then take that for granted, and don't necessarily recognize their own ego-motivated actions, desires, opinions and views. Or justify them as being "Sleeping Buddha" or "Angry Buddha" or "Lustful Buddha" and drift further and further off the path. And if we do this, we usually find that we've taken a number of people with us.

I'm sure many of you are aware of the distress caused in Buddhist circles in recent years over this point and this misunderstanding. As I have said, this ultimate viewpoint is valid. It has its own verity – that qualities of good and evil are only relative truths. Shakespeare's Hamlet says, "For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." That is certainly true from the ultimate point of view, but from the relative perspective there is definitely good and there is bad, right and wrong. There is beautiful conduct and that which is ugly. So we must not only take things from the ultimate perspective, but use a bit of common sense as well; not just operate from idealism but look at life in terms of realism and practicality too.

It is stressed over and over again in classical Buddhist teachings that a deep insight does not negate the need to behave respectfully and carefully towards other people, to the things of the earth and towards social conventions. One of the disciples of a Master of Ch'an meditation was telling me that, even though his teacher is very highly accomplished spiritually, he very rarely gives talks on emptiness. This despite the fact that he is eminently capable of doing so. In most of his Dharma talks he teaches about doing good and keeping the Precepts. Regardless of his audience he tends to stress the need for a profound sense of moral integrity.

This monk also told me an interesting story about their early days, in the '60s, when their monastery was situated in an old mattress factory down in the Mission District of San Francisco. In those days, amongst all the other luminaries of San Francisco, there was a character called Sufi Sam. He was one of the psychedelic gurus of the time. Sufi Sam was quite a wealthy man who kept open house and provided free psychedelics and booze for anyone who wanted to come and join the party, that is, be part of his group and/or join in the general spiritual free-for-all. He pulled in quite a few people and actually helped a good number of them. He was very much a do-whatever-you-want-to-do, be-whatever-you-want-to-be kind of teacher, as far as I understand. And he taught that we are all God/Buddha/The Great Whatever-it-is – however you want to name it. As the story goes, one day Sufi Sam fell down the stairs and died. The following day about 20 of his disciples – slightly starry-eyed, long-haired colourful characters



– showed up at this very strict Chinese meditation monastery. They explained that on the previous night, following the death of Sufi Sam, eight of them had all dreamed the same dream. In their dreams, Sufi Sam appeared saying, “You should go and see Master Hua and you should take refuge with him. Don’t carry on the way I’ve been teaching you. Go with him and tidy up your act.” It was interesting that, coming from a very liberal and open-ended approach, Sufi Sam should say (albeit under slightly exotic circumstances – from the other side) that what his disciples should do is learn how to contain and restrain themselves and guide their lives in a more explicitly wholesome way.

When Ajahn Chah came to the West he noticed that many people asked questions about selflessness, emptiness, and Ultimate Reality. Yet he could see how people were, how they operated, and he started to stress the keeping of Precepts – he tried to bring people down to earth. He saw that what we did *not* need was more of a passport to ignore the practical realities of human living by spacing out into some pseudo-transcendental realm, making that our aim whilst neglecting the world of relative truth.

The reason why the Buddha put a lot of emphasis on the Precepts, and also why the more orthodox Buddhist teachers stress them in other groups in the West, is precisely because of the pain and difficulty caused when we don’t abide by some kind of guidance system. You can liken not adhering to a moral discipline to driving a car without brakes. (This is a very apt symbol for San Francisco – you’ve got some pretty impressive hills here!) If you imagine what driving a car without brakes here would be like, it doesn’t take much to recognize that you could pile up really seriously.

So, that’s what the aspects of self-control and self-discipline are about within the Buddhist training – just making sure that the brakes on your car work. Having a car that can accelerate and go places fast is fine, but if you don’t have brakes, when the road bends you will be in trouble. When we reach a stop sign or a crossroads we need to be able to stop. Life is not all empty roads and green lights; other traffic, red lights and so on abound.

What you find in the Buddha’s approach towards *sīla*, or virtue, is that it is not an imposition upon life, as if he were thinking, “All religions are about telling people that they can’t have fun, so I suppose mine will have to be that way too.” His approach was neither an effort to put the dampers on everything people find enjoyable, nor was it a gratuitous imposition of rules upon people. Rather my experience of it (and what initially attracted me to the Teaching) was that it was a simple effort to pinpoint the areas of life where we get ourselves into

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trouble most easily, where life is most karmically loaded, so it's more like pointing out the danger spots and encouraging us to be careful. The Buddha wasn't saying that something is inherently bad or wrong, but that if we don't develop some kind of sensitivity to these difficult areas of our lives, if we don't look out for trouble spots and problems, it's like driving with your eyes closed, or like driving without brakes. "You're going to be fine for a while, friend, but don't expect me to be around to pick up the pieces when you collide with something."

Looking at the Five Precepts for the Buddhist laity, they are very much presented in this spirit. They are there as guidelines to help us, not as the voice of the Lord dumped upon us. Often people are concerned about what sort of standard to follow, how strictly to apply the Precepts. This is, of course, up to each individual. The Buddha presented them in quite a formalized way so that there should be a clear standard, nevertheless we can apply them in differing strengths. In different cultures what is considered right and wrong varies somewhat.

The first precept is not to take the life of any living creature. This comes from a basic respectfulness of life and is about controlling aggression. If it is taken very scrupulously, then we avoid all unnecessary taking of life – even the tiniest insects, mosquitoes or the greenflies who are doing terrible things to our roses. The precept is there to make us think about what is most important to us: "Are my roses more important, or is the life of this creature?"

I once had a potted plant, a chrysanthemum. At first it looked vital and healthy with lots of flowers, I suspect because it had been jammed full of chemicals in the flower shop. Then, of course, it got a bit exhausted. As you might know, when a flower gets weak the greenflies sniff it out from across the garden. After a while this poor plant was covered in greenfly. I wondered what to do about it. First of all I picked the greenflies off with a feather and took them outside. This was quite laborious because they multiply at an alarming rate. Eventually, I looked at my plant and said, "I am not going to keep a plant anymore. I'll look at it as a greenfly farm. I'll just keep pet greenflies instead!" (Did any of you ever read e. e. cummings' poem about his Uncle Sol's worm farm?⁴³)

I am not necessarily suggesting that this is the approach one has to take. But, certainly, we can terminate a lot of suffering by changing our attitude to what we expect or want out of life.

Last weekend we were down at the Ojai Foundation having a meditation day, but we were not allowed to use any of their buildings. It seemed that they'd had some problems with the planning authorities so we had to have all of our sittings outside. In that area of the state, there is a very potent biting fly. We



could feel these little insects landing on us as we tried to meditate. It was very good for concentration as we felt these little critters land and sink their jaws in. Quite naturally, the first reaction is, “These flies are obstructing my meditation practice, they shouldn’t be here.” But then I realized that I was just getting annoyed with them for biting me. From their perspective, we came and sat on *their* hillside, a five-star food source, radiating heat and all sorts of interesting smells. So they think, “Well, whoopee. Drive-in, free burgers.” If we just change it around and consider instead, “I’m not here to meditate, I’ve just come to feed a few flies. I’m having a fly-feeding day. Of course, if I am going to feed such flies, it is going to hurt a little bit. That’s just part of the deal.” By changing our mind around we can relate to the whole world in a very different way.

I’ve just used these examples so we can see how to work with the precepts and use them to help us live in a much more unselfish way. But the precepts don’t only relate to external things, they also relate to the inner world. We try to refrain from killing off anything in the mind, like wanting to kill our selfishness, anger or jealousy. Rather we try to develop a mind which is able to work with, accommodate and deal with things in a non-competitive, non-confrontational way. We learn to work with the differing aspects of the mind rather than attacking and aggressing against them.

The second precept is about acquisition or greed, the desire for owning things. The text of the precept is, “I undertake to refrain from taking that which is not given.” Which means that we need to learn to live just by what comes to us, to live without taking more than we need from life. So it not only means refraining from stealing possessions or money or defrauding people, but also developing a sense of contentment with what we’ve got, learning not to chase things just for the sake of acquisition. In this culture, this is a highly rebellious principle; most of us here this evening are not hell-bent on becoming millionaires by the end of the year, but still, the whole ethic of “more is better” easily creeps into us. Even if we’re way above wanting fancy cars or loads-o’-money, we can still want loads of spiritual acquisitions – sublime states of mind, beautiful Buddha images, or wonderful spiritual books. Often there is greed for significant experiences; these we can end up using solely to gain a reputation for having great wisdom, or to inflate our egos or to impress our friends. So the second precept is helping us to guard against greed of all kinds, and accumulation for its own sake.

The third precept is probably the trickiest one. I have heard tell how, when Ajahn Chah came to the United States in 1979, he was teaching at IMS and giving a talk about the precepts to an audience of around 100 people who were

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on retreat at the time. When he got onto the third precept, which is about sexuality and the proper use of sexual behaviour, he went on for about twenty minutes without giving the translator a chance to get a word in. He really got into his stride! It was quite a task to convey it all in English, but one could see that this was obviously something that needed to be explained in detail. It's an area which is very personal to people and it is difficult to have an objective standard for it – particularly in today's society where many of the traditional boundaries have shifted radically.

I've contemplated this question a lot because people have asked about it so many times over the years. To use a classical standard – for example, to say that people should not have sex before marriage – is so completely out of tune with the way life is in the Western world these days that if I promoted such a option there would probably, and rapidly, be a much smaller group of people who gave any credence to the things that I said! Even just the idea that a relationship should be between one man and one woman is a great presumption nowadays. Because to be in a partnership of a man with another man or a woman with another woman is pretty common – particularly in this town! So one needs to have some sort of objective standard, whereby sexuality is not just being used as a distraction, for some selfish end, or simply to maximize pleasure for oneself, but much more with a quality of responsibility and commitment. A standard that I might suggest (and this is just for everyone to consider...) is to refrain from engaging in sexual intercourse with anyone you wouldn't be prepared to spend the rest of your life with. Not *intending* to, just *prepared* to. This is only a suggestion – I don't want to give anyone heart failure.

Now it might seem to be a bit of a cheek for someone who has been celibate for the last fifteen years to put such a thing to you. However, even though before I was a monk I was quite libertine in my ways, this is actually the standard that I used to live by; and this was before I was even a Buddhist. I did slip occasionally (!), particularly if I was blind drunk, but I must say that I found it a really helpful standard to consider, "Well, would I be prepared to spend the rest of my life with this person?" If the answer was, "No," I found it much better to relate on the basis of friendship and to avoid going into the area of sexual engagement.

This is just a standard for you to contemplate; it might seem somewhat extreme but it does carry the use of sexual energy, and the sexual nature of our bodies, with a due sense of responsibility – so that sex is not just used for pleasure-seeking and so forth, but is a way of bonding ourselves to another person in a way that is wholesome, supportive and beneficial to both sides.



The internal aspect of this standard is that we're not just trying to maximize the pleasure principle generally; instead we're inclining more towards a sense of responsibility, of caring for all things mental and physical rather than just using different kinds of pleasure to distract ourselves from boredom or for taking our mind off more painful things.

The fourth precept is to engage in "Right Speech." In some of the Buddha's descriptions of the Five Precepts, he spent more time on this precept than he did on the other four precepts put together. This was quite striking to me when I first came across it, because what it said to me was that speech is our primary area of contact with other people; it is how we relate with others most immediately, most directly and most repeatedly; it is also the most loaded area of activity. Who we think we are and how we present ourselves to others is largely represented by what and how we speak. So the Buddha encouraged a great deal of care and sensitivity in our use of it.

The precept of Right Speech is not just a matter of not lying, it's also to do with not gossiping, not back-biting, not talking about people behind their backs, and not using abusive or vulgar speech. In this way we're being careful and not letting those tendencies of the mind spill out into a more karmically loaded situation. We're not bringing those things into being carelessly. By applying sensitivity in the way we relate to other people, we're guarding against those unwholesome tendencies of mind and restraining ourselves from just dumping them onto other people. We're not relating to others in a dishonest way, or in a selfish, spiteful, aggressive, or abusive way. Those tendencies of mind are checked at the mind door and not spread out into the world.

The last precept is to refrain from intoxication – to refrain from drink and drugs which cause the mind to become heedless. The popular interpretation of this is that it only means not to get drunk. But the wording of it is pretty clear: it means that one should avoid altogether that which causes us to be heedless. Again, I should reiterate that these sort of standards are not absolute; however, this is the pattern laid out by the Buddha, and he did so for a reason. The usual way of thinking is, "Well... the occasional glass of wine over dinner... it is uncivilized to say 'no.' People take you out and want to give you a pleasant evening and then you go and upset them by refusing their offer of a glass of Chablis." We can feel that it's quite unreasonable to refuse alcohol, or to not "allow" ourselves a drop now and then... or a few mushrooms...

But this is a standard that we're creating for ourselves because we see that, if we are heedless and careless with life, then we inevitably cause problems for our-

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selves and for other people. If we're more mindful, then we're much less likely to cause the same kind of problems. It's a simple equation – when we're mindful, we don't suffer. There might be pain or difficulty, but there's no anguish. The more heedless and careless we are, the more anguish and difficulty we generate. It is a very direct relationship. If we are deliberately clouding the mind and causing our natural qualities of restraint to be squashed, we might feel great at the time, but I am sure everyone is well acquainted with what it feels like later on when we realize how we spoke, the things we did and the things that we brought into the world in those less guarded states.

Again, I don't want to present this as a moralistic put-down, I simply bring attention to this so that we can notice what we do when the mind is distracted, confused or is modified in that kind of way.

In the formal ceremony of taking the Refuges and Precepts there is a little chant that the person who is giving the precepts recites. It says, "Sīla is the vehicle for happiness; sīla is the vehicle for good fortune; sīla is the vehicle for liberation – therefore let sīla be purified."

According to the Buddha's teaching, the whole process of liberation necessarily begins with moral restraint – a respect for the way that we act, speak and relate with each other. We might feel that to follow our feelings, fear and desires – to act in a free and uninhibited way – is Right Action in the sense that we are "honouring" those feelings. However, that restraint and inhibition can be a very wise sense of right and wrong, and is what the Buddha called hiriottappa. He described it as "the guarding and protecting principle of the world" – *lokaṇḍāla*. It is that simple feeling of, "This is the right thing to do, this is good, this is noble," or "This is wrong, this is ignoble." To act in a restrained and careful way, keeping the precepts, isn't something which is inherently good – there is no such thing. But what it does is to free the mind from having to remember and live through the reverberations of unwholesome karmic action. If we're unkind and cruel and selfish then we have to remember that. So it's not that goodness is something absolute; more accurately, it is that if we behave in a good and wholesome way, it leaves the mind clearer and more peaceful than if we behave in a selfish, greedy or cruel way, which leaves the mind in a turbulent state. It's a very straightforward relationship.

So we can see that, just by keeping the sīla, observing the precepts, the mind is naturally freed from remorse. There's nothing horrible that we have done that we have to justify or remember. When the mind is free from remorse then we feel a natural contentment, a sense of gladness that alleviates self-criticism and



depression. (This is perhaps a revolutionary approach to the psychotherapeutic treatment of a negative self-image.) In the same vein, along with that quality of happiness, the body and mind become relaxed and at ease with life. We're not caused to feel tense and agitated. When there is that kind of physical and mental ease, then we really begin to enjoy the way we are and the way life is. The mind is open and much more bright.

If the mind is content and joyful with the here and now, then we find that it's much easier to develop meditation. If this "place" is pleasant and comfortable we are not going to want to be off in the past or the future or somewhere else all the time. If San Francisco is a good town and you enjoy your life here, you don't feel like you have to move to Oregon or England, or to the South of France. This principle works in the same way with the mind.

This is why, if we ever want to develop concentration or insightful states of meditation, then we need to behave in a very restrained and careful way. On retreats we have a routine and strict discipline so we're not filling our minds with stuff which we have to remember, causing disturbance. The environment is carefully controlled so as not to create that kind of effect. In the same way, if our whole life is being guided by *sīla*, then we're consistently providing a quality of joyfulness and contentment in the here and now.

With the development of *samādhi* – the more the mind is steady, stable and open to the here and now – the qualities of insight and understanding naturally arise. The more clearly we look at where we are and what's in front of us, then the more able we are to discern the patterns that are there – the way that life works and functions. And that quality of "knowledge and vision of the way things are" then brings about a profound seeing into the true nature of reality. The tendency to reject or grasp hold of things is then weakened – as we see into the transient nature of things we no longer try to possess the beautiful or run away from the painful – instead we experience it directly as a flow of different aspects of nature.

The more empty and serene the mind is in its attitude towards the comings and going of the changes in the sensory world, the more the heart is at ease with life. There is a realization of the innate, natural freedom of the mind – there are no obstructions to the natural peace and brightness of the mind. The mind's pure, original nature then becomes the abiding experience, and this is what we mean by enlightenment or liberation. No thing has been gained, it is merely the discovery of what was always there but had remained hidden.

These steps all occur as a process of evolution, one stage following naturally

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upon another.⁴⁴ Just as we grow from babies into infants, into children, adolescents, then into adulthood and old age – so too, if we start with *sīla*, then these other steps of the process will occur in time on their own. It is the basis, the *sine qua non* of the spiritual life – you can't get to be an adult without having been a child first. If there isn't that basis then, as far as I can see, we are seriously obstructing that whole process of evolution from occurring. We are disabling ourselves from fulfilling the wonderful potential that we have as human beings.



The Lotus, The Papyrus & the “O! As is...”

Part 9: Sharm el-Sheikh – Amaravati

Sharm el-Sheikh ~ December 13th

AT OUR LAST MEAL TOGETHER Ead feeds the sparrows – she always has a mind for the welfare of others; she never lets spare food be thrown away, rather she finds a grateful recipient and makes the effort to get the goodies to them. She is a gem.

Ajahn Vimalo has a minor spiritual crisis as to whether he should order a cheeseburger – he decides “Yes” but then it doesn’t show. Troubles in paradise. One more chance to see that familiar dance of indulgence/guilt, hope/disappointment, waiting/suffering in action. But it finally comes, in the nick of time; we finish up, climb on our electric wagon and head out to the gate.

At the airport Ead’s other chief characteristic comes to the fore – she’s an indefatigably committed friend-maker. A Thai woman, a fitness trainer from one of the resorts, sees us, comes to say hello and pay respects and, within minutes, she and Ead are firm friends. It was this way with Eman when we first came to Cairo, and she’s done the same with three or four other women that we’ve encountered along the way – in Aswan, on the ship, in Luxor, and now here. She is a great example of Dhamma in action, not just words.

The Thai woman tells us, when we ask about life in Sharm, “*Ngeun dee, daer my me wat*” – “The money’s good, but there’s no monastery.” Sad face. Also, she told us that there are about 1000 Thais here (mostly Muslim), that there are 35,000 rooms now and 70,000 are to be completed by the end of 2008. Where will all the water come from? How can all that be sustained? Who knows? But that’s the plan.



We land in Cairo under billowing cloud – it’s cool, the air is moist. Many *hajjis* are gathered in their white robes at the airport – there’s a special grand marquee for them to congregate in. With our arrival comes the feeling of unwinding – our time is ending, falling away. One last night in Cairo – our fading day.

Heliopolis & Amaravati ~ December 14th

WE ARE AT THE Mövenpick Hotel – a place for one-nighters on their way to somewhere else, just like us. The morning is cool, the dawn breakfast mood subdued, Luang Por is still poorly and without energy. “Where we’re going” concepts arise in the imagination – Amaravati takes its shape in the group mind, hazy and distant like the threads of high clouds above the airport as we emerge for the last leg.

In the cafeteria Ajahn Vimalo sheds a tear, “Farewell to beloved Egypt”; it’s a real one, then he poses with his hankie for the camera. The Christmas decorations here, as at the hotel, seem a little thin and half-hearted although there is a full-sized stuffed Santa just past the check-in and the table-clearer at the café has a red hat with a fluffy white band and small electric stars that flash upon it.

As ever, at our departure, we still manage to startle and raise a friendly smile, even from those who are paid to be humourless and inscrutable: the immigration officer lit up like a Christmas tree and beckoned us eagerly to his booth; the bag-checker at security looked cold and grumpy but when she saw the Horus badge made of silver on my shoulder bag she cocked an eye and allowed herself half an appreciative smile; the flight-attendant collecting our boarding cards took Luang Por’s with a look of shocked amazement and, to me next, had to ask, “What are you?” the by-now iconic question – indeed what are we? Buddhist monks in Cairo airport at the time of the Hajj, surrounded by Christmas paraphernalia and other white folks, heading back to England after their holidays.

On the plane another of the flight attendants sees us and she lights up as well, “Oh! You came out with me two weeks ago – welcome back!” An auspicious closing indeed – good in the beginning, good in the middle and thrice good in the end. Our journey has been rich and fine – if a little over-packed;



still the hinges survived the strain and harmony was maintained – for the most part – while we welcomed the magnificent and beautiful world of Egypt into our hearts. We are richer, beyond the dreams of avarice.



The flight is quiet, hardly a word passes between us as a weary calm colours the field of communal consciousness. Grey skies in a warm-for-December England. Joshua is there to meet us and, at Amaravati, Suvira, Sister Bodhipāla and an anāgārika are quick to greet the van as we pull up. Home in the Deathless once again.

We, the Egyptian pilgrims, all gather at the Bodhi House for a final tea together. It is a warm, sad/glad moment as our time as a single entity, this being, comes to its natural end: “Having arisen, all things will dissolve, and in their passing is peace” – *Tesam vūpasamo sukho*.

Our conversation lingers long on the origins and apparently rapid sophistication of Egyptian culture and religion: the rise of *Homo sapiens* in East Africa; the spread of populations; the effects of farming on hunter-gatherer communities; the rise of cities and armies – Luang Por’s response to all this, after having sat quietly for the previous half hour is, “My ancestors came from Mars.”

In a final characteristic gesture of her humility and thoughtfulness, Ead asks everyone for forgiveness for anything she did which might have been hurtful or annoying – of course there is nothing, but the gesture also reminds us, amid the expressions of gratitude and the glow of unique experiences, that we can forgive and be forgiven for all our foibles, intransigencies and missed shots. There is a quiet beauty in the air and a weariness from so much felt and seen, so many miles travelled; also I must take leave to go and see Ajahn Sucitto who has made the effort to travel via Amaravati, just for us to spend a few hours together whilst I am in England.



Two hours dissolve without a ripple as he and I, oldest of friends, Dhamma companions, share news, moods, ups and downs from within us and around us. The ten-day stubble on his head is now almost completely grey; we have spent much of the last 27 years in each other’s company and have shared many journeys, inner and outer, together.

The Lotus, the Papyrus & the “O! As is...” – Part 9

It is my first conversation outside of us seven who have been in Egypt and it's a deep, true joy to be with him again – “The whole of the holy life is spiritual friendship,”⁴⁵ the Buddha once said, and in such timeless coalescences one can see how very true this is.

To his amazement I am tired and, after a paltry two hours – where my eyes had been glazing over for the last 40 minutes – things draw to a close and we part. He had had a couple of cups of coffee in preparation for what he thought would be a marathon night of conversation, however, all things change and it's he who's still full of beans but I, for once, am out of beans, bullets and petrol – the tank is truly empty by now – and so we say farewell.

Amaravati, Heathrow & Abhayagiri ~ December 15th

A FOX BARKS, shrill and clear in the hour before dawn – dark, dark, dark; cool and damp in the garden.

I go to see Luang Por, to bid farewell to him too, just as the light breaks through and the familiar birdsong of southern England rings in the air. Sadly, he has had a rough night – his cough has turned phlegmy and he's puffy-eyed, rhuemy. This condition of the body notwithstanding, we are soon chatting about our time in Egypt and reflecting on the spiritual qualities there. So much of their emphasis was on eternal life, and the five elements that needed to be gathered to ensure it (the body, the name, the heart, the Ka and the soul), which raises the question, “Did they ever really get past *sakkāyaditthi* – self-views, and *śīlabata-parāmāsa* – attachment to rites and rituals, conventions?”

Luang Por emphasized how we cannot validly judge things according to our own cultural assumptions. We only see the physical remains and the inscriptions of the royals and officials – there was almost certainly an active wisdom tradition that saw all of this in terms of symbol and external form only – that these elements of the sense world were merely representations of inner, truly transcendent qualities.

Isha Schwaller de Lubicz makes this point in *Her-Bak* and, moreover, just on the intuitive level, it is hard to see how a religious form could last in a consistent and valuable way for 3000 years without it being based on a core of true knowledge of Reality. There *has* to have been some centre of spiritual gravity, some genuine wisdom practice and realization, in order for the religion to have held together for so long. Tradition and custom alone could not sustain that



kind of cohesion – people are not so stupid that they would *all* follow empty rituals for three millennia.



“*Salaam gazaimas!*” A last hello and goodbye to Ajahn Ñānarato.

Breakfast with Edward and Ead, Ajahn Vimalo, Richard and, lo! Nick Scott appears, and soon we are planning (no surprise) another journey – “The Long Road North, revisited” – retracing parts of a walk we did together 25 years ago.

Ajahn Vimalo is as throaty as Luang Por and Richard has a spot of the same bug, too. Gratitude; farewells; leaving – everything is always leaving, when the heart binds itself to time.

The road to Heathrow: grandly moustachioed Alan at the wheel, Tan Ahimsako and Richard accompany. Leaving, I am leaving – wall-to-wall grey overhead – leaving all, away, alone, alast, loved along the... But what remains?

The knowing heart that embraces, releases all appearances, “unexalted, all-sustaining” remains, pertains, in the here that is everywhere – it is the “O! As is!” of timelessness in the desert of time – it is the dream, the hope of eternal life made real. The circle, perfect and complete.



Wisdom

From a talk given on the winter retreat, Chithurst, January 1991

THIS HOUSE IS A PLACE of refuge for us.

On a wild and stormy evening like this we are protected, we are safe here in this place, in this enclosure.

The teaching of the Buddha is, in the same way, always pointing us to that place which is comfortable, safe, secure; which is a protection from the storm; which is the still place, the centre of the cyclone; the place where everything rests; the place of enlightenment; the axis of the Dhamma-realm; this point of here and now. And it is directing us to take refuge in being awake.

Since Ajahn Kittisaro spoke so eloquently yesterday about compassion, I thought it would be suitable to talk about wisdom this evening. These two exist very much as the two wings of the Buddha's teaching.

In Tibetan, so I have heard, the word *lama* means "wisdom and compassion." I'm not sure which one is which though – *la* means, I think, wisdom and *ma* means compassion. The two go together. One who practices the Truth, one who lives according to the Way, is one who embodies wisdom and compassion.

Where compassion is the spirit of including – reaching out to and identification with all beings, feeling the life, the joys and sorrows, the fears and hopes of all beings as our own – wisdom is the recognition that there are in truth no beings, that all of this is not self. This is not who and what we are.

There is a line in the *gāthā* of the Third Zen Patriarch, which goes, "In this world of Suchness there is neither self nor other than self." This very beautifully illustrates the principle that, on the one hand, we have to entertain the reality that all beings are one; we are all of one nature. All things, all life, all existence is an intrinsically interconnected web of being. From the dullest matter to the highest, most sublime divine beings, and all states in between, this is one life,



one substance. And on the other hand, “In this world of Suchness there is no self.” Within each entity, there is nothing here which is absolutely me or mine, which can be taken as a true individuality. This is what the wisdom teachings are always pointing us to: the trap of identification that we make with the experiential world.

We take the body, the world, our internal life of thoughts and feelings, the things around us, the people that we live with, the events in the world, and we invest in them an absolute importance. Because of that we suffer.

We feel alienation, separation, lack of wholeness; we feel incomplete because if there is “I,” then there is “you” and we are apart, there is distinction and there is separation. If we see through this and we dissolve the belief in an absolute individual existence, then the sense of separation naturally dissolves because it has no basis. There is a recognition of wholeness.

The *Anatta-lakkhana Sutta*⁴⁶ is the primary teaching on selflessness; you can see why this was the teaching that brought forth the first enlightened beings in this age. When teaching the Group of Five bhikkhus in the deer park, there was this instruction on how to challenge and see through the identifications that we make with body and mind, and with the world. In challenging that sense of self, these people were able to penetrate, understand and break free of the bondage of habitual ways of seeing.



The principle of wisdom is something which is dynamic – it’s a momentary experience. As we have all heard many times over, but is probably worth reiterating, when we talk about the wisdom of the Buddha this is not speaking of an accumulation of knowledge. This is not the ability to see into the past or the future, to be able to be aware of the goings-on in people’s minds all around the world. It’s not omniscience.

When we talk about Buddha-wisdom it means the wisdom of the pure mind, which is the same as the quality of wisdom which each of us is capable of drawing upon. It’s the same wisdom. It can operate within the mind of Gotama Buddha, or all the enlightened sages, it can operate through the agency of *your* own body, *your* own thinking mind, *your* own senses. It is still the same wisdom, it’s still the same quality. In the same way that the air we breathe is the same air that the Buddha breathed and that it is the same earth that we all walk upon.

That quality of wisdom is a pure Knowing, which arises as an attribute of

Truth itself, of Dhamma. The primordial activity of Dhamma is that of Knowing. That which is the ultimate reality of all being, the *saccadhamma*, or the *paramattha-dhamma*, is not some kind of inert ethereal substance but is dynamic, alive, totally awake Knowing. Knowing is its primary attribute. That's why we say the Buddha arises from the Dhamma, is born of the Dhamma. That which knows arises from Suchness, the true Dhamma, which is the root of all being.

When we talk about Buddha-wisdom, we are talking about that Knowing quality which sees truly and clearly exactly how things are. This is not a memory of how things are, it's not an idea about it, but it's the way our mind can see, in this moment, how it is. What is. This is described in the phrase you hear over and over again in the scriptures, "When the eye of Dhamma opens," when someone awakens and sees the Path, then it is said that they see, "All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation."⁴⁷ That is the basic liberating insight which is ennobling.

"All that arises passes away." It is very simple, but it's like a key for us. It's the key to the door of our prison of selfhood. Once we apply that and keep remembering to put the key in the lock and turn it, once this has been seen and we apply it through every aspect of our experience, then we discover freedom. We can open the door, because there is nothing whatsoever, of the entire fabric of our life or that of the world, that does not come under this formula. Everything which arises, passes away.

From a minuscule feeling to a whole universe, from the footstep of an ant, a leaf falling off a tree, to worlds coming into existence, colliding, vanishing. Every single thing in the whole sensory world follows this same law. All that arises passes away.

This is the fundamental insight which changes us from being a deluded living being into a Buddha. When the mind does not see clearly, then we are a living being, we are a separate independent entity in the midst of an external world. In the moment of wisdom and clear seeing we are a Buddha, a knower. There is Buddhahood. This is maybe a very difficult principle to swallow and might seem like a great exaggeration but it's also very useful reflection to bear in mind. It helps to cut through our habitual negative opinions about ourselves as being somehow imperfect, or not of the same quality, capacity or potential as some great sage. We tend to feel that somehow their minds are intrinsically different, more powerful, more pure, more capable than our own.

The more that we learn to let go of our delusions about life – let go of identification with the body, with feelings, with perceptions, ideas – the more we



allow wisdom to operate, then that becomes our way of relating to life. As we develop the use of wisdom we begin to see that wisdom is not a cold, clinical, dissection of experience, as if we were defusing life. It's not like draining the colour out of it and taking away its vigour or its substance. In fact it's just the opposite, because the more wisdom that we apply, the more light we experience within our life, the more truly alive, awake and vivid our life becomes; this is because the true nature of our mind is bright, radiant. There is a beautiful expression that the Buddha used, the *pabhassara citta* – the radiant mind, the mind of clear light. He pointed out very clearly that the mind's nature is inherently radiant. Its brightness is not something that we have to produce, rather it is the intrinsic nature of mind, the *citta*.

Cittam pabhassaram agantukehi kilesehi. “The nature of the mind is radiant, defilements are only visitors.”⁴⁸ The more we bring forth the quality of wisdom, which is non-conceptual and non-dualistic, then the more we experience the mind of light.

At first – because wisdom is aligned more with intellect, whereas compassion is more aligned with emotion and the qualities of the heart – the use of wisdom in bringing forth the questioning and analytical aspect of mind can create a cold, negating tone. This is only because one gets into the habit of saying, “No, I don't believe it,” to all the different thoughts and feelings and experiences that we have, so we can develop a callous streak towards our experience. It is like thinking, “Don't touch it, don't believe it – it's just another pattern in your mind!”

When the clouds of ignorance start to dissipate and the sunlight of true wisdom starts to appear, then in the same way, we unconsciously shy away from, and become suspicious or negative towards, the brightness of our own mind. We tend to shut that out, simply out of a habit of negating all things. When we don't have a habit of negating experiences or conditions of mind, however, and we allow the mind to relax and to fully Know, what is there when a condition of mind ends? We feel more and more clearly the purity and intrinsic radiance of the mind.

This is why in meditation we talk about realizing emptiness. If our meditation is always about trying to *get* something, if it's always tied up with achieving, purifying or developing something, even though what we're trying to develop might be very wholesome and good, then we find that there is very often a strong sense of self and a lot of “doingness,” a lot of activity and no real quality of purity there. When we watch some thought or a feeling coming into existence, we feel its presence for a while and then we watch it fade. The tendency

of the mind is then immediately to look for the next thing, or to want to *do* something – to create something wholesome or to get on to the next thing or to find another object and see its emptiness! Instead, if we are patient and we just allow the mind to watch, we notice that there is space there.

I felt at first that such space was a bit blank and empty, nondescript. I felt, “Come on, let’s go to something else, let’s do something. What’s next? Come on, let’s get going.” If you allow the mind to not follow that and to just rest in that space instead, then the veil which made the mind seemingly blank and nondescript dissolves. You see that very space broadening, lightening and becoming warm, vast, peaceful. We realize that which is not becoming, that which has always been there, the Unconditioned, the Mind Ground, pure, peaceful, timeless. That quality is something we don’t usually see, because of constantly zipping our attention from one thing to another, to another, to another... If we just take the trouble to look through the cracks, then we find the vast and beautiful space of our own true nature here, on the other side.

It is very helpful to recognize that the bringing forth of this quality is always something that we can do. It’s never beyond our reach. We are not trying to *become* wise; we are not trying to do something now to become wise in the future, to accumulate wisdom like some kind of commodity. It’s much more useful to see it in terms of the fact that there is an infinite resource of wisdom which is part of our own intrinsic nature, which we can draw upon at any time. We can dip into the well. At first it can seem as though our store of wisdom is like a deep well stuffed with straw and husks and is completely bunged up and inaccessible to us.⁴⁹ The mind can play up and gripe and feel insufficient and imperfect. So sometimes we need to arouse our energies like the Buddha’s *udāna*, an ecstatic utterance, a gesture of determination not to be swayed by any kind of obstruction, for that which is blocking up, obscuring the wisdom of the mind just to be blasted out of the way by the power of faith and resolution. Then there is water everywhere!



We say that the Buddha is the archetype of wisdom and, both internally and externally, the Buddha is “The One Who Knows.” But still we are not trying to identify with a particular quality like that, because if we take a single quality and make that our goal, or emphasize that too much, then we become fixated upon that individual thing. The whole point of the spiritual path, using compassion



and wisdom, or devotion or whatever, is that these are all designed to take us to the goal, to Nibbāna. These are all skilful means that suit different people's natures. Some people are faith types, other people are wisdom types, other people are energy types. There are many different methods and modes of liberation. One can be liberated through faith, concentration, energy or through wisdom, and some methods are quicker than others, some accord with our own characteristics more than others. The whole point of any form of approach or use of Buddhist principles is to take us to the Goal.

I remember, years ago, I came across a very interesting little verse; it was in a biography of a Chinese monk, called Han Shan, who was told this verse by the Bodhisattva Maitreya in a visionary dream that he had. It was a very long and amazing dream; by the end of it, however, he was sitting at the feet of the Lord Maitreya. And what the Lord Maitreya said to him was:

*Discrimination is consciousness,
Whereas non-discrimination is wisdom.
Clinging to consciousness causes defilement,
Whereas wisdom ensures purity.
Defilement causes birth and death,
Whereas purity leads to where there are no Buddhas.*

I thought, "That's a funny ending. I thought the ideal was to realize and know the Buddha mind. Isn't that the point of it?" Everything else in it seemed to be so correct and good. I thought, "What does that mean, 'Purity leads to where there are no Buddhas'?" I contemplated, "How did the Buddha talk about this?" He himself discouraged people from attaching to him as a person – making a big deal about the Tathāgata as an entity present in the world was not the point, and not quite accurate anyway.

Once we see the Truth, we become "independent in the Teacher's dispensation," as the phrase goes, which means there is no longer the need to look to an external source of wisdom or Truth. We no longer need to look to the Guru, the Sage, the Guide, the Saint, to be the one on whom our eyes are fixed. When the Truth is seen, then the idea of separate beings, of a Buddha in the world, or no Buddha in the world, becomes recognized as merely a relative truth, and is seen for what it is.

So, I took this verse to mean that the place where there are no Buddhas is the place where there is only Buddhahood. When there is Buddhahood, then

there is no need for external Buddhas to appear. Buddhas appear in the world as external teachers for the sake of ignorant living beings, but purity takes the mind to that place where everything is our teacher or, more accurately, where there is nothing to learn. There is a complete transcendence and unification, a complete oneness with all life, with all things. There is no separation into a “you” and “I” and independent beings. There is only Buddhahood, true understanding.

These two elements, of wisdom and compassion, transcendence and wholeness, are also embodied in the word that the Buddha used to refer to himself: Tathāgata. Scholars debate whether the word is really supposed to mean “Tathāgata,” “thus come” or “Tathā-gata,” “thus gone.” Which is the *real* meaning?

The Buddha was very fond of word-plays, however, and my suspicion is that he coined the word “Tathāgata” precisely because it implied both attributes: is that Buddha quality completely transcendent – utterly gone; or is it immanent – completely here, present now? The term is perfect in that it carries both these meanings and indicates that the two, immanence (or wholeness) and transcendence, do not exclude each other in any way.

*St. Catherine's
Monastery, 2 a.m.*



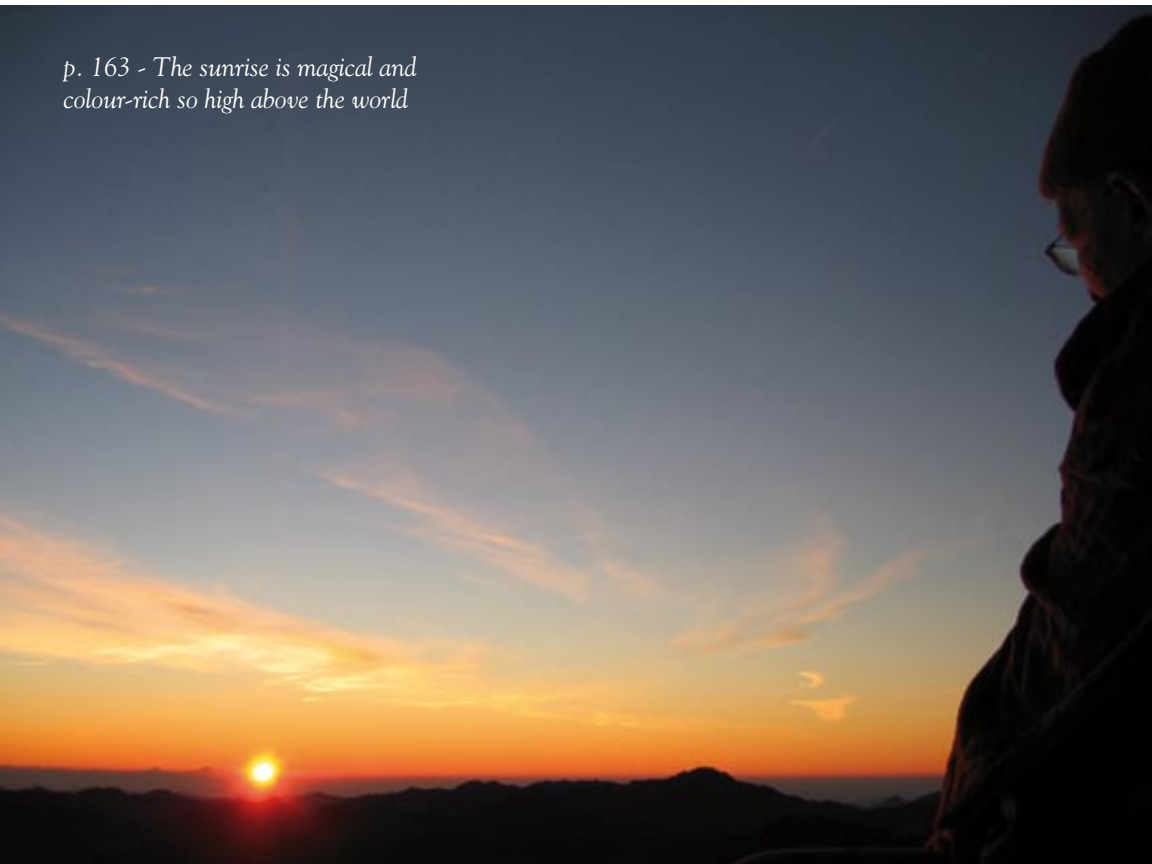
Ajahn Nānarato



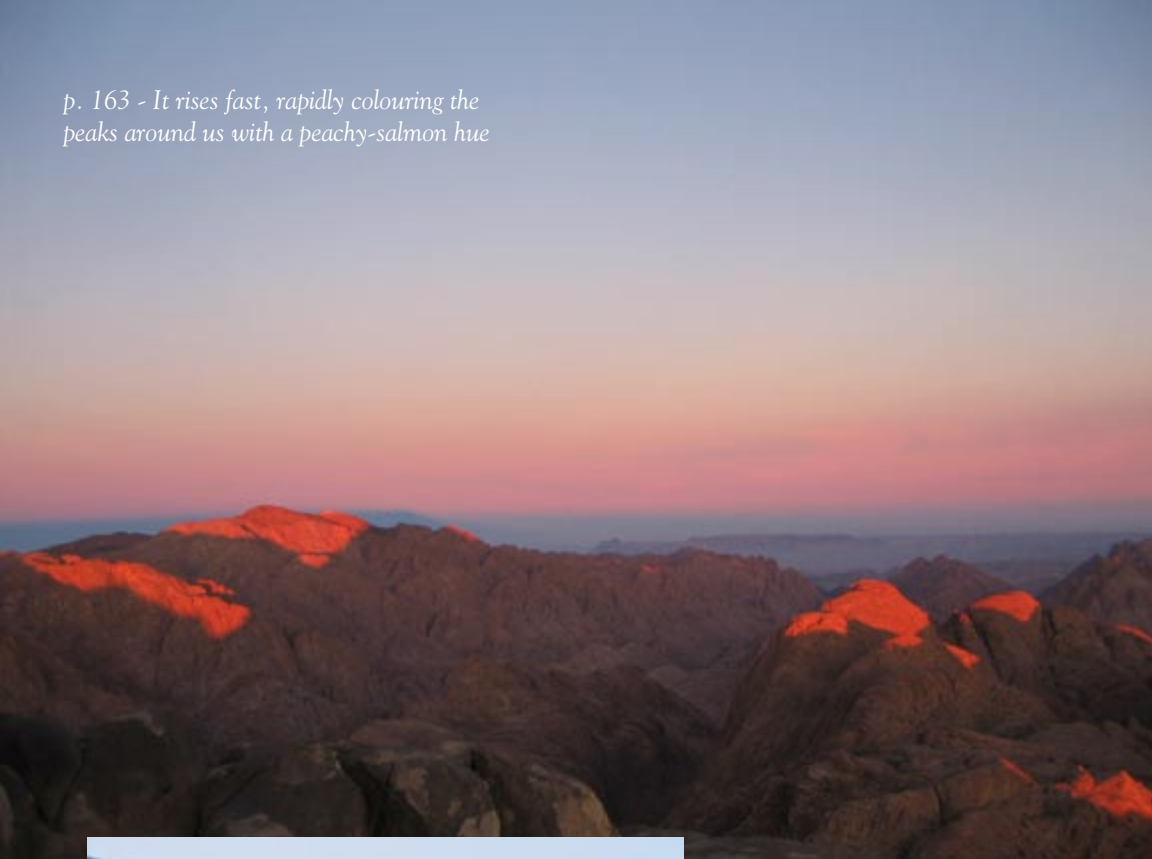
*On the Mount
Sinai summit,
before sunrise*



*p. 163 - The sunrise is magical and
colour-rich so high above the world*



p. 163 - It rises fast, rapidly colouring the peaks around us with a peachy-salmon hue



*p. 163 - Ead sits nearby
... her face washed by
the dawn light*

p. 164 - It is very still on top - no wind



*p. 164 - If we had been able
to see the height we had to
climb, we'd have turned back
down at the bottom*



p. 146 - the BMW of camels & Suleiman - by daylight



*Ajahn Vimalo and
Ajahn Nānarato*



Our hotel, Sharm el-Sheikh





p.168 - dangle our feet in the warm blue bath amid the softly folded submarine landscapes



*A well-fed sparrow, after
our last meal by the Red Sea*



*p. 182 - In the cafeteria
Ajahn Vimalo sheds a tear*



Notes

(1) Page 2, “**I been whipped by the rain, driven by the snow...**” From “*Willin’*” by Lowell George.

(2) Page 3, “**the strange dependency of electronica, of abundant kinds, upon qualities that ‘do not exist’...**” Such as the phase-shift oscillator invented by Hewlett and Packard that became the basis of their \$40 billion fortune.

(3) Page 4, “**And, like the baseless fabric of this vision...**” From “*The Tempest*” by William Shakespeare, Act IV scene i:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

(4) Page 4, “**Augustus was a chubby lad, / Fat ruddy cheeks Augustus had...**” From *Struwwelpeter – The Story Of Augustus Who Would Not Have Any Soup* by Heinrich Hoffmann.

(5) Page 4, “**No wonder Jim detested it...**” From *Jim* by Hilaire Belloc.

(6) Page 4, “**The Dreadful Story of Pauline and the Matches,**” From *Struwwelpeter – The Dreadful Story of Pauline and the Matches* by Heinrich Hoffman.

(7) Page 4, “**Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout and the garbage...**”
Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take The Garbage Out by Shel Silverstein.

Notes

(8) Page 9, **“The world delights in becoming, relishes becoming, is addicted to becoming...”** As at Ud 3.10 – see also below, Note 22.

(9) Page 12, **“...rather than in the direction of desire, of getting, of possessing, of accumulating.”**

“Now the view of those whose theory and view is ‘I have a liking for all things’ is close to lust, to bondage, to relishing, to acceptance, to clinging. But the view of those whose theory and view is ‘I have no liking for anything’ is close to freedom from lust, to non-bondage, to non-relishing, to non-acceptance, to non-clinging.” (M. 74) Bhikkhu Ñānamoli translation, Buddhist Publication Society.

(10) Page 14, **“King Seniya Bimbisāra [the local monarch]... abides in greater pleasure than Venerable Gotama...”** As at M 14.20-22.

(11) Page 15, **“It is empty of the silence of wisdom, which is its substance and its life.”** From *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, by George Woodcock, Cannongate Press.

(12) Page 26, **“Why are all these dead crows stuck on stakes outside your kuṭī?”** As at Vin. Pac. 61.1, in *The Book of the Discipline*, Vol. 3, p.1, Pali Text Society.

(13) Page 27, **“...the Ozymandias of today, ‘Look on my works and buy, buy, buy’...”**

OZYMANDIAS

By Percy Bysshe Shelley

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

(14) Page 42, **“This body is like an old cart, held together by straps...”** As at D 16.2.25.

(15) Page 46, **“...a low curious roaring sound in her ears as of sea shells being held against them.”** From *Gone With the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell, p. 523.



(16) Page 62, “...we are not making the mind have a point, an abiding place...” The great teacher Ajahn Mahā-Boowa once said: “If there is a point or a center of the knower anywhere, that is the essence of a level of being.” *Straight from the Heart*, p. 171.

(17) Page 73, “...all knowledge about the physical world would be complete.” “The most fundamental laws and facts of physical science have all been discovered, and these are now so firmly established that the possibility of their ever being supplemented by new discoveries is exceedingly remote.” Albert Abraham Michelson, 1903 – two years before Einstein published his “Special Theory of Relativity.”

(18) Page 74, “All consistent axiomatic formulations of number theory include undecidable propositions.” Technically it reads like this: “To every ω -consistent recursive class K of formulae there correspond recursive class-signs r , such that neither \forall Gen r nor $\text{Neg}(\forall$ Gen $r)$ belongs to $\text{Flg}(K)$ (where \forall is the free variable of r)”!!!

(19) Page 75, “...behind much of today’s liveliest and most viable thinking in the academic world.” His insights have become the basis of what is known as “systems theory”; one of his most influential books being *Process and Reality*, published by McMillan.

(20) Page 77, “...we come to perfect proof, to completeness.” The Cistercian monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, phrases this point very beautifully:

“At the peak of our Peak Experience everything suddenly makes sense. Your heart is touched and there is peace. Not that suddenly you found answers to all your questions. Not that all contradictions are suddenly reconciled. Not even your problems are solved. But you have hit upon something deeper than questions; more comprehensive than all contradictions; something that can support all problems without need for solutions. How strange. We usually think that we must trace our questions to the ultimate question to arrive at the ultimate answer. We are convinced that we must work our way through contradiction after contradiction to arrive at an ultimate reconciliation; struggle with problem after problem to find the ultimate solution. Yet, what happened here is something entirely different. For one split second we were distracted from our preoccupations with problems, questions, and contradictions. That child catching minnows in a tide pool, that line of a melody, that flash in our lover’s eyes, did it. For one split second we dropped the load of our preoccupations and the super-solution, the super-answer is suddenly ours, in one great super-reconciliation of everything.

“What paradox! When I drop the question, there’s the answer. In fact, we might begin to suspect that the answer is there all the time, trying to get through to us, while we are too preoccupied with our questions. But what disproportion between cause and effect. Why should one moment of true looking or listening yield what no amount of grappling with problems can wrestle from life? Our experience itself suggests an answer to this question. When we watch carefully, we notice that the child, the music, the loving glance, teased us for a moment into saying ‘Yes’ to reality, a very special ‘Yes.’ We were caught off guard. Our heart went out to this tiny fragment of reality and burst into an unconditional ‘Yes.’ But having said this kind of ‘Yes’ to the humblest fringe of reality, we have implicitly affirmed all there is. By drinking deeply from the stream we have said ‘Yes’ to the Source.

That is why our humble encounter is truly mystical, truly an experience of communion with Ultimate Reality. And since Ultimate Reality is the very 'coincidence of opposites,' we should not be surprised if we experience this communion as paradoxical."

Brother David Steindl-Rast, *A Listening Heart*, p. 39, Crossroads

(21) Page 84, "**...the disciplinary formalism of primitive Buddhism could not bind our freedom, our spirit for very long...**"

"This spirit of freedom, which is the power impelling Buddhism to break through its monastic shell and bringing forward the idea of Enlightenment ever more vigorously before the masses, is the life-impulse of the universe – everything that interferes with this unhampered activity of spirit is destined to be defeated. The history of Buddhism is thus also a history of freedom in one's spiritual, intellectual, and moral life. The moral aristocracy and disciplinary formalism of primitive Buddhism could not bind our spirit for a very long period of time..."

D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism I*, p. 75

(22) Page 85, "**the very basis of conditioned existence is also the basis of suffering.**"

"At the end of seven days, after emerging from that concentration, the Blessed One surveyed the world with the eye of an Enlightened One. As he did so he saw beings burning with the many fires, consumed with the many fevers born of greed, hatred and delusion. Knowing the meaning of this, he then uttered this exclamation:

'This world is anguished, being exposed to sensory contact,
Even what the world calls "self" is, in fact, imperfect;
For no matter upon what it conceives its conceits of selfhood,
The fact is ever other than that which it conceives.
The world, whose urge is to become other,
Is committed to being, opens itself to being, relishes only being,
Yet what it relishes brings fear, and what it fears is pain:
Now this Holy Life is lived for the abandonment of suffering.
Whatever monks or brahmins have described liberation from being to come
about through love of being,
None, I say, are liberated from being.
And whatever monks or brahmins have described escape from being to come
about through love of non-being,
None, I say, have escaped from being.
It is through the essentials of existence that suffering is; with all clinging
exhausted, suffering is no more.
See this broad world:
Beings exposed to ignorance, relishing what is,
Never freed from being.
Whatever the kinds of being, in any way, anywhere,
All are impermanent, pain-haunted and subject to change.



So, one who sees this as it is
Abandons craving for being, without relishing non-being.
The remainderless fading, cessation, Nibbāna,
Comes with the utter ending of all craving.
When a bhikkhu reaches Nibbāna thus, through not clinging,
Then he will have no renewal of being;
Māra has been vanquished and the battle gained,
Since one such as he has outstripped all being.”

Ud 3.10, in *The Life of the Buddha*, by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, p. 32, BPS.

(23) Page 86, “**There is a lovely story from the Theravāda tradition concerning a seeker called Kāmanīta.**” *The Pilgrim Kāmanīta*, by Karl Gjellerup, trans. John E. Logie, ed. Amaro Bhikkhu, Abhayagiri, 1999. Based on the story of Pukkusāti in the *Dhātuvibhanga Sutta* M 140.

(24) Page 89, “**...come forth from the depths of God and return again to Him.**” From *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, by George Woodcock, Cannongate Press.

(25) Page 90, “**Beauty is truth, truth beauty...**” From *Ode on a Grecian Urn* by John Keats.

(26) Page 94, “**You have conquered, like good men!**” As at Vin. Par. 1.9.2, in *The Book of the Discipline*, Vol. 1 pp. 11-13, PTS.

(27) Page 103, “**He avoided talking about the ultimate beginning of things...**” As at A 4.77 & S 15.1; referred to in *The Life of the Buddha*, by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, pp. 212 & 221, BPS.

(28) Page 103, “**If you want to know how a universe comes into being...**” As at D 27.10-32 & D 26.2-26.

(29) Page 105, “**Ignorance has to have a mother and father just as we do...**” From *A Heart Released*, by Ven. Ajahn Mun, p. 10, Metta Forest Monastery.

(30) Page 106, “**All the days of your life you will toil with sweat...**” As at Gen. 3, vs. 16-19.

(31) Page 136, “**there is an inquiry made to a monk called Anurādha...**” This following exchange is found at S 22.86 & S 44.2.

(32) Page 140, “**These are merely names, expressions, terms of speech...**” As at D 9.53.

(33) Page 141, “**he created dreams which enabled the dreamers to awaken...**” “We are lured into the eternal reality by well-timed illusion ...” From *Tales of a Dalai Lama – The Great Hum*, by Pierre de Lattre.

(34) Page 144, “Sailing to Byzantium”

SAILING TO BYZANTIUM
by WB Yeats

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
Those dying generations – at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

(35) Page 148, “One who relishes the six senses relishes dukkha.” As at S 35.19.

(36) Page 151, “It is described that during the first two hours of the night...” As at Ud 1.1-3.



(37) Page 152, “**Rather than trying to figure out a metaphysical structure...**” As at S 56.31 & M 63.1-10.

(38) Page 153, “**Where there is birth, there is inevitably old age, disease and death.**” From *The Masks of God – Oriental Mythology*, by Joseph Campbell, p. 273.

(39) Page 154, “**Quite frankly, I don’t really understand this...**”

“Whilst I would now begin the comment
On the structure of conditions
I find no footing for support
And seem to founder in a sea.

“However, many modes of teaching
Grace the Dispensation here
And still the former teachers’ way
Is handed down unbrokenly.”

Vsm XVII 25

(40) Page 161, “**Life is truly a dream...**” From *News from True Cultivators*, BTTS.

(41) Page 162, “**They have a beautiful sculpture by the roadside...**” This piece was sculpted by Edmond Shumpert.

(42) Page 162, “**In the ignorance that implies impression...**” James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 18, Penguin.

(43) Page 174, “**...e. e. cummings’ poem about his Uncle Sol’s worm farm?**”

nobody loses all the time
by: e.e. cummings

nobody loses all the time

i had an uncle named
Sol who was a born failure and
nearly everybody said he should have gone
into vaudeville perhaps because my Uncle Sol could
sing McCann He Was A Diver on Xmas Eve like Hell Itself which
may or may not account for the fact that my Uncle

Sol indulged in that possibly most inexcusable
of all to use a highfalootin phrase
luxuries that is or to
wit farming and be

it needlessly
added

my Uncle Sol's farm
failed because the chickens
ate the vegetables so
my Uncle Sol had a
chicken farm till the
skunks ate the chickens when

my Uncle Sol
had a skunk farm but
the skunks caught cold and
died and so
my Uncle Sol imitated the
skunks in a subtle manner

or by drowning himself in the watertank
but somebody who'd given my Uncle Sol a Victor
Victrola and records while he lived presented to
him upon the auspicious occasion of his decease a
scrumptious not to mention splendiferous funeral with
tall boys in black gloves and flowers and everything and
i remember we all cried like the Missouri
when my Uncle Sol's coffin lurched because
somebody pressed a button
(and down went
my Uncle
Sol
and started a worm farm)

(44) Page 180, “**These steps all occur as a process of evolution...**” As at A 10.2.

(45) Page 184, “**The whole of the holy life is spiritual friendship...**” As at S 45.2.

(46) Page 187, “**The Anatta-lakkhana Sutta...**” As at S 22.59 & MV 1.6.

(47) Page 188, “**All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation.**” As in the *Discourse on Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dhamma*, at S 56.11 & MV 1.6.

(48) Page 189, “**The nature of the mind is radiant, defilements are only visitors.**” As at A 1.61 & 1.62.

(49) Page 190, “**... a deep well stuffed with straw and husks...**” As at Ud 7.9.



Abbreviations

<i>D...Dīgha Nikāya</i>	The Long Discourses of the Buddha
<i>M...Majjhima Nikāya</i>	The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha
<i>S...Samyutta Nikāya</i>	The Discourses Related by Subject
<i>A...Anguttara Nikāya</i>	The Discourses Related by Numbers
<i>Ud...Udāna</i>	Inspired Utterances
<i>Vsm...Visuddhimagga</i>	The Path of Purification, a commentarial compendium
<i>MV...Mahāvagga</i>	The Great Chapter, from the books of monastic discipline
<i>Vin... Vinaya Rules</i>	The Buddhist monastic code of training



Glossary

ajahn – teacher (Thai. Pali: *ācariya*).

akh (ancient Egyptian) – the transfigured spirit which is released into eternal happiness.

anāgāmi – a “non-returner,” i.e., one who has reached the third stage of enlightenment.

anāgārika – a lay person holding the eight precepts; literally a “homeless one,” one who has entered the first stage of monastic training.

anattā – not-self.

anicca – impermanence or uncertainty.

añjali – a gesture of respect made by placing the hands with palms together at the heart.

ārammana – sense object; also commonly used to refer to a mood induced by those sense objects.

asmimāna – the conceit of identity; one of the final fetters obstructing enlightenment.

asubha-kammathāna – the contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body.

avijjā – ignorance; nescience; not understanding the Four Noble Truths.

Ba (ancient Egyptian) – the soul.

baksheesh – a small sum of money given as a gratuity or as alms.

bardo (Tib.) – “in-between state,” used to refer to the state of being between



death and rebirth.

Bedouin – an Arab of any of the nomadic tribes of the Arabian, Syrian, Nubian, or Sahara deserts.

bhante – “Venerable Sir,” the most common form of address for a Buddhist monk in the Southern school.

bhava – Becoming; the process of existence.

bhavacakka – the wheel or cycle of becoming, also known as the Wheel of Birth and Death.

bhikkhu – Buddhist monk.

bodhi – enlightenment.

bodhisattva – a practitioner on the Mahāyāna path who is working towards the goal of full enlightenment for the sake of all beings; also refers to individual Bodhisattvas, such as Manjushri, who are the subjects of devotion in certain sects and are often represented in paintings and sculpture.

bodhi tree – the tree under which the Buddha was sitting at the time of his enlightenment.

Buddha – “One who knows” ; one who is awakened, who represents the state of enlightenment or awakening; the historical Buddha, Siddhatta Gotama. Also: *Buddho*.

Buddha-rūpa – a statue representing the Buddha.

Buddha-Dhamma – the teaching of the Buddha.

burka (Ar.) – the veiled, full-length gown worn by traditional Muslim women.

cankama – walking meditation.

citta – the heart or mind.

devadūta – literally “Heavenly Messengers”; the qualities of old age, sickness, death and the religious seeker when they encourage spiritual practice.

dhamma – phenomenon; mental object. See also: *nāma-dhamma*, *saccadhamma*, *sankhata dhamma*, *sīla-dhamma*, worldly dhammas. Dhamma (capitalized) refers to the teachings of the Buddha, as well as the quality of Ultimate Truth itself.

Glossary

Dhammacakka – “The Wheel of Dhamma” is a name for the teaching “set turning” by the Buddha.

djellabah (Ar.) – an ankle-length tunic worn, along with a turban, by the majority of Egyptian men.

dukkha – suffering, unsatisfactoriness; the inherent insecurity, instability and imperfection of conditioned phenomena.

Eightfold Path – the spiritual method described by the Buddha as being the only reliable means to completely transcend unsatisfactoriness. The eight factors are: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness & Right Concentration.

evam – thus; thus it is. An expression often used to conclude a Dhamma talk.

felucca – small sailing boats that have been used on the Nile for millennia.

gāthā – a verse of Pali or other scriptural poetry.

hajj (Ar.) – the pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslim men are encouraged to make at least once in their lifetime.

hajji (Ar.) – an honorific title given to a Muslim who has been or is on their way to Mecca on pilgrimage.

Hīnayāna – “Lesser Vehicle,” “Inferior Vehicle.” It is a derogatory term for the Southern, Pali-based lineages of Buddhism. The PTS Dictionary lists as meanings of “hīna”: inferior, low; poor, miserable; vile, base, abject, contemptible, despicable.

hiriottappa – Sense of shame (*hiri*) and an intelligent fear of consequences (*ottappa*), two positive states of mind that lay a foundation for a clear conscience and moral integrity.

imam (Ar.) – Islamic priest.

insha'Allah (Ar.) – “If Allah is willing,” or “If Allah wills it,” i.e., “It might happen if things go as we wish them to.”

indriya – spiritual faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom.

jāti – birth.



jīvita – the life force.

Ka (ancient Egyptian) – variously rendered as “divine double” or “individual life force.”

kamma – volitional action by means of body, speech, or mind; Sanskrit: *karma*, used in the text to indicate the more common, popular usage, implying both action and its results.

khandha – “heap” or aggregate; one of the five constituents of human existence: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and sense consciousness.

King of Death – Yama, the judge of the dead in Buddhist cosmology.

kusala – wholesome or skilful actions or mental states.

kutī – a small dwelling place for a Buddhist monastic, a hut.

lobha – greed.

lokapāla – literally “Guardian of the World,” it is a word used to describe moral sensitivity (*hiriottappa* q.v.) and, cosmologically, the Four Great Kings who guard the earth.

lokiya – worldly.

lokuttara – supramundane, transcendent.

Luang Por – Venerable Father, Respected Father; a friendly and reverential term of address used for elderly monks.

magga – path. See Eightfold Path.

Mahā – (Pali & Skt.) – “Great”; it is also a title given to monks who have studied Pali and completed up to the fourth year or higher.

Mahāyāna – “Great Vehicle,” a term used to refer to the Northern Schools of Buddhism.

māna – conceit, pride.

mani stones (*mani*, Tib.) – rocks inscribed with the mantra “om mani peme hung” (meaning “Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus”) that are found at shrines, on pilgrimage routes and on high passes in the Tibetan Buddhist world.

Glossary

Māra – evil and temptation personified; a powerful malevolent deity ruling over the highest heaven of the sensual sphere; personification of the defilements, the totality of worldly existence, and death.

mettā – loving-kindness.

mudītā – sympathetic joy, gladness, happiness at the good fortune of others.

nada (Skt.) – sound; particularly the inner, high-pitched tone that is used as a meditation object in various spiritual traditions.

nāma – Nonmaterial (mental) phenomenon (Also: *nāma-dhamma*).

nāmarūpa – mind and body; name and form; mentality and materiality.

netēr (ancient Egyptian) – the principal deities of the Egyptian religion, also the inner essences of the heart that these divinities represent: “A netēr is a principle or an agent of a cosmic law or function.” (*Her-Bak, Vol. II, p. 130.*) “A man’s heart is his own netēr.” (*Her-Bak, Vol. II, p. 105.*)

Nibbāna – the state of liberation from all suffering and defilements, the goal of the Buddhist path (Sanskrit: Nirvāna).

nibbidā – disenchantment, world-weariness.

nirodha – cessation; often used as an abbreviation for *dukkha-nirodha*.

“*one who knows*” – An inner faculty of awareness. Under the influence of ignorance or defilements, it knows things wrongly. Trained through the practice of the Eightfold Path, it is the awakened knowing of a Buddha.

ottappa – see *hiriottappa*.

pabhassara citta – the radiant heart.

paññā – wisdom, discernment, understanding of the nature of existence.

paramattha-dhamma – Ultimate Reality

paramattha sacca – Ultimate Truth

pārami, *pāramitā* – the ten spiritual perfections: generosity, moral restraint, renunciation, wisdom, effort, patience, truthfulness, determination, kindness, and equanimity. Virtues accumulated over lifetimes manifesting as wholesome dispositions.



phassa – sense-contact.

prāna – (Skt.) literally “breath”; also the energy winds that move through the body and mind.

rūpa – material or physical objects, corporeality (Also: *rūpa-dhamma*).

saccadhamma – Ultimate Truth.

sakkāyaditthi – personality view, one of the obstacles to stream entry, the first stage of enlightenment.

sālā – a large meeting hall

salāyatana – the six sense bases: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

samādhi – concentration, one-pointedness of mind, mental stability; state of concentrated calm resulting from meditation practice.

samatha – calm, tranquillity.

sammā-sambodhi – “perfectly self-enlightened,” an attribute of the Buddha.

sammuti sacca – conventional, dualistic, or nominal reality; the reality of names, determinations. For instance, a cup is not intrinsically a cup, it is only determined to be so.

samsāra – Wheel of Existence; lit., “perpetual wandering” ; the continuous process of being born, growing old, suffering, and dying again and again; the world of all conditioned phenomena, mental and material.

Sangha – the Buddhist monastic community. Also refers to those disciples of the Buddha, both monastic and lay, who have realized the various stages of enlightenment.

sankhāra – compounded, or conditioned thing; phenomenon; anything constituted by preexisting causes. In the Thai language the word *sungkahn* is commonly used to refer to the body.

sankhāra-dukkha – the unsatisfactoriness inherent in all formations, mental and physical.

sankhata dhamma – conditioned thing, conventional reality; as contrasted with *asankhata dhamma*, unconditioned reality, i.e. *Nibbāna*, the Deathless.

Glossary

sīla – virtuous conduct, morality; moral discipline.

sīlabbata-parāmāsa – attachment to rites and rituals, conventions, an obstruction to stream entry.

sīla-dhamma – another name for the moral teachings of Buddhism. On the personal level: “virtue and (knowledge of) truth.”

soka-parideva – sorrow and lamentation.

sutta (*sūtra*, Skt.) – literally, a thread: usually used to refer to a discourse of the Buddha as recorded in the Pali canon; the Sanskrit term is also used to refer to the teachings of the Buddhas in the Northern schools.

tanhā – craving; desires conditioned by ignorance of the way things are.

Tathāgata – Perfect One; lit., the one who has “thus gone” or “thus come”; an epithet of the Buddha.

Tathāgatagarbha – literally, “the womb of the Tāthagata,” meaning the origin of Buddha nature.

tathatā – suchness, as-is-ness.

Theravāda – “The Way of the Elders,” also known as the Southern School of Buddhism; it prevails in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand.

thītibhūtam – the primal mind.

Udāna – exclamation, or uplifting verse; one of the collections of suttas in the Pali Canon.

upādāna – grasping, clinging, attachment.

upekkhā – equanimity.

vedanā – feeling, sensation.

vicāra – contemplation of a meditation theme.

vihāra – monastic dwelling place.

vinaya – The Buddhist monastic code of discipline; lit., “leading out,” because maintenance of these rules “leads out” of unskillful actions and unskillful states of mind; in addition it can be said to “lead out” of the household life and at-



tachment to the world.

viññāna – consciousness, particularly through the senses.

vipassanā – “insight”; refers to insight meditation, particularly based on the contemplation of the Three Characteristics of Existence: transience/uncertainty, unsatisfactoriness, and “not-self.”

virāga – dispassion.

viveka – seclusion, either physical, mental or spiritual.

vosagga – abandonment, relinquishment.

yoniso manasikāra – wise reflection, consideration, contemplation.



The Author

Born in England in 1956, Ajahn Amaro received his BSc. in Psychology and Physiology from the University of London. Spiritual searching led him to Thailand, where he went to Wat Pah Nanachat, a Forest Tradition monastery established for Western disciples of Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah, who ordained him as a bhikkhu in 1979.

He returned to England in October 1979 and joined Ajahn Sumedho at the newly established Chithurst Monastery in West Sussex. In 1983 he made an 830-mile trek from Chithurst to a new branch monastery, Harnham Vihāra, near the Scottish border.

In July 1985, he moved to Amaravati Buddhist Centre north of London and resided there for many years. In the early 1990s, he started making trips to California every year, eventually establishing Abhayagiri Monastery near Ukiah, Northern California, in June of 1996. He has lived there since that time, holding the position of co-abbot along with Ajahn Pasanno.

He wrote an account of his 1983 walk, called *Tudong – the Long Road North*, republished in the expanded book *Silent Rain*, now out of print. The book in your hands is a reprint of some of the Dhamma talks in this volume, with additional material from the journal Ajahn Amaro kept during a pilgrimage to Egypt in 2006.

He published another book, *Small Boat, Great Mountain*, in 2003 that is available for free distribution. In addition to his Egyptian pilgrimage, Ajahn Amaro recently spent one year on sabbatical visiting Buddhist holy places in India, Nepal, and Bhutan.

Ajahn Amaro is a well-known and well-respected teacher of Buddhism worldwide; his warmth and humour make the teachings accessible to a wide and varied audience.

