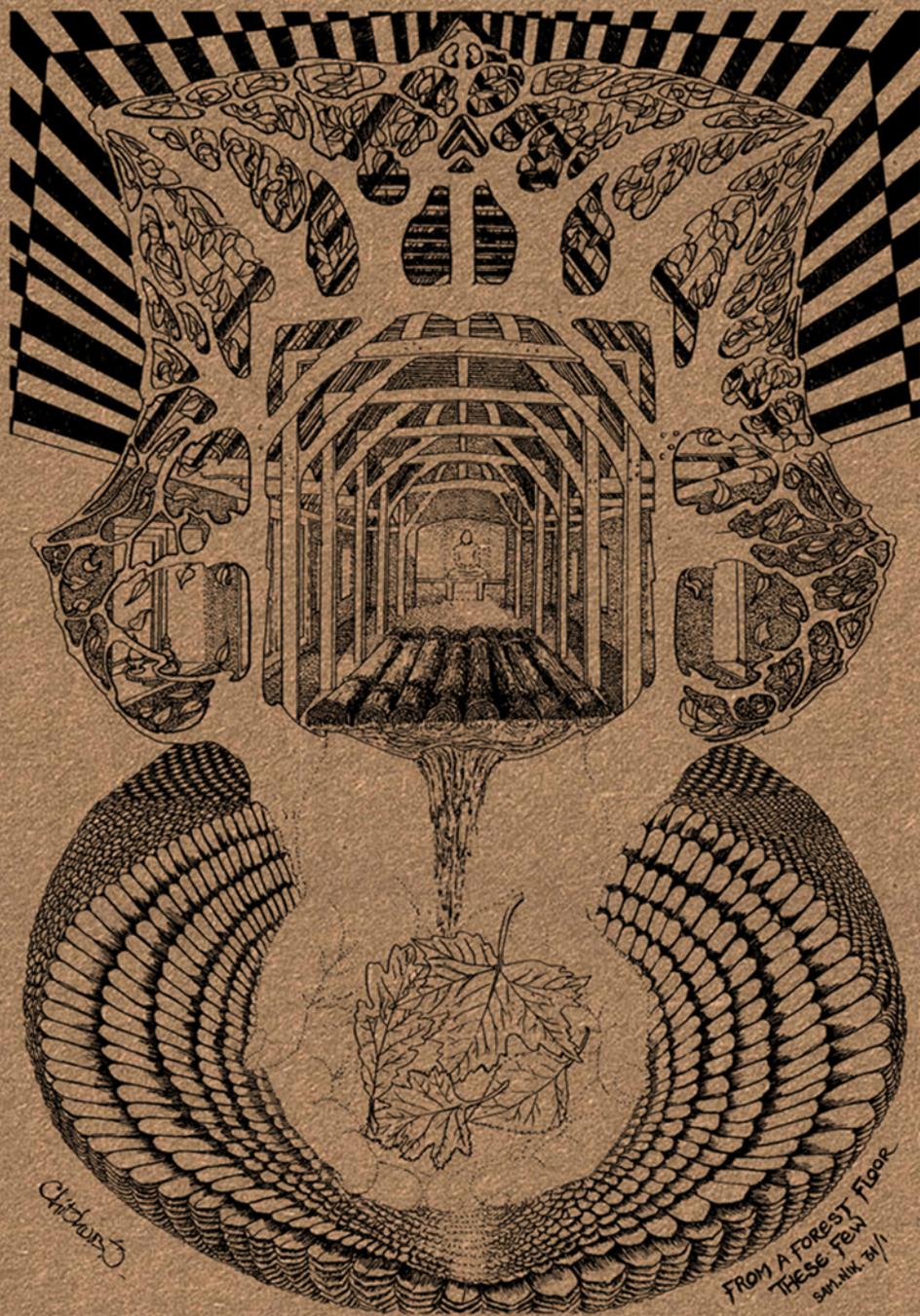


THE MOST PRECIOUS GIFT



HONOURING THE LIFE AND WORK OF
AJAHN SUCITTO

THE MOST PRECIOUS GIFT



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AJAHN SUCITTO

The Most Precious Gift

HONOURING THE LIFE AND WORK OF
AJAHN SUCITTO

RECOLLECTIONS OF AJAHN SUCITTO
AND A COLLECTION OF HIS DHAMMA REFLECTIONS
FROM 1985 TO 2017

 AMARAVATI
PUBLICATIONS

FOR FREE DISTRIBUTION
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WITH GRATITUDE TO AJAHN SUCITTO
ON THE OCCASION OF HIS SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY

‘THE GIFT OF DHAMMA IS THE MOST PRECIOUS GIFT;
THE TASTE OF DHAMMA IS THE SWEETEST TASTE;
THE JOY OF DHAMMA IS THE GREATEST JOY;
THE EXTINCTION OF CRAVING IS THE END OF ALL SUFFERING.’

Dhammapada, verse 354

A Handful of Leaves

The Blessed One was once living at Kosambi in a wood of *śimsapā* trees. He picked up a few leaves in his hand and asked the bhikkhus, ‘How do you conceive this, bhikkhus? Which is more, the few leaves that I have picked up in my hand or those on the trees in the wood?’

‘The leaves that the Blessed One has picked up in his hand are few, Lord; those in the wood are far more.’

‘So too, bhikkhus, the things I have known by direct knowledge are more; the things that I have told you are only a few.’

‘Why have I not told them? Because they bring no benefit, no advancement in the holy life, and because they do not lead to dispassion, to fading, to ceasing, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna. That is why I have not told them.’

‘And what have I told you? This is suffering; this is the origin of suffering; this is the cessation of suffering; this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. That is what I have told you. Why have I told it? Because it brings benefit and advancement in the holy life, and because it leads to dispassion, to fading, to ceasing, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna.’

‘So bhikkhus, let your task be the contemplation: this is suffering; this is the origin of suffering; this is the cessation of suffering; this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’

Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.31

COMMENTARY ON FRONT COVER DRAWING BY

Ajahn Thitadhammo

29 NOVEMBER 2012 – FULL MOON



Sitting in the corner on the concrete floor, flooded by sunlight. No roof yet, only the body of an upturned boat. All ribs. No planking.

It is spring. A tall moving blue sky of passing white clouds.

Oak pillars, all arching cross-ties, become an avenue upholding the longitudinal purlins, strapped down by rafters in seven chants between principles – all static.

The air saturated with pleasant, rancid tanning fragrance.

In a faraway silence the April cuckoo called contentedly from Hammer Wood and in the leaves, sprung, recreating these awarenesses of machined timber back into dreaming self of this my cradled cathedral – wooded and shadowed as was once growing.

Even now, wandering stumbles into these memories so privately engraved upon corridors of remembrance, leading as it does to my death of this once more fortunate return.

ADDED COMMENTARY ON 4 MAY 2016

An umbrellaed protection canopy.

An emptiness Buddha symbol of the further shore within, held in the heartwood temple of Dhamma.

Eightfold raft against the stream.

1000 petaled opening consciousness awakening wisdom.

Hand of the teacher offering (emphasizing);

‘What should be done by a teacher – this I have done for you.’

Numerical References

Numerical references to the suttas from the Majjhima Nikāya are taken from the Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi translation.

Numerical references to the suttas from the Saṃyutta Nikāya and Aṅguttara Nikāya are taken from the Bhikkhu Bodhi translations.

Numerical references to the suttas from the Dīgha Nikāya are taken from the Maurice Walshe translation.

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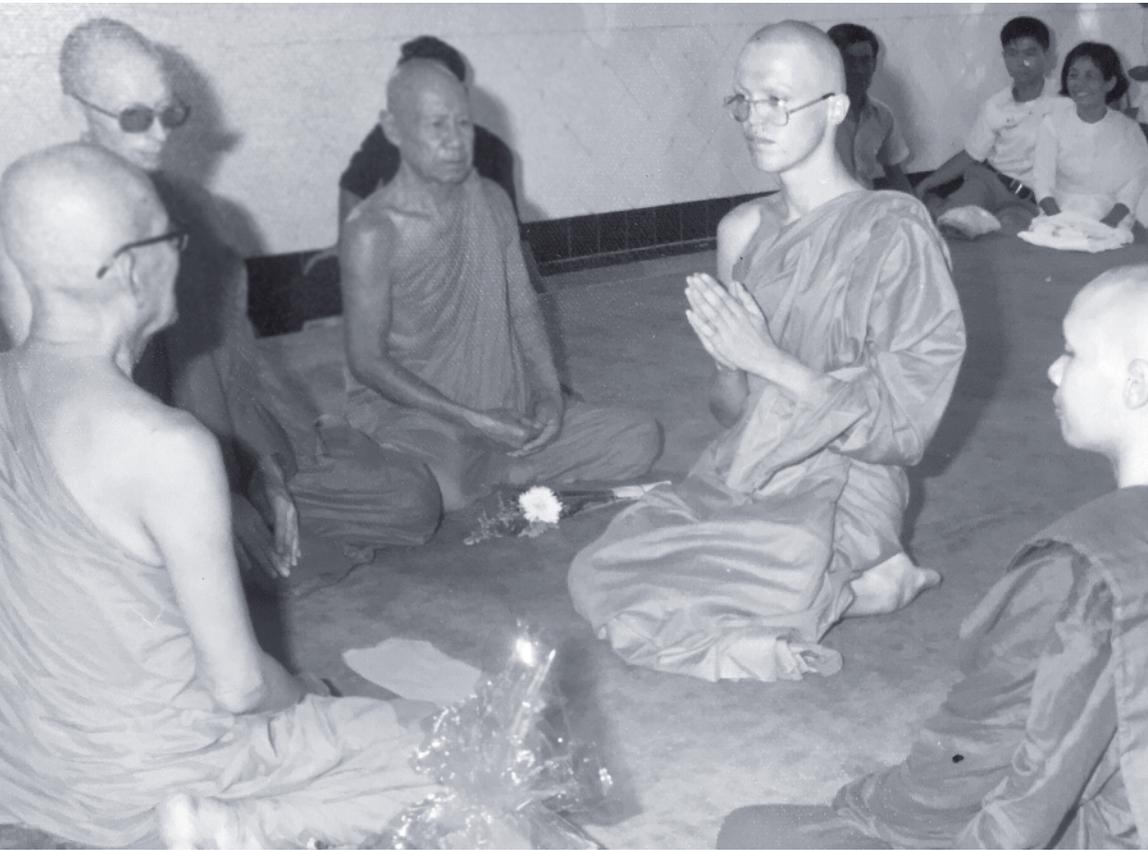
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AJAHN SUCITTO'S PABBAJJĀ CEREMONY IN SEPTEMBER 1975



Preface

The inspiration to compile this celebratory volume in honour of Ajahn Sucitto's seventieth birthday came from the hearts of a number of his appreciative students, both monastic and lay, in particular Sister Kittināṇī. Ajahn Sucitto has spread the Buddha Dhamma to a vast range of audiences for well over thirty years, so it seems most fitting to use this natural milestone of seventy years to honour his teaching career. In addition, it is an opportunity to express gratitude for the wisdom, guidance and good example that have come from being in his presence and hearing his voice, for so many of us, for so many years.

Although Ajahn Sucitto has compiled numerous books of his own teachings, such as *Dawn of the Dhamma*, *Kalyāna*, *Introduction to Insight Meditation*, *Meditation – A Way of Awakening*, *Meditation – An Outline*, *Kamma and the End of Kamma*, *Pāramī – Ways to Cross Life's Floods*, *Clarity and Calm*, *Unseating the Inner Tyrant*, *Samādhi is Pure Enjoyment* and others, they have all focused on specific areas of Dhamma practice, drawing the attention to particular facets of experience and spiritual training. These individual jewels each have their own value and beauty, but, another intention behind this current publication is, in contrast, to display a varied casket of gems of Ajahn Sucitto's teachings, embodied in his wise reflections as they have evolved over more than thirty years.

It is hoped that gathering together this broad range of talks that Ajahn Sucitto has offered over several decades will provide a representative compendium of his words that his many long-standing students can easily refer to and be reminded of. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it aims to offer a multitude of helpful and inspiring

perspectives to new readers, spiritual aspirants and all those whose hearts are seeking an end to suffering.



It is a sign of the respect and admiration in which Ajahn Sucitto is held that it was felt appropriate to begin the book with a number of Recollections expressed by his fellow Dhamma-farers, led by Luang Por Sumedho. For Ajahn Sucitto has not only been a source of guidance and inspiration for the vast numbers of lay people he has taught on retreat, or who have visited Cittaviveka Monastery over the last decades; he has also been a major source of wise reflection and an exemplar of the spiritual ideal for his fellow monastics.

The reader may notice that many of these Recollections refer to Ajahn Sucitto's 'Mahā Kassapa-like' relishing of asceticism – the bitter practices of monastic training – particularly in the earlier years of his monastic life. However, it is striking that it is rather his 'Sāriputta-like' wisdom, as manifested in the lively thoroughness and intricacy of his Dhamma teachings, that has shone the brightest light into the lives of so many of us. As expressed in many of the Recollections, Ajahn Sucitto's wisdom is multi-layered, astute, never repeating and ever-fresh in expression. It is this brilliance of the light of embodied wisdom that has touched so many so deeply.



By way of introducing the Dhamma material gathered in these pages, the reader should note that all the teachings were given by Ajahn Sucitto as extemporaneous talks. These are not scholarly papers but *Dhamma-desanā*, 'demonstrations of the Dhamma' arising from the living interaction between the audience and the teacher. All the talks transcribed here were offered to people on meditation retreats or to members of a monastic community, usually during a retreat period.

The book's voice thus assumes the reader will have some degree of familiarity with Buddhist terms and concepts. Accordingly it is not a book designed to meet the needs of those completely new to the Buddha's teachings and meditation, but hopefully those unfamiliar with the terminology will be able (with the aid of the *Glossary* and the *Definition of Technical Terms*), to glean great benefit from these pages regardless.

The reader will probably note that Ajahn Sucitto's style of teaching is largely analytical and non-anecdotal, but that it has nevertheless become more and more grounded in the embodied nature of Dhamma as the years have gone by. As Kittisāro strikingly and touchingly puts it in his Recollection:

'I'll never forget his exclaiming to me, "*Who took the body out of Buddhism?*" So he dedicated himself to practising conscious embodiment, mindfulness of the body. He began to balance unrelenting effort with embodied ease, and the results are impressive. I've seen the blessing of embodied practice transform Ajahn Sucitto from a clumsy, awkward, top-heavy genius into a calm, radiant, grounded, poised, balanced and graceful presence.'



The subject of 'embodiment' in Dhamma practice brings into the picture the fact that, physically at least, Ajahn Sucitto has resided at Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery on and off for over thirty years, including twenty-two years as its abbot. He has lived in the forest, in the buildings and on the soil there; he has drunk the water and breathed the air of that part of the English countryside for much of his adult life; he soaked *these* very stones with Wykamol to stop the dry rot; he decided that *that* tree should be planted *there*; he chose to raise a stupa for Luang Por Chah in *that* spot ...

Ajahn Sucitto's life as a bhikkhu and as a teacher has thus been intimately woven together with the fabric of Cittaviveka, and is therefore in some ways inseparable from that location. Many of his more recent teachings acknowledge and celebrate the practice of Dhamma as a relational process (e.g. *The Relational Sense* p 266 & *Refuge* p 185), so it is significant that his life has been interwoven with that place; not forgetting that in its very name is the message that the inner 'cittaviveka', 'the serene heart', is a psychological abiding-place of non-attachment. Just as in past centuries the bricks and stones that form the walled garden at Cittaviveka were set by the mason like *this*, and the house and garden were designed like *this*, so today our minds participate in the effects of those choices – embodied in the bricks and stones, the placing of the pine and chestnut, the box-tree by the woodshed – and those choices affect the mind like *this*. The past exists in relation to the present; the observer exists in relation to the observed. Similarly Ajahn Sucitto's brilliant, jewel-like teachings were laid down just like *this* – were established in our hearts like *this* – so this volume aims to plant those teachings in the broader experiential field where they can settle and weather and continue to bless through the ages – just as do the stones of the house, the waters of the Hammer Stream that runs between the nuns' cottages, the oak-beams framing the Dhamma Hall, the kutis in the forest ...

In the same vein, as a demonstration of and reflection on this emphasis on embodiment in Ajahn Sucitto's teachings, it was thought fitting to include one of Ajahn Ṭhitadhammo's beautiful illustrations of Cittaviveka as the front cover of the book, together with his reflective Commentary upon it. Ajahn Ṭhitadhammo has lived at Cittaviveka for his entire monastic life; he has therefore dwelt under Ajahn Sucitto's guidance for over twenty years. His graphic style of profound balance, coupled with complex but unentangled intricacy, with the earthy and the sublime intermingled, is in many ways a perfect evocation of those

same qualities in the teachings contained within this book. His drawings are like an Ajahn Sucitto Dhamma talk transposed into graphic form.

All those who are fortunate enough to read this book are invited to take the Dhamma teachings contained here to heart and embody their spirit in thought, word and deed. And may that embodiment of the Dhamma be a living reality that frees the heart from all suffering.

Amaro Bhikkhu
Amaravati Buddhist Monastery
February 2018

Acknowledgements

I would like to express appreciation to all those involved with the preparation of this commemorative book.

Firstly, to Luang Por Sumedho, who agreed to be interviewed in order to share his Recollections of Ajahn Sucitto; Ajahn Vīradhammo, Ajahn Kāruṇiko, Ajahn Sundarā, Ajahn Candasirī, Ayyā Medhānandī, Thaniya, Kittisāro, Nicholas Halliday and Nick Scott, each offered written contributions of their own Recollections.

Ajahn Amaro took time from his full schedule to proofread all the texts; Ajahn Ṭhitadhammo offered the cover illustration and its commentary; Ayyā Jayati helped with proofreading and with fine-tuning some sentences.

Lynne Drayton and Khema (Jan Carroll) read all the texts and offered very useful feedback. Jayasiri (Sash Lewis) helped with editing the Recollections and some of the texts; Shauna Gillan and Pamela Kirby helped with editing.

Sharron Chan and the many volunteers of the Lotus Volunteer Group provided significant assistance. Notably, Wendy Parker helped with the transcriptions and proofread all the texts; Piyumi Jayasinge helped with the transcriptions; Kate Upton, Caroline Moss and Louis Cross helped with editing and proofreading; Robert Mathers helped with proofreading, and Ariya Schaas proofread the entire book.

Nicholas Halliday prepared, typeset and designed the book.

In addition, there were many others who contributed in different ways.

I also wish to express gratitude for permission to reproduce extracts from the following publication:

Satipaṭṭhāna – The Direct Path to Realization, by Venerable Analāyo, published by Windhorse Publications, reprinted with the kind permission of the author.

The final expression of appreciation must be for Ajahn Sucitto himself. His teachings, offered with wisdom, skill and humour, and arising from decades of dedicated practice, have been a great source of inspiration and support for many people.

May this collection, published in celebration of his seventieth birthday, bring immeasurable benefit to all those who read it.

Sister Kittināṇī
Amaravati Buddhist Monastery
December 2018

EARLY DAYS AT WAT KIRIWONG, 1976



Recollections of
Ajahn Sucitto

Luang Por Sumedho

LUANG POR SUMEDHO WAS INTERVIEWED BY AJAHN ASOKO ON 11 AUGUST 2015. THE TRANSCRIPTION OF THAT INTERVIEW HAS BEEN EDITED INTO THE FOLLOWING TEXT.

Before I went to live in the UK I travelled with a group of Thais from Ubon to visit Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai. During that time Ajahn Sucitto came to visit me; it was in December 1976. I'd heard of him, but I'd never met him before. I told him that I was going to live in England, and because he's English I invited him to come to London and drop by. I had a good impression of our first meeting, but it wasn't very long.

The second time we met was at the Hampstead Vihāra in London. Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Khemadhammo and I had arrived there on 6 May 1977, and one day the next year Ajahn Sucitto turned up. His father had passed away, so he had come back to England to attend his funeral, and then he came to see me. At the time Ajahns Ānando and Vīradhammo were with me at the Vihāra. I had the same very good impression of him as before, so I determined not to let him go. I thought, 'We've got to keep this guy.' I always had a good feeling about him, from the beginning up to now.

At that time we were in the process of selling the Hampstead Vihāra. We had to get the money from the sale to pay for the place at Chithurst. When that was accomplished, in June 1979, we all moved to Chithurst. There were Kittisāro, Sucitto, Vīradhammo, Ānando, myself and Araññābho, a British monk, who appears in the BBC film *The Buddha Comes to Sussex*; but Araññābho didn't stay very long, he disrobed. So that was the beginning of the sangha in England, and the first branch monastery of Luang Por Chah in the West. I also became an *upajjhāya* then.

During the first five years we made Chithurst House habitable. We had to refurbish and rebuild it, but first we had to tear down a lot of the inside. The more plaster we tore down, the more horrible things we saw. There was dry rot. You wouldn't believe the kinds of hideous mushrooms and fungi there were! They were really ugly. Ajahn Sucitto, who's very artistic, would draw pictures of the dry rot like some kind of creeping monster. During that time he also started doing an illustrated calligraphic version of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*¹ for me. Ajahn Sucitto's mind is very creative; he could create artistic images and symbols. I don't think he ever trained as an artist, it's just part of his genius. It took him four years to complete. When it was finished he gave it to me, but I thought it belonged to the 'Amaravati historical museum' so I left it at Amaravati.

Ajahn Sucitto was also the one who started the Forest Sangha Newsletter when we were still at Chithurst. He used a grubby old printing machine, almost like a child's, where you get the ink all over you. He produced these newsletters faithfully, though they were always a bit grimy. But they were very good because he's an exceptionally good writer, and he's also a poet. He has talents that I really appreciated because I don't consider myself a writer at all and he's got a superb command of the English language. I always like listening to his talks because they are interesting. He has a very good intellect and he's very reflective and thoughtful.

At one time Ajahn Vīradhammo and I shared one room, Kittisāro and Ānando shared another room, and Ajahn Sucitto and a Swedish monk named Lakkhaṇa shared another room. The rooms were all close together, on the first floor in Chithurst House, so you could hear

1. *The Discourse on Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma* is the Buddha's first discourse after his enlightenment. It was given to the five ascetics at Sarnath. In it he expounds the Four Noble Truths. The illustrated calligraphic version made by Ajahn Sucitto can be seen in his book: *The Dawn of the Dhamma*.

Kittisāro and Ānando going on joking, laughing all night long, while in the other room where Ajahn Sucitto and Lakkhaṇa were, it was dead quiet. So I had a bright idea: I moved them around. I put Ajahn Sucitto with Kittisāro, and Ānando with Lakkhaṇa, and that balanced them out.

Nick Scott and a group from Newcastle would go on retreats with us in Oxford at Oakenholt and they wanted to start something up in the North. When we got the Harnham place, it was Ajahn Sucitto who took it on in 1981. He stayed there for a few months to start the place and then came back to Chithurst.

We then established the Sīladharā Order. Obviously we couldn't ordain bhikkhunis, but I felt there was some need for women to have more acknowledgement than just as eight-precept maechees. This was my American mind at the time. I got permission to do this and asked Ajahn Sucitto to take on the training of the sīladharā. I felt he would be good at that and he was quite willing to do it. They were originally eight-precept maechees, but when they became sīladharā they had ten precepts. They had to learn about *samaṇa-saññā*, so Ajahn Sucitto tried to devise a Vinaya that would work for them, according to the Vinaya scriptures, the bhikkhuni Vinaya and the *sekhiyavattas*. He was trying to provide a form under which they could live together, agreeing rules of etiquette and relating to monks. None of us really knew what to do, including me; it was something completely new. So Ajahn Sucitto would meet with them almost every day, I think, and try to work something out. I think he did quite a good job, considering that it was something he'd never done before.

After five years at Chithurst, Ajahn Sucitto came with me to start Amaravati in 1984. Amaravati was founded because our community at Chithurst was growing fast and the nuns only had a little cottage and a few kutis. When we went to Amaravati the nuns took the staff

quarters, and this gave them quite a nice place to live, with a garden and some space. Also I wanted Amaravati to be more of a centre to attract people because it had the facilities to receive large numbers. We were also trying to protect Chithurst from being caught up in too many activities. I thought Chithurst would be a good forest monastery, but not particularly a central point. Amaravati was nearer to London, easier to get to, and it had the Sala, twenty-two buildings, a lot of bathrooms and several kitchens, things that could be adapted for use by more and more people. So the idea was to protect Chithurst, not to compete with it.

Ajahn Sucitto stayed at Amaravati until Ajahn Ānando left Chithurst in 1992. It was a very difficult time because Ajahn Ānando had problems and left abruptly. This was a big shock, and Chithurst was left in a mess. Psychologically it was very traumatizing. So I asked Ajahn Sucitto to take on the duties of abbot at Chithurst. He was a very brave man to step in.

Ajahn Sucitto is a natural ascetic and he frowns on luxury; it utterly offends him. I remember one time – this is a funny story – I took him to Thailand with me. We were staying at Khun Kesaree Bulsook's. Quite often when we went to Bangkok we'd stay at her place. Ajahn Sucitto had heard stories about this quite luxurious kuti she had built near her house for monks to stay in and that she would provide great quantities and varieties of really delicious food. On this occasion, she had a large following of women who helped her cook and the floor was covered with all these marvellous dishes. I had the impression Ajahn Sucitto was really determined to dislike the whole scene. He was sitting next to me with a stern look. The ladies were looking at him but he wouldn't look at them. We started passing the food and he'd toss it into the bowl. Khun Kesaree and her friends were wondering if he was all right; they wanted an acknowledgement from him. When all the food had been passed around they took it away, and then they brought a bowl of very good quality ice-cream for each individual and started passing it

around. They brought it in at the end of the meal, so it wouldn't melt. Ajahn Sucitto just put it down as if to say he wasn't going to eat it, but I whispered to him, 'They want you to enjoy it.' Sometimes we can be very idealistic about being ascetics or not indulging in sensual things!

One of the pleasures Ajahn Sucitto sometimes used to give me was to come to my kuti at Amaravati and make me some tea, and then massage my feet. Even with expert instructions from him, I never could compete with him in tea-making.

A lot of the books with my talks wouldn't have been published if Ajahn Sucitto hadn't edited them, so you can thank him for all that. I think Ajahn Sucitto should be good at retirement. He has so many talents. He always wanted to write, but he's a very committed and responsible person so I guess he felt he had to carry on with his many duties. He would take on responsibilities without complaining because he was meeting the need at a time when there weren't many monks, especially monks who had experience in leadership positions and being abbots.

I admit there are many things I don't understand about Ajahn Sucitto. He's an enigmatic character. Sometimes I find it quite difficult to understand his reactions to things. He's always been an extremely good friend to me, as far as friendship goes among monks. I have always felt he respected and trusted me, and was a friend. I've never had any kind of personal conflict with him. I always admired his talents. I even find him loveable because of the way he walks with his nose up in the air and a vacant look on his face. And bearing in mind the different problems that arose during those years in England, I always felt he was supportive of me, which I still appreciate to this day. I have a great affection for him personally and I trust him. He's someone who has integrity, and whose opinion and character I can rely on.

Ajahn Vīradhammo

SEPTEMBER 2016

I have known Ajahn Sucitto since 1978, when as young bhikkhus we practised together at the Hampstead Vihāra in London and at Oakenholt retreat centre in Oxford. Over the years he has been a good and wise friend, whose advice I have often sought on all manner of things. With empathy, good humour and a brilliant use of the English language, Ajahn offers reflections steeped in a profound understanding of the teachings of the Buddha. This collection of transcribed talks is a fitting tribute to Ajahn Sucitto's dedication to the path of liberation. May he enjoy many years of good health and well-being.

Ajahn Kāruṅiko

MARCH 2016

Ajahn Sucitto, a true kalyāṇamitta

I feel privileged to have known Ajahn Sucitto for over thirty years, during twenty years of which we lived together at Cittaviveka Monastery, and I value him as both a teacher and a *kalyāṇamitta*.

When Ajahn Sucitto was abbot of Cittaviveka, he presented a good example of uprightness and restraint in Vinaya, balanced with a sense of humour. His early years of being abbot were not easy, as he took on the role after quite a charismatic former abbot who had suddenly left in unfortunate circumstances. But Ajahn Sucitto is not one to shy away from difficulties; he lives up to the phrase he coined: 'The only way out is in,' meaning, 'To go beyond *dukkha* one must face it.' I remember as an anagārika being his attendant on a weekend retreat which he offered to lead at the last minute because Sogyal Rinpoche had to cancel. The retreatants were very disappointed, and when Ajahn Sucitto questioned them as to why they had come, several of them replied: 'We thought Sogyal Rinpoche was teaching.' However this did not hinder him from offering some fine teachings, and I think most left the retreat uplifted in Dhamma and no longer disappointed.

Ajahn Sucitto is generous in offering teachings which many people appreciate in both his talks and his writings. His wisdom and empathetic nature make him someone you feel you can go to if you are struggling and need some helpful advice. I find his way of teaching Vinaya inspiring, and he has put much thought and effort into establishing a good standard of training at Cittaviveka, as well as establishing the Sīladharā training for the nuns. I have valued his perspective on various issues that have arisen in developing the monasteries in the

West. If a letter which calls for some sensitivity is required from the Elders' Council, he is often chosen to write it.

As human beings we all have characteristics which some people like and others dislike. In positions of leadership and teaching one receives both positive and negative reactions. Ajahn Sucitto has been described as 'inscrutable'; this leaves a lot of scope for people to misinterpret some of his expressions and misread them as indicating disapproval. But I have found Ajahn Sucitto willing to receive negative reactions and feedback without reciprocating them, one of the qualities which I feel contributes to his living up to his bhikkhu name of Sucitto, 'Noble Mind'.

Ajahn Sundarā

APRIL 2018

In the early years at Chithurst Ajahn Sucitto seemed to have unlimited energy and would frequently push himself to the edges of his physical endurance. He would be standing up all day, printing one of our first newsletters on an ancient printing machine, the smell of black ink oozing from his small workroom that later on became ‘the princess toilet’, near the back door of the main house. He could spend half the night absorbed in his calligraphic painting, although the daily routine and workload were intense. Then he would tell wonderful stories about his monk’s life experiences in the early days. Once, while attempting to dye his robe, he was fully expecting it to come out bhikkhu-colour, but instead, to his amazement, it turned out green! Or his moment-by-moment account of developing a positive relationship with the sewing machine as he attempted to sew a double-layered *sanghāṭī* robe. He could bring the entire shrine room audience to the point of tears from laughing so much.

It was not very long after we became *sīladharā* that Ajahn Sucitto was invited by Ajahn Sumedho to help our fledgling nuns’ community establish our new way of training and discipline. With his well-known generosity of heart, notorious toughness and high standards, he taught us over a period of six years how to understand and skilfully use our training discipline. He had taken care to adapt the training to meet the needs of a female community following a renunciant, mendicant lifestyle in the twentieth century. On reflection, that was a mighty task, both for Ajahn Sucitto and for us. We were all – consciously or not – engaged in building what was perhaps the first community of female Buddhist alms-mendicants in the West. This involved understanding

and quite often being baffled by ancient Asian cultural ways and conditioning.

Ajahn Sucitto contributed much to the birthing of our community by helping us to find a way of living and practising together. It was the beginning of something totally new. Without the sound refuge of Ajahn Sumedho's wise teaching, and the skilled and patient guidance of Ajahn Sucitto, together with the supportive and dedicated presence of monks, nuns and lay people, I feel quite sure that the nuns' community could not have developed so well or lasted so long. Without Ajahn Sucitto's unflinching support, his Dhamma guidance and high standards of Vinaya, I wonder if any of us would have come out alive! As we shared a physically demanding lifestyle, a fairly intense practice of the Buddha's teaching on ending suffering, and training in mindfulness, there were often exceptional physical and mental challenges.

Although at the time I did not always appreciate what a great gift this was for our nuns' community, I now feel a great debt of gratitude to Ajahn Sucitto. He would always show loving, patient and kind spiritual support to the nuns, even though he sometimes appeared puzzled by us, by the female psyche and our ways of relating to the world and to ourselves. Yet he never gave up; though when asked once if he had ever fallen in love with a nun, he paused before admitting that falling in love had not been a problem, but that there had been occasional murderous thoughts!

Ajahn Candasirī

DECEMBER 2017

Over the years Ajahn Sucitto has put an enormous amount of time and energy into making the extraordinary teachings of Ajahn Sumedho available: selecting talks, editing them and arranging for their publication as books. It is extremely gladdening that now Sister Kittīñāṇī has been inspired to prepare this collection of his own remarkable teachings.

I've known Ajahn Sucitto for almost forty years. My very earliest recollection is of a talk he gave one evening, shortly after he had arrived from Thailand, at the newly re-opened Hampstead Vihāra in London. His teaching was basic, raw, immediate and practical; it comprised an encouragement to contemplate the experience of body ... Since then, over several decades, he has developed many modes of recollection in his guiding of countless monks, nuns and lay people all over the world.

My personal experience of him is as a true friend of the best kind – a *kalyāṇamitta* – totally committed both to his own liberation and to supporting others in their aspiration. Opening the door of his kuti at 4.00 a.m. and bathing in the freshly fallen snow was just one of the many austerities he seemed to delight in. However, rather than imposing the same rigorous standards that he would expect of himself on others, he finds ways of adapting his approach to the needs of an individual or group with humour and kindness.

Some might think of him as a kind of Dhamma warrior, rather intimidating at times, but I have also observed a deep tenderness. One time many years ago he painstakingly studied knitting under the tutelage of an elderly friend. He had wanted to knit a pair of socks

from the spun fleeces of sheep that had been grazing at Chithurst as a birthday present for Ajahn Sumedho. His account of the process of creating them was just one in his repertoire of hilarious encounters with practical matters, involving, among other things, sewing machines, old-fashioned printers and – almost fatally – fungicide. He was also willing to share even the most intimate personal vulnerability as means of supporting us to approach similar aspects of our own life experience. *‘Don’t ever put doubt into your mind. Don’t do that to yourself’* is one of many sound bites I captured and noted down during a period of deep despair over my own practice. It eased my struggle.

Ajahn Sucitto’s teaching legacy is huge, and perhaps the most significant contribution – although it may not have been appreciated by everyone – was the crafting of our nuns’ training Rule and procedures. The firmness and persistence he brought to that task has enabled a group of women of different ages, backgrounds, nationalities and temperaments to live and practise in community for over twenty-five years, using a form based on the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni *Pāṭimokkhas* – there being no such training previously available for women.

Now his focus has turned to a concern for how we might best cope with the ageing process, and towards guiding our collective awareness towards the welfare of the planet. I strongly suspect that until his last breath he will continue to share what he can for the ultimate benefit of all. I end with a most selfish wish: May he not take that last breath for a very long time!

Ayyā Medhānandī

3 MAY 2018 – SATI SARANIYA HERMITAGE, CANADA

Ajahn Sucitto was always, and continues to be, the noblest kind of teacher: wise, witty, kind and generous, one who embodies the Buddha's teachings in remarkably refined and uncompromising ways. He became our hero when we learned about his fearlessness in the face of bandits in the forests of India. I dare say that serving in England as a Dhamma parent, while in his forties, to a group of a dozen or so contemporary nuns, called for courage of even greater proportions.

I first met him when I arrived at Amaravati from Burma as a young nun in 1990 and he had the rare duty of acting as 'Mother Superior' of our fledgling nuns' community. He was truly a benevolent parent who provided both sanctuary and protection in the storms we weathered together. Like a giant tree with enough space between its branches for the sun to shine through, he gave shelter, while allowing light for us to grow and glimpse the vast skies beyond. Through his own unwavering commitment to the Path, Ajahn Sucitto became a mirror to us, reflecting both our goodness and our foibles with exceptional kindness.

Despite his many other responsibilities as a teacher and leader of the whole community, he met regularly with our group of nuns. For him this sometimes meant witnessing the less polished nuts and bolts of our perceived suffering. Ever formal and stern, yet respectful and sensitive, he would truly listen, hearing us out. When we lacked faith, he had faith in us; when we were troubled, he steadied us with calm and discernment; when adjudicating contentious situations, he balanced our reactivity. He could tease out the truth in the most

fraught moments, and tenderly, even playfully, point out a creative way to dissolve our tension.

During one period of instability in the mid 1990's, many monastics, including some elder monks, were disrobing. There was great concern throughout the community. To reassure us, Ajahn Sucitto invited the nuns to meet with him and Luang Por Sumedho. After some Dhamma reflections, we shared an unforgettable moment when Luang Por declared, 'Ajahn Sucitto and I will never disrobe.' Seeing the expressions on the faces of our two leaders empowered us and restored our faith in the Sangha. They were our pillars. We felt their unshakable determination and devotion to the Path.

Not only was Ajahn Sucitto a pillar of the community, he also took a hands-on approach to leading us. He would work with us energetically for hours during the day, and in the evening he would deliver a stunningly erudite and heart-penetrating Dhamma talk. Whenever we were with him, whether at work or in formal occasions, he inspired us. We loved his unabashed honesty, dry humour and wisdom; his grace, joyous austerity and clarity. Deftly and artfully, he would bring out the best in us – the courage to face our pains and the endurance to seek out the Dhamma that would take us beyond them.

Over the years, Ajahn Sucitto has invited me to teach retreats with him. On several occasions he could see that teaching in front of my 'Mother Superior' was a cause of anxiety. Though he had dozens of retreatants to look after, he still took time to champion and encourage me, and he gave me the key to let go of fear so that I could find my Dhamma voice. This was Ajahn Sucitto's way with everyone. A tirelessly patient mentor, he never gave up on us. Though he could be fierce, time and again it was out of compassion – like a mother protecting her innocent and ignorant child from an unseen danger, he would rescue us from our self-disparagement or fear. He would fluff up our feathers when

we floundered and delight us with the riches of his teachings. Such a spiritual friend, the Buddha said, is one hundred per cent of the Path, the treasure of a lifetime. Worthy of homage and perpetual gratitude, his presence in this world is an immeasurable blessing.

Thaniya (Willa Reid)

JUNE 2017

Ever since I have known him I have considered who is this process we call Ajahn Sucitto. As I reflect on almost two decades at Cittaviveka with him, a particular fragment of his Dhamma teaching from among the many I heard comes to mind. The teaching was given on an *Uposatha* night, when the shrine room at Cittaviveka still acted as the meditation space for the community. With lots of coming and going through the door, Ajahn Sucitto asked us all, 'Is the squeak waiting there to come out every time someone opens the door?' So rather than simply oiling the hinges, we could contemplate conditionality and not-self ...

It is a potent enquiry, typical of his capacity for articulating the Dhamma. Taking this metaphor of conditionality, I have recognized how – like us all – Ajahn Sucitto is naturally affected by conditions. Of the various complex roles and relationships through which he and I engaged, some were congenial, some resonant, while others had the odd tricky edge. But always I recognized, 'Good Heart', in his generous wish to share his insights into the Dhamma. From his India *sāadhanā* he brought back his own rendering of the *Recollections on Universal Well-being*, which he chanted for the community. Even now, in 2017, as our community in Aotearoa, New Zealand chants it, there is a continued heart connection. In such ways his willingness and capacity to offer Dhamma ripples out in blessing.

A Dhamma friend, offering kindness and support in myriad forms, whose commitment to waking up I could and do completely trust: what better kind of friend is there?

Kittisāro

MARCH 2017

I first met Ajahn Sucitto almost forty years ago, in 1979, when we were young monks together at Oakenholt, a small Buddhist centre in the English countryside outside Oxford. Both of us had just returned from Thailand; I was recovering from typhoid fever, and he was visiting his family after the death of his father. Although I didn't have much energy, and he was very quiet and somewhat aloof, I'll never forget the sheer joy that poured through us whenever we chanted the *paritta* blessings together at special meal offerings, especially the *Victories of the Buddha*. JAYAMANGALA!

When I remember Ajahn Sucitto, I'm inspired to begin again on this Path of Awakening with renewed faith, determination and vigour – and not to get too disheartened by yet another setback. I once heard him say that enlightenment is death by a thousand cuts. He took the long, patient view. 'Kittisāro, Māra works for a living. He's always on the job.' When I think of Ajahn Sucitto, I see a bhikkhu's bhikkhu, someone truly dedicated to the spirit and embodiment of living the holy life to its completion for the ending of suffering – not looking for shortcuts, not preoccupied with the superficial highs, but focused wholeheartedly on the essence.

From our earliest conversations and from listening to his Dhamma talks, it was obvious that he had a brilliant mind, with a deep passion for investigation and reflection, and an extraordinary gift for articulating the subtleties of the Buddha's teachings. I have never met anyone else who could so skilfully relate the classical Pali terms to actual lived human experience. He brings the Dhamma to life year after year, with a dry, brutally honest, self-deprecating humour and a quiet compassion.

Having known the Ajahn for almost four decades, I've witnessed striking transformations in his way of being, which has richly blessed me and countless others. Not long after our short stay in Oxford we moved to Chithurst, and were part of the small group of monks and nuns who helped establish a forest monastery in the West Sussex countryside. In those early days there was a lot of work just to repair the monastic residence. The place was a building site, and yet morning and evening chanting continued, as did the all-night sittings every week with the phases of the moon. For me the young Sucitto was an intimidating intellectual and creative genius, with a fierce ascetic motivation for spiritual practice and tireless service to the monastic community. He seemed quite unconcerned about the welfare of his body, however, and not very adept at bodily awareness. When he started writing, editing and printing the first Chithurst newsletters, I remember seeing him one day covered in ink after a bout with the copying machine, or banging precariously into walls when carrying materials for the building restoration work. Although we would chuckle and kid him on occasion – and give him some space – he just quietly carried on undeterred. Once, he was the senior monk leading a *pūjā* in the old reception room, in front of the elaborately layered Thai shrine, with various engraved tables and shelves adorning the Buddha-image with flowers and candles. After the final bows he solemnly stood up and turned to leave, with the monastic community reverently waiting for his departure. His robe caught one of the tables and the whole shrine slowly came crashing down. Without flinching, undaunted, he stood there quietly and looked at the wreckage with his inscrutable gaze ... and then without a word, he walked away.

Whenever he noticed something out of balance within himself – *dukkha*, something he was averse to or struggling with – he'd determine right then and there not to avoid it, but to check it out and get to the heart of the matter. He did this without any fanfare or grand announcements. At first it seemed as if his motto was *the more bitter, the better*. Ajahn

Sucitto wasn't afraid to suffer. Yet as he deepened his cultivation of the Way, he realized that the path was one of unification and integration of body, speech (thinking mind), and heart. He had tremendous willpower, but he saw that you can't bully the heart: it just rebels. Rather than viewing enlightenment as something to be conquered, he began to see the path as one of healing. Realizing that to a large extent he had become disembodied (like so many of us), and aware that many styles of meditation perpetuate and even exacerbate *staying up in the head*, he studied the Buddha's original teachings on *samādhi* and saw that they emphasized profound rootedness in the body, training ourselves progressively *to be sensitive to the whole body* as we breathe in and out, *calming the whole body* as we breathe in and out. I'll never forget his exclaiming to me, 'Who took the body out of Buddhism?' So he dedicated himself to practising conscious embodiment, mindfulness of the body. He began to balance unrelenting effort with embodied ease, and the results are impressive. I've seen the blessing of embodied practice transform Ajahn Sucitto from a clumsy, awkward, top-heavy genius into a calm, radiant, grounded, poised, balanced and graceful presence.

In the early days at Chithurst we shared a tiny room. We had no heating, but we were warmed by the camaraderie of sharing our dedication to the path. In some respects we were an odd couple: me lying down all the time, collapsed on the floor with the lingering effects of debilitating illness, and Ajahn Sucitto never lying down for months at a time as he undertook the ascetic 'sitters' practice. I knew he worked hard during the day with the building projects, and yet at night I saw him patiently leaning over his little desk for hours as he painstakingly illustrated the Buddha's first discourse with elaborate Celtic designs and intricate Buddhist symbols. We had a highly esoteric secret school practice to employ when it was bitterly cold. We imagined that the defunct cast iron stove by the wall (with *Rose* engraved on the front) was blazing

away. ‘Ole Rosie is really pumping out the BTU’s² tonight. I’m sweating, it’s so hot in here.’ We’d put our hands up and warm them in the luminous glow of our faithful fire.

In those years I started to feel a bit useless, lying there like a sack of potatoes while everyone else was working so hard. I was eventually given my own room in the attic, and the opportunity to recuperate in peace, away from the fray. Ajahn Sucitto used to drop by from time to time to check in and see how I was doing. I always felt better from his encouraging visits. One day he arrived after a hard day of working in the monastic routine, lay down flat on the floor next to me, splayed out, and sighed with satisfaction: ‘Kitty, it’s hell out there! Dog eat dog. What a relief to come here to see you, a man pared down to the bone, a man of nothing.’ What a kind, compassionate and illuminating gift he gave me. He helped me see that being sick, working with that and letting go into it, was also an important offering to the community.

Ajahn Sucitto’s Dhamma is profound and subtle, empty and mind-blowing, trustworthy and enlightening. In so many ways he’s helped me and countless others deepen our understanding and stay with the gradually transformative process of awakening. But with all that brilliance and unstoppable determination to walk the noble path to its completion, he hasn’t forgotten the power of kindness, the blessing of being a friend. Twenty-five years ago, in 1991, when Ṭhānissarā and I fell in love and decided to leave the monastic life, there was a lot of controversy about the situation, with strong opinions and judgements in various quarters about what were perceived as our selfish deluded actions which harmed the sangha. It was a difficult time. Soon before I left, Ajahn Sucitto walked up to me, smiling. He said, ‘Kitty, I have my running shoes near the door. Who knows, I might be next.’ I didn’t feel judged. He wasn’t going anywhere or planning to disrobe; he was just

2. British Thermal Unit: a unit of heat equal to the amount of heat required to raise one pound of water one degree Fahrenheit at one atmosphere pressure; equivalent to 251.997 calories.

being kind and compassionate, letting me know he could relate to our predicament. In the twenty-five years since that day, Ajahn Sucitto has been a wonderful teacher and true friend.

On the occasion of Ajahn Sucitto's seventieth birthday, I rejoice at this commemorative collection of his teachings, and am grateful for his noble presence on this earth. Thank you, Ajahn, for your life, your inspiring example and your kindness. May you be well.

Nicholas Halliday

DECEMBER 2018 – NĀVĀDĪPA³

Ajahn Sucitto once told me with a wry smile that humans had perfected just two things: calligraphy and tea. Having seen much of his artwork – some from the early days – and been honoured to perform a ceremony alongside him in the old tea emporium in Singapore, I can see that, though light-hearted, this comment holds a truth: the perfection of both calligraphy and tea are achieved through dedication and practice over time.

I've known Ajahn Sucitto for nearly a decade, since I began designing his publications. However, it was during the first three months of 2016, when travelling together through Thailand, Singapore and South Africa, that I gained a deeper understanding of why so much *muditā* flowed in his direction. I recall a story-book's worth of tales from just those twelve weeks, and so many which embody his pathos, warmth, compassion and connection with nature.

Ajahn's own dedication and practice shone through this time in so many ways – from simple acts of everyday kindness to manifestations of 'the serene heart'. I would often encounter him wrapped in quiet meditation in whatever floor space he could find, sweeping leaves from his walking path or brewing Oolong on the off-chance of a visitor.

We had just arrived in Singapore, fresh from weeks deep in the Thai jungle of Wat Dtao Dum, and were sitting on the plush carpet of our apartment, grateful for the novelty of hot water, electricity and chocolate croissants. We were unwrapping phones so generously offered by our supporters. All went well as we followed the setup instructions to the point where we needed to initiate the fingerprint

3. Nāvādīpa is the name Ajahn Sucitto offered for my canal boat, aboard which I currently live. *Nāvā* translates as boat and *dīpa* as island or refuge.

recognition software. On request, Ajahn Sucitto rested his digits on the home button; the device duly stored the venerable identity and he was set up to unlock his iPhone with a single, elegant tap. We then began installing our Singaporean SIM cards, but something was clearly wrong: Ajahn's phone would not recognize his fingerprints – fingerprints stored just moments before. No matter how he tried, the device refused to yield. I suggested licking the layer of Marmite off his thumb, but that didn't work either. He reinstalled his prints, but again, nothing! On reflection, I encouraged him to view this as a positive – that his connection with the earth clearly prevented any meaningful connection with computers. Indeed, to this day, when Ajahn Sucitto attempts to interact with some of the world's most advanced consumer technology, it refuses to acknowledge that anybody is there!

Some weeks later, in the closing days of March, as our minds turned to the approaching homeward journey, our benevolent hosts Kittisāro and Ṭhānissarā offered us the opportunity of a safari. We happily took it and, waking before dawn in the St Lucia Safari Lodge in the north-east of South Africa, were driven deep into the bush. En route our guides explained that the parched landscape was a result of the many months of drought – the usual rains had failed, the whole country was suffering and we were, therefore, unlikely to see much wildlife. However, we were reassured by the older of the two – a genuine poacher turned gamekeeper – that their years of experience would improve our chances of catching a glimpse of something.

The gentle glow on the horizon grew from dust-bowl pink to amber to amber, and then to a full surge of light, seemingly released only to impress and bring one to imagine how long-lost tribes would have seen such a dawn as evidence of the divine and bowed before it.

Then suddenly, just to the left, a few meters away was a huge black rhino, with a baby in tow and just beyond it a white rhino, all quietly munching on meagre tufts of grass. 'We've never seen that before,' declared the guides, 'black and white rhinos together, and a baby. We're very lucky to witness this.' We lingered long enough for the

sight of these extraordinary creatures to soak in, before bumping further along the track. Then, there on the right was a rhino carcass, shot by poachers some nights before for its horn, and enveloped by vultures, who, the moment we arrived, finished picking the carcass clean and scattered, assembling on arid crooked branches or rising on thermals above the bones. ‘We’ve never seen that before,’ declared the guides, ‘the final moments of a feeding frenzy. We’re very lucky to witness this.’ Over the next rise, a shelter of trees capped a high flat range, and above it soared an enormous Martial eagle. We stopped and all stood together on the dusty verge beside Ajahn Sucitto and watched in silence as the eagle’s circular path tightened, before it dived abruptly out of sight beneath the canopy. A moment later it emerged carrying a huge snake in its talons. ‘We’ve never seen that before,’ declared the guides, ‘a Martial eagle taking a snake. We’re very lucky to witness this.’

And so, with such sightings and declarations, the day unfolded. A parade of female elephants running at full speed beside our four-by-four, charging ahead and then stopping to feed: ‘We’ve never seen that before,’ declared the guides. Then we were surrounded by a twenty-strong herd, including a charming week-old calf, and being told to stay ‘perfectly quiet and still’ while the magnificent matriarch looked us directly in the eyes less than two feet away. ‘We’ve never seen that before,’ declared the guides. Every experience was announced as unique and surprising, and with each, I looked to my dear friend Ajahn Sucitto, who seemed to be enjoying it with a calm acceptance that this was all somehow normal.

While putting this book together for Sister Kittināṇī, I took a moment to read the other recollections and, not surprisingly, qualities such as respect, wisdom, vulnerability, humour, generosity and intellect are repeated, and around them are sculpted delightful and candid memories of friendship, respect and love. It’s clear that we are all the richer from time spent with Ajahn Sucitto. My final words must be a thank you for his support and understanding, especially when my own dedication and practice have been less than inspiring.

Nick Scott

MAY 2018

The announcement of our first ‘senior’ monk at Harnham wasn’t that auspicious. Ajahn Sumedho phoned Richard Hopkins to say he couldn’t send the monk he wanted to send as that monk had to go home to Canada. ‘So I’m sending you Sucitto, but it will only be for six months.’

We had offered to rent a cottage as a small branch monastery in the North of England, found one in a small hamlet in Northumberland and provided it with an inside bathroom and kitchen by working together at weekends. And now we were waiting, with anticipation, for our monks.

So who was ‘Sucitto’? Richard told me he’d been on the first meditation course led by Ajahn Sumedho we’d attended. But he hadn’t been one of the three young monks we had seen sitting at the front, bolt upright and not moving during the meditation sittings or Ajahn Sumedho’s talks. He was the other monk staying at Oakenholt who we only saw occasionally in the grounds, wearing oddly coloured robes – they were more green than brown – and he didn’t have the elegant deportment of the others. At the time I’d assumed they had decided that he wasn’t good enough to be on show at the front beside Ajahn Sumedho.

But I also knew that it was this ‘Sucitto’ who’d approved our cottage when he’d stopped off with Richard when travelling down from Edinburgh. A previous monk taken to see it had declared it uninhabitable, but Sucitto had told Richard, ‘What are you waiting for?’ I was intrigued with whom we might be getting. ‘Sucitto’ arrived with two others, a young and very enthusiastic Italian who had just become a novice and a lanky anagārika in white from Northern England. There

being few of us supporting the new ‘monastery’, we got to know them all well: we had to bring all their food and anything else they needed, and to provide the transport. One regular ride was into Newcastle to lead the Wednesday evening meditation sitting. This had been going for several years by then, sustained by our small committed core, and we now looked forward to the positive effect having a monk would have on the numbers. We were misguided in our optimism. Our new monk liked to dwell on the Buddha’s teaching on *dukkha* (suffering) in his talks and few of the new people came back for more.

At least his appreciation of life’s difficulties meant he had no problem with the spartan state of their accommodation. I remember the delight he took in their first shrine built of rough stone. He was also happy to take on the back-breaking work of renovating the cottage while living in it, to provide something better for the future sangha. Not that he was particularly skilled at such work. None of them were. I recall being shown a newly installed door lintel – I was the ‘advisor’ but only because I was renovating a cottage myself. We peered up at it together from beneath. ‘But why is there POT carved on it?’ ‘That’s not POT, *bhante*. If you turn round you’ll see it’s TOP. They write it in the cement so you don’t put it in upside down like that.’

The main job in those first six months was the epic installation of a damp course. The old cottage, empty for several years, was really damp when they moved in. So the three of them set to with hammer and bolster, stripping the stone walls of the first metre of thick plaster and then drilling hundreds of holes for injecting the new damp course. The walls were thick and built of large lumps of local stone, including hard limestone and whin. As they were not that skilled, the long drill bits for the hired large drill regularly broke; even the drill broke several times. Virginia Deaper would be called upon weekly to take them back. Eventually the hire firm asked, ‘Who the hell is using this?!’

Austerity and hardship were Ven. Sucitto's way back then. The most famous example was one I discovered by chance. It was the Vassa, the three-month Rains Retreat when Buddhist monks are particularly diligent in their practice. I had brought them their meal for that day. As I prepared it for serving in the kitchen, the young anagārika – now an abbot in Italy – approached: 'Nick, would you mind also offering this cake my mother sent?' I said, 'Why? Surely you should keep it for another day when it would seem more special.' 'But then it would have to go in the bucket!', he replied, his face crinkling with dismay, 'My mother baked it specially.' 'What?!'

Ven. Sucitto, inspired by how Ajahn Chah sometimes had special curries all put into one large pot to stop monks getting carried away by the taste, had decided they would adopt the practice for the Vassa at Harnham – but only when the meal was not offered from outside. So we hadn't known. When Richard told Ajahn Sumedho, he sent them a box of chocolates and Ven. Sucitto got the hint. Mixing several different special curries was one thing, but cake, curry, bread and whatever, stirred together in a large bucket with a wooden spoon, was another.

That liking for austerity didn't just create good stories, it had another side to it which I particularly enjoyed and appreciated: Ven. Sucitto had a wonderful sense of the absurd, an ability to be amused at the world and its misfortunes that would have me rocking with laughter. He also had a straightness, a 'Well, this is how it is and we have to make the best of it' attitude that helped an over-optimistic and romantic guy in his twenties deal with life's setbacks and difficulties and inspire him to keep practising with them. When he was replaced after those first six months and returned to Chithurst Monastery, and later Amaravati Monastery, I would seek him out whenever I visited. We all would. We'd become very fond of him. And he would get us laughing again at life and its difficulties.

We went on to spend six months together, walking around the Indian Buddhist holy sites and then jointly writing a two-volume book about it. At the start of that account, I relate the horrified reaction of others on learning that I was to be going with Ajahn Sucitto, known for his toughness and austerity. But actually I didn't feel like that myself. I'd been pleased when Ajahn Sumedho had chosen him. It was his forthright honesty and commitment. I respected him. That in turn meant that although I often felt frustrated, I never got angry with him. His motivations were so selfless. And he held a standard for those six months which I could never have come close to managing for myself. As a result the Indian pilgrimage was the event in my life which had the most profound and beneficial effect on me.

Those same qualities are what made him such a good abbot. He was just what young monks in training needed: someone inspiring to look up to, who set a high standard, but who was also really compassionate. After the pilgrimage, I spent ten years at Chithurst as the Dhamma Hall project manager, while Ajahn Sucitto was abbot. Being close to him, I saw just how demanding that role could be: leader of a community of more than twenty, available 24/7, while also being monastery front-person and teacher to all the supporters. About once a month, we would get to have breakfast together and he would share some of his current problems. I would have to regularly remind myself that I was the only person he could share his burden with, so I was hearing a disproportionate amount of the difficulty. But even so, it was some burden!

Through experiencing that, I got to see how he, and, it seems to me, Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Chah, got to be the exceptional beings they became. They all shared a willingness to take that burden on, selflessly, diligently, despite it being something they didn't want to do. And they all started with that propensity for practising diligently and with an austerity that we lay people can easily dismiss as 'over the

top'. They were very much like the early Christian monastic saints – those recognized without needing approval from Rome. One of them, Northumberland's Saint Cuthbert, lived on a rock outcrop in the sea, off the monastic island of Lindisfarne, in a small stone enclosure from which he could only see the sky, but then agreed, reluctantly, to become abbot and eventually bishop in Durham, and is venerated to this day for his wisdom and compassion. It's that surrender that's key. Others get to that point and just want to enjoy the fruits of their effort.

In the monasteries in the 1990s, some of the monks and nuns were working with group therapy to deal with personal difficulties. Ajahn Sucitto was the senior monk supporting this and taking part himself. I recall one of our breakfast conversations where I pointed out how, in the East, many of the impressive old monks one met were actually quite 'wacky' personalities, but they'd transcended that personality, not tried to change it. He agreed. And to me, that is what has happened to that odd monk I'd seen wandering in the grounds of Oakenholt all those years ago. And, as with the early Christian monastic saints, we should now treasure him.

Recollections of
Luang Por Sumedho
by Ajahn Sucitto

Ajahn Sumedho, My Teacher

THIS RECOLLECTION WAS OFFERED BY AJAHN SUCITTO AT AMARAVATI MONASTERY ON 26 JULY 2014 – THE DAY BEFORE LUANG POR SUMEDHO'S EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY.

Tonight I've been asked to give some reflections about my time with Luang Por Sumedho. I don't normally offer a lot of anecdotes, partly because memory distorts things and so it can only offer a fragment of the truth. But reflecting on my teacher gives me a sense of connection and of what I have valued most about him. In my opinion, the things that we learn and really take to heart come not from books, but from other humans.

This particular person has been a major feature in my life for nearly thirty-eight years. That's the longest time I've known anyone, apart from my brother – but I've seen more of Luang Por Sumedho than I have of my brother! So it's a very powerful presence. That's what I've been with, learned with, bounced off, been confused by, been inspired by, been received by, been welcomed by and sometimes been ignored by – or seemingly so! He is someone who embodies integrity in terms of Dhamma-Vinaya and that's something I have been learning from.

My memories and perceptions of him remain as fragments that I put on my shrine – the shrine in my mind. They trigger a feeling of inspiration. It's really important to recollect our teachers, both ordinary teachers and Dhamma teachers, as well as our parents, because they are all carried into our *citta* and become part of it. We're not really separate. Our mind is like a stream that's absorbing influences from other people. There's a lot of weird, strange and painful stuff, but then occasionally you get something that gives you a very strong current, something that deeply moves you. This power of the Dhamma manifesting through a

LUANG POR SUMEDHO AND AJAHN SUCITTO, AT CITTAVIVEKA MONASTERY, IN 2006



particular person is so precious and so valuable, but it's important to hold it in the right way.

As Luang Por himself would say, 'Luang Por Sumedho is a perception in the mind' and 'There's no real fixed person there.' Perceptions of people are impermanent formations that arise in our minds, and yet they can have huge guiding influences in our lives. We store up the perceptions that we find beautiful and we contemplate the ones we question or still try to make sense of. In this way we can intimately absorb the skills of our teacher and fellow practitioners. And hopefully, as we live our lives, we're also giving skilful and helpful impressions to others, who can take them on. The field of human manifestations of Dhamma is a valuable resource to share in.

An aspect of Luang Por that comes to mind is that he's big. Not just physically: if he comes into a room, his energy and presence fill the room – there's a lot of nothing, or a huge amount of a something that's not just a person. He gives a strong impression and a lot of powerful things seem to happen around him. Yet, as I occasionally have the privilege of going to his kuti and seeing him individually, he'd say, 'I haven't done very much' or 'I don't have very much to say. I haven't got much to teach. There's nothing to make a big deal out of.' And in a way, that's also true. But that personality is the channel through which tremendous *pāramī* manifest. And we definitely need that personal form. Try living with a book and see how good that feels after a few years! When you're feeling really miserable or disillusioned with the practice, go and talk to a book and see what it does! Try asking a book to build a monastery. It's not going to do it, is it?

Another thing about Luang Por is that he has tremendous valency. Valency refers to atoms and signifies how many others they can bond with. Hydrogen can only bond with one other hydrogen atom. Oxygen can bond with two, and Luang Por Sumedho is like uranium – which

takes 128! A lot of people can have access to him and find something they can connect to. He has the ability to represent something good and true and accessible to a wide range of people. In the monastic community, we have people who used to be students, dancers, school teachers, etc. Luang Por has the tremendous capacity to present something that's universal and multifaceted, and yet not lose contact with his primary inspiration: Luang Por Chah, the Forest Tradition and Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. He keeps maintaining integrity to that. He has the ability to send down a taproot and is able to branch out without losing the connection to the earth. I don't know anyone else who has done anything like that.

As regards branching out, he could relate to many forms of practice. He established a strong connection with Master Hua, the Chinese Ch'an Master – and that was one of the primary conditions for the establishment of Abhayagiri Monastery in California. He used to attend a lot of interfaith gatherings. Then there was the Dalai Lama, as well as the Zen and Tibetan monks with whom he taught a Summer School in Leicester for eighteen years, as well as Christians, and contemplatives of no specific faith like Douglas Harding. And how many of the community assembled here were penniless students when Luang Por Sumedho came and gave a talk to their local Buddhist society or meditation group and were inspired? And now, fifteen or twenty years later, they're Ajahns too!

When we talk about Luang Por Sumedho, we also acknowledge the origins of the Nuns' Order. Of course it came with Ajahn Sundarā and Ajahn Candasirī – you can't deny their *pāramī* – but there wouldn't have been a Nuns' Order without Luang Por Sumedho. Who else made the connection to Thailand? Who else gave that its ground? With the Nuns' Order, I did a lot of the detailed stuff. But the pattern with this and many other sangha developments was that Luang Por would establish the basics and then attract others who'd do all the detailed stuff, like

Ajahn Munindo, Ajahn Vajiro, Ajahn Amaro, Ajahn Jutindharo, Ajahn Attapemo. We all did a lot, but without him there wouldn't have been any basis or ongoing support for the details.

One can say much the same with George Sharp and the English Sangha Trust. They've done a lot. What was happening before Ajahn Sumedho? Nothing. The *vihāra* was empty. The notion was that it was impossible for bhikkhus to live in Britain. The last bhikkhu, around 1972, said, 'You just can't do it in this country. It's impossible.' Then one American bhikkhu turned up in Hampstead and pulled it all together. By doing what? As he said, 'I didn't come to teach Buddhism or bring it to the West. I've been invited to receive the four requisites⁴ and continue to practise the Dhamma-Vinaya. That's it.' And he let the rest happen around that without any particular agenda. Throughout all the various things that Luang Por tried out and explored, he'd always come back to that fundamental point of practising the Dhamma-Vinaya and deepening into it. And the beauty of this is that it wasn't exclusive. He could investigate mystical aspects of Christianity or Nagarjuna, and he'd take that in, absorb it, connect it back to the taproot of direct practice. He didn't get lost, he didn't spin out. He stayed firmly rooted in the ground of training as a Buddhist monk and relying on Dhamma-Vinaya and on direct experience.

I take leave to say a few words about myself, to give you an idea of where I'm coming from and why he means what he does to me. I had taken on bhikkhu training, not with Luang Por Chah but more or less by accident. I was travelling and getting bored with the world, running around and doing this, that and the other. I realized I needed to sit down and find something meaningful to do. So I landed in Thailand, which I didn't know much about at all. I'd read roughly one paragraph on it and it sounded good. The Buddha was cool as far as I was concerned. When

4. The four requisites are: clothing, food, shelter and medicine.

I was in India I tried to get involved in something spiritual but just couldn't connect. There was always stuff you had to take on: belief in a guru or belief in some cosmology. My mind was much too rational and cynical for that. But when I was in Thailand and saw some meditation being advertised, I thought, 'I'll go to that. At least it'll help me get my head together.' So I went, and pretty quickly realized that, as I could watch the mind, I wasn't my mind, and that I needed to do more of this.

I spent three years there altogether and was taught in the Burmese *satipaṭṭhāna* system. I stayed in a little hut for three years. There was no conversation, no tea together, no eating together, no *pūjā*. We were allowed to go *piṇḍapāta*, but in silence. That was the event, and then it was 'back to your hut'. We were following an intensive meditation practice in which you're supposed to make a mental note of everything. So when you hear a sound, you note 'hearing'; while lifting your hand, note 'lifting'. You do everything very slowly, noting: 'Intending, about to lift, lifting, moving, touching, feeling something, placing.' There's a voice in your brain reporting on everything that's going on. I did this all day for three years. I was not in a good state. I got very intense! I don't say that's the way it is for everybody or that's the right way to do it, but that's the way I was doing it. One thing I did in order to get really focused and mindful was to take an alms-bowl, fill it with water until the water stood above the rim of the bowl, and then try to pick it up and walk without spilling a drop. You try it! The meniscus of the water stands above the rim of the bowl, so with just the slightest tremble it's going to flow over. That was what meditation meant to me: extremely intense concentration on a point.

In the middle of this I was sent off to a monastery in Chiang Mai to do a super-intensive period of practice for six weeks. Some time in the middle of that the monks there knocked on my door and said, 'Oh, you have to come, you have to come!' 'What? I'm meditating.' 'No, you have to come and see Sumedho!' 'What's Sumedho?' 'Ajahn Sumedho

is coming to town. You must go see him.' 'Oh. Sumedho? Who's that?' They replied that he was an American monk who lived with Ajahn Chah. I'd seen a single photostatted sheet going round about Ajahn Chah which talked about how austere his monastery was, so I thought, 'Oh my goodness, I'm intense and miserable enough already and I'm going to meet someone who's been doing this for ten years and is austere as well. This is not going to be much fun.' I imagined someone like a Marine sergeant, but also tight and emotionally shrivelled. However, I felt I had to go because I was these monks' guest and they'd been so nice in offering me a place to stay.

They took me to a house where Ajahn Sumedho was sitting on a big chair with Ajahn Pabhākarō sitting next to him on the ground. So we went in and we paid our respects, the Thai monks had a chat, and then they disappeared. Ajahn Sumedho said, 'I've been asked to come here and give a talk, but nobody's turned up.' So there I was with Ajahn Sumedho, and I spent three uninterrupted hours with him.

I can't remember now what we talked about, but that wasn't the point anyway. There was a huge presence of something very warm, open, simple and steady. I hadn't experienced anything like that before. He was firm, grounded and yet modest and courteous. They brought in some tea and he insisted on pouring and offering me a cup of tea first before he took his own. He didn't have to do that. This was around December 1976, and he said, 'I've been asked to start a monastery in Britain.' 'Oh, yes?' 'Yes, somewhere in Somerset.' 'Well, good luck!' I couldn't imagine a Buddhist monastery in Somerset. It seemed too remote and traditional. Anyway, at that point we said our goodbyes and went our separate ways.

I went back to being intense, but the meeting had initiated a question in my mind. 'What's that person? Where has he got to? Hmm. There's more in this than just the meditation technique.' Then a year and a

half later my father died and I felt I had to go back to Britain to sort out my affairs and be with my mother for a while. My teacher then had a connection to Ajahn Paññāvaddho⁵, and there was a *farang* network of monks who passed things on the grapevine. The word was: ‘Sumedho’s in London.’ I was given his address with the advice to look him up. That was another little gift.

So I came to Britain. That was extraordinarily difficult because I’d been three years in solitude without speaking, apart from reporting briefly to my teacher. I went from sensory isolation out to a non-Buddhist country, trying to manage legal and family details while dealing with the death of a parent. After about six weeks I felt completely lost. My intensive noting wasn’t much good on that level. I remember going out somewhere and standing in the rain, trying to get grounded, because I was just so blown away by it all. I think I might not have stayed as a monk. It was very touch-and-go. I just couldn’t see how this Oriental tradition could relate to twentieth-century British society. Then I knocked on the door of the Hampstead Vihāra on Haverstock Hill and the door opened. It was quite a small *vihāra* and this big figure almost filled the door frame. ‘Oh, hello.’ He recognized me and invited me in. My perception was: ‘Ajahn Sumedho is the door.’ The door opens, and you walk in.

The bhikkhu community there comprised Ajahn Vīradhammo and Ajahn Ānando; Ajahn Vajiro was an anagārika then. I think there were two or three other anagārikas and three sāmaṇeras. Ajahn Vimalo was around as a lay person, with his lovely sense of humour and spontaneity. The *vihāra* was a very human scene. We were doing things like eating together, talking with each other and going out. I thought

5. Ajahn Paññāvaddho was a British monk who ordained as a bhikkhu in 1956. He stayed in the London Buddhist Vihāra for five years, before he went to Thailand. In 1963 he was accepted to stay at Wat Pa Baan Taad monastery with Ajahn Maha Boowa and stayed there until he passed away on 18 August 2004. He was a much respected teacher and practitioner, and his life greatly benefited people from all over the world.

that this was wonderful, coming out of the tight box of my intensive practice and sensing that being a bhikkhu is something liveable! We were going *piṇḍapāta* on Hampstead Heath. Before then I'd really just been a person meditating wearing robes. I hadn't been a bhikkhu. Then I thought, 'This is new, this is fresh, this is interesting, this is alive. This is not something you're doing with your attention, this is something that wraps around you and carries you. It's lived, and you can share it. I'll stay with this for a while.'

I'd only decided to come to Britain for perhaps six weeks, but then I asked to stay for the Vassa. The Hampstead Vihāra, although it was a refuge, was cramped. I think Ajahns Ānando and Vīradhammo, who were very junior then, were suffering from being stuck in London. Fortunately we went out to Oxfordshire for the Rains Retreat, as a devout Burmese family, the Saws, had offered us a place in their country house with lots of land. We stayed in various rooms and huts that they'd built in order to do retreats. During that Vassa our group was Ajahn Vīradhammo, myself, Ven. Araññābho, three sāmaṇeras and a few anagārikas. People were going through their ups and downs, because when people take on the holy life it's a radical overhaul, and all the things that normally hold people steady – our relationships, our ability to go places and our other various comfort zones – are taken away. People start to have strong mood swings. Getting up early in the morning, sitting still for a long time, being with the same routine and same people day after day ... these things mean that difficulties start emerging. People become moody, collapse and argue with each other.

None of us had developed the skilful monastic etiquette that Thai monks have. They are gentle and spacious, and they know how to do things politely. We were rude, direct, raw and ugly! There was Anagārika Jordan who later became a monk, who was larger than life, and there was Anagārika Shaun, who became Ajahn Jayasāro. We were all relatively untrained. I think Ajahn Vīradhammo (the next senior to

Ajahn Sumedho) only had three or four *vassas*, so there was no sense of there being a stratum of senior experienced people holding it together. Luang Por himself had twelve *vassas* at that time. There he was, starting in a country that he'd never lived in before and that didn't really know what Buddhist monks were about, with a bunch of newcomers. And it was all resting on him in a very uncertain situation. We didn't even have a monastery; we were just guests in somebody's house. We had morning and evening *pūjā* every day and daily work. I think he gave two talks a day throughout the entire *Vassa*. Every morning a talk, every evening a talk, and it was always the same steadying tone.

One thing that I've noted about Luang Por is that he'll pick up a particular theme and return to it again and again and again. There was the sense of steadiness and continuity: repeating the message, because you don't really get it in one go. You get the words in one go, but his offering was to bring you back to the same point again and again so you really got the message. That *Vassa* it was, 'All compounded phenomena are impermanent, arising and passing away.' Letting go, that was the theme. So there was all this stuff bubbling up inside people: 'That's another impermanent phenomenon, arising and passing away.' Through all the ups and downs, 'It's another impermanent phenomenon, arising and passing away.' He was unwavering. I said to him one day, 'Don't you get bored with all this Buddhism, don't you get fed up with it all?' – I was pretty ugly and direct too! And he looked at me and said, 'No, that's another impermanent phenomenon!'

The beauty of it was that in those days there were only half a dozen of us. We could all just bundle into his *kuti* and have tea together. We'd go *piṇḍapāta* together, rubbing up against each other all the time. He was the one thing that we all could rub up against and receive something from. And he'd just take it and take it, and stay steady, and laugh, and stay steady. I'd come up with things like, 'Why can't we drink milk in the evening though we can eat cheese? This is silly!' His answer was:

‘It’s a crazy world.’ He wasn’t defending, he wasn’t justifying, he was just laughing at it: ‘Crazy world!’ You were becoming tangled up and infuriated, and he’d say something and suddenly you could see what you were doing. All right, another impermanent phenomenon – let it go. I picked that up and tried to do the best I could to follow it.

We had an alms-round every day, and it was tough at times because I only had sandals and in the wintertime there was thick snow. I remember walking three-mile alms-rounds (with no donors, of course) through two feet of snow with freezing feet. But somehow I was carried by the discipline and his continuity and steadiness: ‘You just do this. It doesn’t have to make sense, you just do it.’ He was very strong on going beyond the justifying mind that would always want to bend things round. The teaching was simple, but the presence and the ability to absorb the various amounts of conflict and silliness that were going on, without wavering, was something else. So I decided to make an *adhiṭṭhāna* to stay and try to help. I thought, ‘There are three hundred thousand monks in Thailand; there are only a few in Britain. I’ll stay here and help out.’ So I did.

During 1978 the forest at Hammer Wood had been offered, but there were various pieces of legal procedure to be tied up. I went down with Luang Por Chah and Ajahn Sumedho and we looked around this forest. There was nowhere to live. The property in Somerset had been snatched up while everybody discussed whether it was worthwhile having it or not, so when Chithurst House became available George Sharp thought, ‘This one, we won’t talk about it. I’ll just get it!’ He got some flak for that, but he got us somewhere to live. So the next year we bundled down to Chithurst House and tied up the legal arrangements around Hammer Wood. Suddenly we had this place and it was wonderful, spacious ... and a mess – a complete ruin! For all the time I was there apart from morning and evening *pūjā* and all-night sits on the *Wan Phra*, we worked. Ajahn Sumedho gave talks every day. While all the

mopping up and grubby work happened around him, he maintained the central axis of Dhamma.

The first year we were there his theme for the Vassa was, 'What is it that Buddhas know, that unenlightened beings don't know? Everything that arises passes away and is not self.' He repeated this almost every day and you'd think, 'He said that yesterday! So what?' But then you'd find out that you hadn't really penetrated the fact that everything arises, passes away and is not self because you'd taken something very personally, become stuck on it and hadn't let it pass away. So with that kind of teaching, living in that situation became a practice. That's the difference between a teacher and a book. With a book you just turn the page to the next idea. But a teacher puts out the reminders that act as a Dhamma mooring post while life washes over you. You keep checking that same teaching out against the flow of life as it hits you, and you contemplate whatever you're holding on to, such as some sense of what you think you are or should be.

The first four nuns were living in one room in the house – four of them, trying to realize that everything that arises is not self! The rest of us were all crammed in little rooms with the rain coming in through the roof. Then Ajahn Amaro turned up and fell through the floor into the basement and broke his arm. All that was not self either. We didn't go *piṇḍapāta* at first. Luang Por didn't want to do that because he was concerned that the conservative mind-set of West Sussex would get alarmed if we made too public a presentation. Some neighbours had already made negative remarks. So we had a meeting in the village hall where he tried to present the sangha, and he brought the English sangha members along so he wouldn't say things that might offend the sensibilities of West Sussex. A BBC film entitled *The Buddha Comes to Sussex* was created after this meeting.

We worked from eight in the morning until five at night; then we'd have the evening *pūjā*. On the *Wan Phra* we'd sit until four in the morning,

get up at six and then go back to work! And I was learning the *Bhikkhu Pāṭimokkha* at that time as well. There was a lot of energy around. Luang Por seemed to generate faith and energy. During that time he was also going out to just about anybody who invited him to teach: Women's Institutes, Buddhist Societies, White Eagle Lodge, Theosophical Society ... whoever. He was making contacts and presenting the image of the bhikkhu as being someone who was what *he* was. He wasn't hammering Buddhism into them, but just being his own presence and speaking very directly and humorously. He was on a TV programme called 'The Gods of War', where various religious leaders were interviewed about their attitude towards war. So Ajahn Sumedho said, 'We don't do that sort of thing.' Somebody asked, 'What about that Vietnamese monk who poured petrol over himself and set himself on fire?' Ajahn Sumedho replied, 'That's personal, that's his choice. Fortunately they don't expect me to do that.' He was always bringing it down from the doctrinal, the ideological, to the human quality. And I think that's the thing that people really welcomed: someone who wasn't just mouthing the official line but talking as a human being, and always with a smile or laugh after it.

Ajahn Sumedho would take on just about anybody for training – and there were some very strong characters! He'd also push us out. I think I'd been in Britain two and a half years, just past my fifth *vassa*, when he said, 'Go and teach a ten-day retreat up in Northumberland.' So I went up there. Then the local people wanted to start a *vihāra*, so Luang Por said, 'Well, you go up there and start it.' I only had five *vassas*! I went up there with Ajahn Chandapālo, who was an anagārika then, and Venerable Thānavaro. We were just the three of us, working in this freezing cottage up in Northumberland, which is now a very beautiful monastery: Aruna Ratanagiri. There was no book, there was no 'this is what you do'; there were no guidelines. There was just practice: do the morning and evening *pūjā*, stay simple, do the work, stay as a community. That was it.

Then we started Amaravati, and that again was a huge leap in the dark. He took a group of us there, and the nuns walked from Chithurst. It was set up to be their centre. He wanted to have a retreat centre, events for families and a place where many lay people could come and practise, because Chithurst didn't have the permission to hold large, residential events and it was too small. So we went up there and found a place which was like every other place we'd started – freezing cold and derelict – and started working on it. Here's where he seemed to gain further confidence in his vision of practice. His theme was, 'The doors to the Deathless are open.' He still chants that when he begins a Dhamma talk: open up, bring everything in, we'll take it on. We just followed and did what we could to support the energy and persistence he had, both in teaching and also in his own practice.

A standard day for Luang Por Sumedho would be: get up at two o'clock, work out for an hour or so on his rowing machine, take a shower, have a cup of coffee, meditate. So by morning *pūjā* at five o'clock he was incandescent. He said, 'You really prepare yourself for the morning *pūjā*.' This is his favourite moment of the day. He'd structure his day around coming to that morning *pūjā* as if he was going to meet the Buddha. He would be there, often giving 'stream-of-consciousness recollections', reflecting on Dhamma out loud as it was arising in his mind. We'd let it wash over us, and whatever bits landed opened us up. It was a very open channel, with him letting it flow. That was probably the main event of the day for him. And the example was: *prepare* for the morning *pūjā*; you're going to meet the Buddha, you're going to meet the Dhamma. It's not just, 'Here we go again, another day ...' but a rising up into the Dhamma, setting things up for a day of practice.

After morning *pūjā* we'd do our chores. Then Luang Por would give another reflection over breakfast, and we'd sit there with our various mind-states. Sometimes, I must confess, I'd be looking at my tea and thinking, 'I wish he'd shut up so I can drink my tea.' But he kept going.

And eventually I'd think, 'Let go, it doesn't matter,' and just be with it. He'd carry on all day, see people after the meal and continue until the evening *pūjā*. Then he'd go back to his kuti at nine or ten o'clock and retire.

He had the attitude of making himself available. He'd prepare his body and mind to carry things through for the resident community and anyone who turned up. That took huge generosity and patience, because there were some crazy people turning up, and they'd ask him crazy questions. He'd sit there and listen. A husband and wife were having a quarrel, and he'd sit and listen to it – her side and his side. He'd give advice. I'd be thinking, 'Why bother with these people? Tell them to sort themselves out.' But he would say, 'I'm just throwing out seeds. Some time in a future life they might have a recollection of meeting a Buddhist monk who received them. That's good enough.' He was prepared to throw out seeds to whomever, so they'd have some sense of having met a Buddhist monk who was ready to listen without being righteous, and offer help. He'd do that for just about anybody who turned up – and he's still like that! We had to start to guard him because we realized, despite that channel, there's a human being there and we want to protect it. So you'd say, 'Luang Por, please, let's retire and take a rest, because you're eighty years old now!' What an immense sacrifice he would make!

With all that, he'd still make a point of going back to Thailand at least once a year to pay respects to Somdet Buddhajahn⁶ and the Sangharāja⁷ and, obviously, go to Wat Pah Pong when Luang Por Chah was still alive. When Luang Por Chah passed away he'd still go every year, to stay

6. Somdet Buddhajahn was the acting Supreme Patriarch of Thailand, as well as a good friend and mentor to Luang Por Sumedho, having met before Luang Por's entry into the Sangha.

7. Sangharāja is a title given in many Theravada Buddhist countries to a senior monk who is the titular head either of a monastic fraternity (*nikāya*), or of the Sangha throughout the country. This term is often rendered in English as 'Patriarch' or 'Supreme Patriarch'.

connected, to bring up any topics which needed discussion and listen to concerns. He'd do that for his own practice, but also to maintain that connection for the Sangha in the West: to indicate that we haven't split off, we're connected, we want to listen, we want to learn, we want to maintain our sense of kinship so that things can develop properly. He says he's retired, but he's still making connections in Thailand and bringing people over. This year, he brought over the successor to Somdet Buddhajahn, abbot of Wat Saket, so that he would see our sangha in Britain and respect what we're doing here – so that we can feel connected.

Luang Por was widening his accessibility to just about anybody who came along, but he also stayed very true to the core lineage. As with a tree, what you see is the trunk, the leaves and branches growing upwards. The tree is growing bigger and bigger, but every time it grows upwards it also has to grow deeper and deeper roots to balance it, otherwise it's not going to last. You don't see the roots under the ground, but they are as large as the amount of the tree that's above the ground. This kind of practice isn't mystical; this is work. It takes patience, generosity and energy. It also takes equanimity – and there's no such thing as a smooth path to equanimity! To develop equanimity doesn't mean everything's going to be wonderful. Equanimity means you have to experience the rocky stuff, the disappointments, the praise and the blame, the success and failure, and accept it all.

I remember the year when Ajahns Ānando, Kittisāro and Pabhākarō disrobed. They are all people whom Luang Por had nurtured and with whom he had a strong sense of companionship. So there was a feeling of trying to hold something together while people were breaking down in it. That's always part of Sangha life – not just physical death, but also the disillusionments and conflicts: senior people growing disillusioned (not just juniors!), quarrels within the community and struggles over leadership. If you're the leader of the community you have no choice,

you will always get the blame no matter what you do. That's just the way it goes; it's not a rational thing. If you're going to be a leader you're going to suffer, because you can't control things. You'll feel a sense of responsibility for everyone, but you realize they're not going to be the way you want them to be or able to do what you want them to do. Some will leave, some will stay. Of course there'll be good ones and inspiring ones, but you'll also see ones who become disillusioned or find fault with you.

Sangha life is turbulent, and we manage to contain it because of a very important example like Luang Por's. We could become ideological about the rights and wrongs of meditation, but he offered simplicity and commitment to openness and presence. Because he loved the holy life so much, he was very warm-hearted, but also quite tender-hearted. He'd be profoundly affected by people becoming disillusioned with what he thought was so beautiful and valid, and which worked for him. But he came through it and eventually said, 'I recognize people are just working out their kamma. Some will do monastic life for a lifetime, some will only do it for a year. They're doing what they can. And you have to let it pass. You have to let it fail and fall apart sometimes.' That's equanimity. Take Amaravati, for example. When Amaravati started people were naturally complaining and criticizing because it wasn't what it should be, and he'd say, 'Well, we try, and if the whole thing fails, so what? It's been a good experiment. It's been an interesting attempt. We try, and it works for some people and for some people it doesn't. We still do it. And if the whole thing folds up, well, never mind. The Dhamma persists.' He'd always have that attitude.

I remember when Ajahn Ānando was organizing a *tudong* on the South Downs and inviting everyone to go. I said, 'Well, I don't know whether I should go. Surely we need to be responsible and look after Amaravati and make sure it's running.' Ajahn Sumedho replied, 'Look, if you want to go *tudong*, it's good. We'll just hang a sign on the door saying "Gone

tudong. Come and sit here if you like.” He said, ‘I want to be able to run it like that. It’s not super-tranquil, it’s not well organized. You’re not guaranteed to have brilliant teachings every day. It’s like this. It’s an open door. If you want to be open and you want to practise, it’s here. But don’t bring your expectations.’ So he practised with equanimity as to whether people liked what they found or were disappointed by it. Not that he didn’t feel anything, but he was able to maintain awareness of those feelings as ‘that which arises, passes’, and ‘being the knowing’, which was another one of his great mantras: ‘Be the knowing, abide in awareness, the world is like this.’

When Amaravati was still developing, on many evenings local hooligans would drive up in their cars, screech around the courtyard and make noise. Sometimes they’d smash the donation or post boxes, or scream and howl, ring the bell and so on. We’d say, ‘How could they do this?’ And Luang Por Sumedho would say, ‘The world is like this. This is the way it is.’ We tried all kinds of things. We had a night vigil where we’d take it in turns to walk around the monastery to intercept people. One monk had the bright idea of having a ‘potato brigade’, whereby you were given a potato and if you saw a car parked, you stuffed the potato up the exhaust pipe, so that when the driver tried to drive the car away the engine would fill with exhaust and break down. We were all armed with potatoes on these vigils.

One time the hooligans pushed over a bronze Buddha standing in the courtyard. This was the day before Vesak. We came out the next morning and there was the Buddha-rūpa lying on its face in the dirt with a massive dent in its shoulder. I looked at it and was so upset, ‘How could people do this?’ Luang Por said, ‘The world is like this. Wanting it to be another way is suffering.’ He had that ability to catch the points where you’re about to blow up or get wound up about something. He would prick the bubble. There were many incidents like that, and to me that was the most helpful thing.

Luang Por never prepares a talk. His interest in studying is limited but he'll just pick a particular phrase or one sutta and reflect on it again and again, and distil things out of it. But then you see the results in the actuality of daily life! This is a strong characteristic of the forest teachers, particularly Luang Por Chah and Luang Por Sumedho. Just as you're getting absorbed in something or irritated by something, that's when he'd point to it. I've been asking a few people what their recollections of him were, and one monk mentioned that at one time he was involved with a building project. Ajahn Sumedho came up and just took hold of his arm, squeezed it and gave him a big smile, 'Hello.' That's it. You're getting into your little bubble and then, 'Hello, here we are,' and you could feel the mental landscape suddenly change.

In those early days you could still gain access to him easily, and I was privileged to be able to serve. I like serving; it's nice to be able to support. I'd go and massage his feet every day. I've never massaged anybody's feet before. I'd get hot water, bathe his feet, massage them and squeeze his swollen foot. We didn't talk very much, but it was good to feel that I was doing what I could for my teacher in this simple human way. That's a memory on my shrine, too. I can't put a word to it, but it's there, along with many other recollections of what was so special.

When you live with Luang Por Sumedho or in monasteries that have known his presence, you take it for granted that this is Buddhism and it's set up for you. Maybe you don't reflect on how it got there. Where would it have been without him? How do you think this temple got here? He didn't build it, but he pulled in the energy, the intelligence and the finances to make it happen. How do you think you've been able to come from all these different countries in the world and be granted permission to stay here? How do you think you can go to Thailand or go to another twenty monasteries in the world and be immediately accepted? You go to America and they say, 'Ajahn Sumedho's monks,

they're the ones you can trust. They're really solid.' How do you think that happened? He made the connections. Where does it all point to?

We're gathered together for this being, this non-self presence, to use his eightieth birthday as a recollection. Who knows who this person is? It's an impermanent formation, but I think it's huge *pāramī* that brought this special occasion about. Where would we be without that? I don't know where I'd be. It wouldn't be as good, I'm pretty certain of that. And just consider in your own life, all of you who've come here, I'd say you've been part of something unparalleled in Western Buddhism. How many other monastic foundations are there? Where do you think all this came from?

So this is what I recollect – this amazing development that's happened for all of us. It's something we're part of and can carry in our minds and hearts. I hope you all have some anecdote for yourself, some occasion when you heard something he said or noticed something he did, and thought, 'Ah-ha!' Maybe there was only one thing, but it's an important one. Just take those one, two, three or four things and ask: 'Where would I be without them?'

Dhamma Reflections

1985-2017

AT AMARAVATI MONASTERY, IN 1985



1985-1992

BEFORE BECOMING ABBOT OF CITTAVIVEKA MONASTERY

Learning to Feel and Be With Oneself

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED ON 24 JUNE 1985,

THE LAST EVENING OF A FIVE-DAY RETREAT AT AMARAVATI MONASTERY.

Apart from the wish to understand ourselves, to feel a sense of clarity or inner firmness of knowing 'this is so', one of the motivations for mind cultivation is to learn to feel. Perhaps the two are not so different. Our habitual way of knowing things is not to have any feeling for them but to be able to retain a mental image, a thought, a concept or an idea. When we can think about something, we feel we know it, we feel we've understood. Yet we find a great feeling of inadequacy and hunger about that way of understanding. This is an aspect of mind development that's highly emphasized in schools and education systems: how much information we can retain or have about things. When we talk to each other, we tend to relay facts or opinions or views. It's like sending packages of thoughts across the space between us; we pick up that package of thought, open it up, take the thoughts out and feel we have communicated, understood and passed on information. We feel an increasing alienation from life when we just think about it and only relate in that way. There's no tone, no real sense of response, no sense of vitality. Nothing is alive.

Personally, after fifteen or sixteen years of education, I felt almost completely dried out and desiccated, and I wondered why. I looked for emotional stimulation of some kind, to try to kick some life into myself and stimulate some emotion into the system, but I had never actually learned to feel in an open way. I wanted to have a package of emotional content to take out, but this process of learning to feel for things, to be with the unique presence of things, is a matter of inclining, of listening very humbly. We're not dredging up an emotion

or trying to feel something, but learning to be more attentive, with an attention that has no object, no purpose and no point. This attention is not trying to perceive or discover a particular thing. It's just attentive; it listens to tone and suggestion. For that, obviously, the mind needs to be cultivated. We become very blunt and coarse when we expect, think and conceive of things rather than really feel for things.

It's a great problem we come up against when we try to practise *mettā* (loving-kindness) meditation. We may say, 'I don't have *mettā*. It's not something I can do. Trying to feel kind to myself and think "May I be well and happy" is silly.' We're *thinking* about *mettā* and trying to have the experience of it rather than learning to listen, attend more, feel more, think less, know a little less, have a little less of an idea. All these things come from an openness of mind. *Mettā* can simply be non-aversion, not allowing ourselves to create critical thoughts, or keeping that tendency to find critical thoughts in check. When a thought ends there's a moment of pause, a moment of space, isn't there? When we don't know something or we don't have an opinion, there's a moment of emptiness, of silence. At that moment we're listening, we're tending to the present experience, rather than creating something.

The practice of contemplation leads directly to a sensitizing of the heart. We might imagine emptiness to be an erosion or cessation of all feeling, but emptiness is actually the ending of needing to fill ourselves up with things. When you think, conceive and are full, see what happens. People are very skilful, talented, successful and getting along in life, but they lose their sense of receptivity. I was talking to a lady a little while ago who felt she could always get ahead, she could always cope, she could always manage, she could always do things. She could do all the things other people couldn't do. She could endure the things other people couldn't endure. She could take the things other people couldn't take. She told me that she works on a farm and that one day she decapitated something like 160 chickens, and the thought just came to her, 'How on earth did I manage to do that?' Clearly, she wasn't practising *mettā* or compassion.

We take suffering as a great misfortune. We take the things that stop us in our tracks as a great misfortune, but actually they can be blessings. While you're getting ahead, succeeding and coming out on top, how much do you stop and listen? There is no need to, is there? When life is fun, who needs to be wise? When we contemplate *dukkha* (suffering) we begin to be aware of that. We get stopped in our tracks by misfortune, our inability to cope, our feelings of inner desolation. It's all right really, it's a sign that there's a possibility of waking up. That's why we call this truth of suffering 'noble'. It's a sign for a spiritual seeker, a sign of waking up, something we should contemplate. What is the sensation of that? What is the antidote to that? People who have not really followed through or understood clearly tend to try to replace *dukkha* with *sukha*, unpleasant things with pleasant things, unsatisfactoriness with some kind of satisfaction.

In meditation you're seeing that even pleasant things are unsatisfactory. Even happiness is, in a way, not quite enough. It comes and goes; it tends to wane and leaves us feeling disappointed. The problem is actually the way we relate to these experiences. Like this lady killing chickens, you can take yourself as being a kind of closed object, like a lump of wood; you go around and you do this, and you do that, then you do this, and then you do that ... You don't want unhappiness so you try to get happiness. But the idea that happiness is something you can *get* reinforces the idea that happiness is something you have to hold, and therefore something you can lose.

When we cultivate the heart, we're actually not concentrating on the getting or the losing, but on the movement, allowing perceptions and feelings to go through us. We watch them change. We watch our fears, doubts, discontent and sorrow arise. Sometimes a great sorrow comes up. We become much more transparent, allowing feelings to go through us without holding on to them or pushing them away. This is a means of opening the mind, of sensitizing ourselves to the movement

of things, to the change of things, so that other beings and the world around are things that move through us. We are interchangeable; it's not a hard thing out there.

If you want to know what you look like, just look around you. This is what you look like. This world around you defines you: it's your opinion, your way of seeing things, your location in space, your perceptions. What appears to be the visual world around you, outside you, is a picture of yourself. There's a sense of interrelationship with things. The first stage of the practice is seeing all things as essentially interrelated. We experience being part of things, feeling for things and learning to feel for the unimportant things. When you do the body sweeping meditation, there are sensations of pleasure, pain, tingling, aching or nothing much: these dull, empty feelings.

How does your body-mind feel first thing in the morning? Learn to feel that rather than just thinking, 'I don't feel so good. I don't feel very much awake. I feel I could use a stiff cup of coffee or stay a few more hours in bed.' That's what happens when we *think* about suffering: we think of the antidotes to it, so of course if we don't get them, this suffering becomes worse and worse, doesn't it? We continually limit ourselves. But how does it actually feel? Are we prepared to go through the experience of waking up, the feeling of dullness, the feeling of hunger, the feeling of tiredness? What do they actually feel like? In meditation, how much do the unloved, grey, empty areas of your life come up for you? On this retreat we're keeping to a routine, and we may come to a point when the interest, the stimulation, the sense of doing something new, of being somewhere else, of finding things, of becoming this and that, is all waning, fading away. We get to a kind of grey area, a plateau, and to cross it is a great stage in spiritual development.

I began to practise in a very committed and serious way. It was intense. I spent several years doing very little except meditating: sitting and watching the breath, and doing walking meditation, day in and day out, in the same place. It got to a point in my practice where everything

faded out. I had this feeling that there was no point. I couldn't go forward anywhere; there wasn't anywhere to go forward to. I was just putting in time, going through the motions of sitting and walking, the motions of the day, with this bleak, dull, numb feeling, thinking, 'How do I get out of this? How do I get across it? Am I supposed to try and push into it, try to concentrate more on it or snap out of it?' It was like I was coming to the edges of the self. I saw the limitations of trying to find something new in my mind to play with. I was wearing out my fascination in things, including the mind and all the things it could do.

We have to learn to open up to the world around us. It's one of the last things we do, actually. We normally have an unawakened relationship with the world around us. We pay attention to it just to manipulate it, to find things for ourselves in it. We even talk about living our life as if life is something separate from us. We try to get 'on top of life' or get 'ahead in life'. The world of nature is something we dominate; we don't feel we're part of it. Planet Earth is a place down there, and we walk around on top of it. We don't feel that we're part of the earth; it's that stuff underneath us that we wander around on. In meditation, you begin to see the results of this alienation. Eventually you become alienated from your own vitality, your own life. When there isn't anything you can get out of meditation, when there isn't anything you can manipulate about it and when any sense of vitality or relationship finishes, you have this dumb, numb, dull feeling. Where has the joy gone? Where has the twinkle gone? I want happiness! Where has the happiness gone? You may think, 'Meditation is supposed to make me feel happy and to transform me into a more kind and loving person ... Well, I need to practise more loving-kindness, but where is it? I can't find it. How can I practise it?' You can't feel anything.

We start learning from the world by learning to be with the negativity of our mind, with the dullness of it. We have to start from there, with those endings. Rather than trying to feel a positive feeling, we take

the time to be with ourselves and we start to learn to feel. When you concentrate and begin to witness the mind more fully, you see a strong aversion, which is the root of our alienation from things. We tend to reject so much of the world around us through fear, disinterest or dislike. If we can't get something out of it, we're not bothered with it. There is ignorance, dullness and unkindness; we don't feel at one with it. So we have to learn to feel at one with our emptiness, our dullness. We look into the resistance, the sullenness, the resentment: 'I don't want to put up with this!' or the feeling sorry for ourselves: 'Why is this happening to me? I've tried so hard for all this time, and I haven't got anything out of it! Nobody loves me!' – these sorts of childish sounds come and go in our mind. We come to a point where we decide that there's nothing to get out of this at all. This is the complete giving up, the complete letting go: not getting anything out of anything.

What does our mind do when it stops grasping? It actually starts to feel, just by itself. You learn to feel by not grasping. What do you do when your mind feels dull, negative or bored? If you look at it, you can witness that there's a grasping there, an attempt to clutch hold of something. Then there's the attempt to get out of it, the attempt to find a positive or happy feeling, the attempt to find a reason why that mood is there or a justification to get away from it and go somewhere else. There's still an inner tussle and frenzy going on. When you feel sleepy or dull there are actually plenty of things happening. There's a whole lot of trying to find, trying to get, trying to be still or trying to wake up – a struggle, an inner conflict.

We can decide to learn to be more patient with negativity, to learn to open up to it and witness what it feels like. A dull feeling, self-pity, self-doubt, the feeling of inadequacy – what does it really feel like? We learn to feel it, to witness, to experience those feelings more deeply. And from that feeling mode we begin to change our ways and our perceptions. It may seem a long way from kindness, but it's the beginning of it; this

is where kindness becomes a genuine thing. If it turns into self-pity, then you can see yourself trying to hold on to something again – to hold on to an idea, a hope or an expectation. Genuine kindness comes with detachment, from the practice of meditation, and by making the mind firm. When you feel a dull or bored feeling, notice how that tends to make your whole practice very soft, woolly, casual, sloppy and uninteresting. At those times you need to use a firm posture to bring a sense of clarity towards that ‘nothing much’.

I think that one of the most helpful things in my practice was having to be in a lot of situations in which I wasn’t at all interested or engaged. I had to learn to be open to them. When I was in Thailand, at the beginning of my monastic life, I had to go to ceremonies. I didn’t know what the ceremonies were about. I didn’t know the people, I didn’t understand the language and I didn’t know the chanting. Everything was very uncertain, and I just had to sit. I could feel a tremendous irritation because I felt I was wasting my time. I could be doing something important, something necessary, something that would be meaningful, useful, interesting or significant. I could be working out problems or meditating or doing something helpful, instead of sitting around and being another brown robe in the line. But actually, in the long run, it was very helpful because I could only carry on complaining inwardly for so long until I got the point that there was something there to work with. I would then realize, ‘Well, I think this is trying to tell me something.’

In meditation there isn’t anything to observe in particular, except the residual wanting to have, wanting to grasp, wanting to get – that feeling of selfhood. As our meditation develops, we call it ‘meditation without an object’ because we are not concentrating on any particular thing. There is the sensitivity to feel out what is balance, what is peacefulness, what is attention. And when we’re leaning into something, hanging on to, avoiding or looking for something, then we recognize those feelings.

When they come up, we can see that it's time to be more attentive and patient; it's time to learn something. There's something to be learned in all these experiences that we think are of no use and no point. There's also something to be learned from our lifelong tendency to try to dismiss certain kinds of experiences.

For this lady I talked about earlier, killing chickens was a pointless experience: just chop it, cut it, get through it and get on to the meaningful thing – which would probably be thinking about how she's going to cook the potatoes to go with them, or if she sells them, what she is going to do with the money, how the farm is going to grow, or whatever. But first she had to get through this particular chore: chop, chop, chop, chop ... It's not that far removed from what we do with our lives, really. When we wake up in the morning, we usually don't bother about how we feel; we just get into the newspapers, radio, breakfast and go to work – we chop that 'waking up' bit. People you know, people around you, you don't need to talk to them, you cut them out: 'Wife ... seen her before, same old face ...'. You just give a few standard responses and grunts and then get on with the important things. You can go through a whole day like that, and get home at the end of it, stuff your face and crash out.

Who wants to know what hunger feels like? Who wants to know what feeling tired feels like? Who wants to be with that? Most people just want to stuff their face and crash out: 'I don't want to know what feeling hungry and feeling tired feel like! What's the point in that? I don't want to hang around and wait for a bus or wait for things. It's pointless! Get on with it and get it done quickly!' That's the everyday brutalization. When there's nothing to get out of an experience, a person or a situation, then most of the time we want to go to something else – something out of which we can get a sense of success, confidence or inspiration.

In learning to feel, we have to bring something forth. Things that are repetitive, boring and ordinary require us to bring something forth: the simple act of attention. It's not easy to bring attention forth in this case, because we don't have any reason in particular to do so. We bring forth attention simply as an act of love, an act of going towards something – not because we're attracted by it, but just in order to be with it, to feel kinship with it, to feel at one with it. It means we have to go forth from our 'self' – that is, what we want to hold on to, what is pleasant or desirable, what we've decided to identify with – into something that's strange, different, unappealing, something we don't naturally feel attracted towards or want to be a part of. So it's a giving, isn't it? A learning to give.

When we're looking for kindness, we're usually doing the wrong thing. Kindness is only something we can *give*, not something we can get or have. It's something we can *always* give; there's no limitation to it. Once you know what it's about, you don't find the world a disappointing place, because there are always opportunities to give a little bit, to venture out a little bit. The sense of self, of being the known, is an illusion; there is nothing but the unknown. There isn't any self, so we have to go out towards everything because nothing here is 'me' or 'mine' or 'my own'; it's all strange, it's all a mystery. Where these thoughts come from, where these sounds come from, where they go to, what this feeling is about, is a mystery. We don't create it, we don't find it anywhere; it's just something that arises.

People around us are a mystery. How common it is to find conflict with each other! We are all 'not-self' and nobody will ever fit into the thoughts we have of them. Any thought you have of somebody is a personal creation, something that defines *you*. Any kind of perception of another person is actually a product of your own mind, isn't it? And that other person will never really fit into it. They never do quite what you want them to do; they do surprising things. A person is something

that breaks up your conceptual picture, so if you're trying to hold on to one, it can be very frustrating, exasperating, confusing and difficult. 'Why do they have to do it like that?' 'What a funny way to behave!' 'How many times have I said it, and she still does it like that!' 'Why can't he ever turn up on time?' 'Why are people so hung up about being punctual?'

Fancy laughing at that. Fancy seeing the joke in that. Everybody defeats our opinions about them, don't they? Human societies are always difficult to try and order because nobody fits into any opinion or view. As long as we are ordering our world around opinions, views and thoughts, it's always a struggle. You have to have laws, policing and orders, tying people down with times and rules: 'This is this kind, and you are that kind ... you go here, and you go there.' We're thinking about each other all the time. Whenever you think about somebody, sooner or later you come up with something negative.

You can always find a reason why a person should be like this and why they're not. You can easily think about people in those terms: 'She would be all right if she didn't do it like that, if she didn't have that kind of habit or that kind of feeling or look like that or talk like that.' We can come up with a hundred and one ideas of what others should be like and what we should be like. That's the discriminative consciousness: cutting things up, denying things, seeing things in abstract terms.

We learn to feel because of suffering, because of that which has thwarted our ability to control, manipulate and cope with life – the indigestible portions, the things that stick in our throat. When we can no longer control and dominate things, we have to learn to feel them out: what exactly is this? We have to learn to relate to people, beings and things as they are. Feeling for people is not always pleasant, but it is fruitful. It brings a feeling of integration, of wholeness. We can have well-being even with an unpleasant feeling. A feeling of well-being can

arise because our mind is composed on an unpleasant feeling. Our mind can let go of any negativity or aversion and can be made whole around an unpleasant feeling when we've learned to let go, to surrender to it. What comes out then is a feeling of ease, a lack of friction. Similarly, in the world around us: when we have learned to appreciate it (not necessarily *like* it), feel for it, be sensitive to its violence, distress and confusion, we have a feeling of integration, of having a place in this world. We feel part of it, not lost, alienated or dried out.

We develop kindness, compassion for others, a feeling of gladness at the well-being of other creatures, and equanimity or evenness of mind: serenity despite the changing nature of conditions, the ups and downs. These four *brahmavihāras* come up naturally as we purify the mind of its conceits, attachments and graspings. You can also evoke something that makes you feel kindness (such as people you like or respect), or something that causes you to feel compassion or gladness. So there are two ways of doing it: you can evoke it in a conventional way or you can develop it as it starts to evolve naturally in your practice. What you have to do to live life from the heart level in an integrated way is to make peace with conflict. You take that conflict into yourself until it's accepted.

Life's difficulties don't become fewer, but they don't have to be a problem. There is a saying attributed to Lao Tzu which defines a great man as someone who encounters difficulties but never experiences them. Problems are problems when we're trying to find an answer to them or when we're trying to get away from them. Problems are problems as long as we have the idea that there shouldn't be any. But when problems, difficulties, obstacles and hindrances are taken as food – something that you learn to chew over, digest and take in – they become part of life, rather than something outside attacking you, something to be blamed. They actually become an essential part of your experience in life, and a way in which you can

always grow larger. As long as we think about ourselves, about life and each other as all separate things, we remain very tiny and frightened. You can see the unfortunate results of people who've lived on their own for a long time and thought about themselves a lot: they have become highly self-conscious. Their power of imagination may be very strong, but as life goes on it becomes increasingly obsessive, and the sense of self becomes tighter.

Somebody who was working in a hospice told me that one of the most tragic things is to see dying people talking about their furniture, their china ducks on the wall, worrying about what to do with the mahogany wardrobe when they're gone and still remembering grudges and grievances over things that happened over twenty years ago. Their mind is caught up with these minute physical things. These people have never learned to go 'out' at all: to go into the unknown, into where it's frightening, strange and uncomfortable. The path of waking up, of meditating, of opening up the mind, will take you into places that are uncomfortable, strange and frightening sometimes. It's for people who want to grow up, not for those who are looking for something to lean on, something to get lost in or something to do as a kind of hobby.

When you go on a retreat you have the opportunity to see this in a clear way, to get a good understanding of it. There's nothing going wrong with the practice; it is exactly right on course. You might get a sense of uncertainty, or the mind going into strange states, internally jabbering and chattering away all the time, mumbling or falling asleep. Now is the time to encounter these states, not just to think about them or about alternatives. You need to learn to be patient, to give something to them, to brighten them up, to put some heart into your practice; that's the direction now. If you practise skilfully in this way, at the end of a retreat, going back home won't be a big comedown or a big change for you. Sometimes when people practise meditation they become so used to holding on to a refined object that they develop the ability to

manufacture and hold a particular refined mental state. When they leave the retreat, their mind is still on a very refined plane, holding on to refined mental states. As the world is a pretty coarse place, suddenly all kinds of coarse mental states arise, and these people fall apart. They can't handle crossing a road any more, or being in a busy city or town. It's too much for them because they have learned only to see and hold the ultrasensitive in things.

In insight meditation you may be aware of ultrasensitive things and of all kinds of refined or subtle states, but you are not holding them. You're just feeling their passage, their movement. You're learning about the responses, and you're keeping them clear, easy, light, mobile; there's no hanging on, no pushing away. This is of tremendous benefit to your practice, in any condition, in any situation – busy or not busy. The world still evokes a sense of confrontation, a sense of it being unusual or strange; it still asks you to keep coming forth. However, your practice will actually benefit from and be sustained by conflict. Conflict will teach you; you'll learn great patience. The world is a perfect place to learn enormous patience.

It's not enough to say that things end; our attention has to be clearly with that reality. Along with understanding and reflection, you also have to develop a foundation of calm. This is the way these two aspects work: if you don't develop any foundation then the mind is not prepared to witness, to be with, to contemplate whatever arises in the mind. But if you only develop calm for its own sake, you miss it again. We have to blend the two: the effort, concentration and attention, as well as wise reflection upon the way things are. The two are actually one path; they go together.

Right Effort

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED DURING A TEN-DAY RETREAT
AT AMARAVATI MONASTERY, ON 19 APRIL 1987.

We usually come on a retreat with ideas of cultivating the mind, training the mind and progressing in Dhamma. We put effort into things; we put energy into things. Energy becomes a problem when it's not going the right way or when it's turbulent. How we apply ourselves is something that requires a lot of understanding, reflection, maturity and experience. This whole topic of effort and energy and what to do with it – how to apply ourselves in a spiritual way – becomes a reflection. When it's properly used, it's one of the chief supports of practice.

We are sensory creatures; we have a sensory consciousness that is a matter of energy. It attracts, it repels, it moves. Life as we know it is a matter of energy, with things coming and going, experiences happening to us. As we begin to settle, we see that even when we are not trying to do anything, there's still a continuous state of movement and flux: the metabolism of the body, the breathing, the beating of the heart, the flow of the blood, the movements of the mind – ceaseless movement.

Energy is a part of our existence; we need to learn what to do with it. We tend to dissipate energy or do unprofitable, useless things. We need to liberate energy from its habits, from pointlessness, from going in directions where we become frustrated or where we burn ourselves out. That transmutation of energy is what brings out the radiance of the spiritual path. Spiritual practice is not a flaccid, inert, wasted-out, worn-down, enfeebled thing, where you are too whacked-out to do anything else. In fact, the Buddha recommended people to begin practising when they are young, when there is plenty of juice. This puts you right into a paradox because most of our energies are seemingly not going towards calmness, reflection and composure. They are going

out into food and sleep; they are going out into plans and expectations. They are going into making things, into endless, inquisitive thoughts, worries and problems. They are going into desires of one kind or another. We create enormous mind problems, don't we? The energy gets stuck up in our heads all the time, trying to figure things out, then trying to stop figuring things out, then trying not to stop, and then trying to think about how we stop trying to stop thinking about figuring out whatever we are trying to stop thinking about!

When this energy is not going into kinks and knots, there is a great buoyant feeling, the radiance of someone who has matured on the path. There is the compassion of the Buddha, that quality of being able to spread and give the teaching, to live the spiritual life in a positive and encouraging way, because the energy is not being dissipated. The restlessness of the mind is not in itself something gone wrong; it's just misdirection. If your mind is restless and there's a lot of moving and creating, this is really all right; it just means you have a lot there to harness. You have to find a skilful means to make the energy uplift your practice, rather than become a burden you carry around.

What is important in the aspect of right effort (which is the foundation of mindfulness, of meditation) is this word 'right'. Energy and effort are not unusual to us, but rightness, this quality of the Noble Path, takes a little bit of getting used to. We can start by considering: how do we experience conflict or suffering? The kind of effort we all know is 'wrong effort'; it feels wrong, unprogressive and painful. This Noble Truth of suffering, which the Buddha made the keystone of his teachings, is a very accurate guide. It's the one you always go to when you have a question or a difficulty you want to solve. You can ask a question about suffering, for example: 'Where is the conflict here? Why do I experience conflict with this?', or 'How do I become more peaceful? How do I become more enlightened? How do I become more loving

and compassionate?’ When you look towards the Buddha Dhamma, you begin to see the answer to your questions.

These types of questions actually imply, ‘I experience suffering because I am not what I think I should be.’ We have an *idea* of something such as wisdom, compassion or enlightenment, and we think that we experience suffering because we haven’t become that idea. Then we look at that and think, ‘How could I possibly be an idea? I am not an idea, am I? I am real! Something is real; there is a real sense of somebody being somewhere, doing something, but I can never find out exactly what it is. Well, that’s why I suffer: I’m trying to be an idea!’

Maybe love, compassion, enlightenment and wisdom are not ideas. Maybe they are actual realities, something you *do* rather than have an idea of. You are actually *being* wise, *being* peaceful: it’s happening *now*. Rather than thinking about being peaceful, we start to bring up the reflection: ‘Is it possible to be peaceful with my doubt, with my sense of inadequacy?’ What does inadequacy do to you? What does doubt do to you? Why do you suffer with that? You suffer because things are not what you think they should be. ‘I’m not getting what I want. I want to become something!’ In Dhamma practice we’re actually *being* peaceful rather than becoming it. We’re not ‘someone now who will be something else in the future’.

So put all of your effort towards opening up and establishing yourself *now*. The sense of inadequacy, of limitation, is to be overcome. It is to be seen through by making your mind go fully into this present moment. Often we experience inadequacy because something in us is hanging back. Something in us is saying, ‘Well, I don’t know, maybe ... Will this work? Is this going to be useful? Will it hurt? Will I get what I want?’ When you are meditating, notice if something in you is trying to figure out whether you should do it or not. Doubt will prevent you from getting a sense of unity, a sense of establishment or concentration. You won’t

get any sense of real calm. You will always be someone whose calm is more like the feeling of limpness. You can manage to tranquilize things but you are not really resolved, you are not relaxed into it because something in you hasn't given up yet; it hasn't let go. It's still thinking, 'Well, I don't know about this. Is this the way to do it?'

The mind's energies can always create comparisons and alternatives, can't they? We can always compare where we are at now with a memory, a notion or an idea. For example, we feel pain and behind that pain is the wanting it not to be there, the feeling of, 'It shouldn't be there.' There's always some alternative our minds can create. When we feel restless, the notion of calm may come up. In any group of people, we usually compare ourselves instinctively with the others: better or worse.

One of the difficulties of any religious or spiritual teaching is that the thinking mind can turn every reflection into a doctrine. When this happens, you then think you have to become the teachings and embody all these lofty qualities of mind. You hear the word 'wisdom' and you think, 'Oh, wisdom ... I am not wise, I am pretty stupid really' or 'I don't know everything yet.' Or you hear the word 'kindness' and you think, 'I'm not a very kind person. It seems a bit silly to me, sitting around being kind to myself. I can't do that.' There's always the risk of making these qualities of mind into absolutes. Instead, allow yourself to be a little more reflective around your feeling of misunderstanding or your feeling of doubt. The transcendental path is possible. We are using these qualities of mind as a *reflection* rather than as ultimate realities. What is wisdom? It's being wise about things. Peacefulness is being accepting, finding a balance, having that quality to work with difficulties. Peace is not an inert, numb state; it is an exceptionally vibrant, sensitive state. In enlightenment the Buddha was not numb, voiding out into blankness. He had an exceptionally vibrant, sensitive mind that could adjust and balance.

If you look at the various teachings the Buddha gave, you may notice that wherever somebody was coming from, whatever their attitude or line of argument, he could always find a way to balance it out, to reflect back to them what would bring harmony. With his interlocutors following their own views, and him providing reflections, they would tend to come around and understand. The Buddha's depth of wisdom is such that his doors to peace are numerous and can carry many people across from different angles, different perspectives.

In our own practice, we have to do this with the multitudinous experiences that we have. How many people have you been today? Quite a lot! You are not expecting all this variety of phenomena to become one thing, but the process of meditation and contemplation is allowing them to go. Some of them we have to step back on, some of them we have to back off from, some of them we have to guide, some of them we have to hold carefully, some of them we have to gently support or pick up ... and where do they go? They all go in one direction: they go towards passing away. We can experience a feeling of ease or relief that's not at all an annihilation of feeling or being, but a quality of living at ease with the process of birth and death, the process of becoming. By this I don't mean the physical birth and death of the body. Every sensory experience of your eye comes and then it goes, it is born and then it dies. A sound enters your ear and then it goes. A thought pops up in the mind-consciousness, it's born, it matures, it ripens, it spawns various offspring and then it passes away. We are in a world of birth and death and regeneration. It's a continual process, isn't it?

We're calming the mind down and simplifying our view by trying to watch one or two phenomena at a time, like the breath or the process of thought. You just watch one experience and see: what does it do? What does something like the breath do? It begins, it matures and it passes away. Now, if you want the beginning of the breath to be the ending of the breath, that's conflict, isn't it? If you want the ending

of the breath to be the beginning of the breath, that's conflict. If you want it to be shallow when it's deep, that's conflict. So, in following the breath, we are simply looking, watching to see: 'How is it?'

The quality of attention we give to something like the breath appreciates that there is no alternative: 'It's like this.' There's no conflict with that; there isn't a something else it should or could be. 'It's like this' is not an ultimate statement, because the next breath is slightly different. It's also 'like this', but the this-ness of it has changed its characteristics. This one may be shorter or longer, or you may miss it altogether. What is constant is that everything is exactly itself. Our minds can be so sluggish that we are still caught up with the way things *were*. We are so alienated that we are still carrying around a whole bunch of ideas about the way things are, what we are and what we should be. We have this feeling of conflict or confusion because this ever-changing flow of life, as it is, doesn't match up to them. And it's not going to change; it's not going to fit into our thoughts – not without a good struggle anyway!

This becomes apparent when you are calm and when you are looking at things in an unbiased way. With meditation practice you can make effort quite clear, supportive and unconfused. You see that you have a very simple thing to do and it is not a life-and-death issue; it's just being with the breath, the walking or the feeling, as it is. Sometimes it's a little more difficult to try to be with the way we feel, with the ideas and thoughts that come up or the mind-states, so we often start with the body. We put attention into the body, sitting upright, sensing the feelings in the arms, the tensions that can be released and relaxed. We are attuning ourselves to the rhythms of the body, because that is something we don't make too much of an issue of. We don't like pain, admittedly, but that's not ever-present; it's a visitor. So we start with the body because it's a simple object that helps us get a good sense of how to flow with things.

This kind of ‘tuning in’ is the quality of right effort. It differs from wrong effort because wrong effort always comes from power rather than sensitivity and awareness. Wrong effort comes from a bias, a desire of some kind, a wish for things to be this way or that way. When we are not living in a spiritual, attuned, aware and sensitive way, a lot of energy is expended in efforts that are forceful. They are forced by anxiety, urgency, fears and desires of one kind or another.

There is also a quality of effort which is instinctive. It’s not wrong in that it is not being used foolishly. If something is attacking you, you find you suddenly have plenty of energy to get away; you don’t feel lazy and dithery, you don’t have any doubt in your mind. A tremendous amount of energy is liberated in the system in moments like that. I remember reading some of these instances of mothers who lifted cars off their children in a car crash. Imagine: a diminutive woman picks a car up in order to get her baby out from underneath! The instinct to protect is so powerful that it can bring an enormous energy into the body.

There is also the energy of nature, the natural attraction towards things. One of the challenges in meditation is trying to develop energy or bring attention towards something that is not particularly stimulating, whereas nature can readily bring up energy in us by directing us towards things that we find pleasant and away from things that we find unpleasant. The mind is under the power of nature. The eyes are under the power of nature. The ears can be attracted towards things, and can fasten and hold on to them quite tenaciously. When you’re hungry, you don’t have any difficulty at all in concentrating on eating.

In daily life, you can be munching away on your lunch break while reading the newspaper or thinking about something else and hardly even notice that you are eating! If you’re busy and engaged in things that really interest you, sometimes you forget to eat. But imagine I say, ‘Well, we don’t need any food during this retreat, I don’t think it’s

important. It's more important to meditate, isn't it? Let's just meditate and concentrate! We don't have to put up with all that eating and washing-up – all that waste of time! Just get rid of it because we are determined to be enlightened, so let's just meditate, sit and watch the breath! If I suggest this, you might experience a certain amount of resistance or even aversion to me! You might even break into the kitchen! Certainly, energy will be liberated from the system in one way or another.

When you find yourself getting cravings for things and your mind is continually zooming in on stuff, it is important to remember that it's not the particular thing in itself that is a problem or obsession. For example, you're sitting here in the morning on an empty stomach, trying to do this inspiring chanting, but in fact you're just thinking about toast and muesli. It's not that you're a toast-and-muesli addict; it's just that when the mind is not interested in something, it easily finds sensory objects to be attracted to. That's the mind's nature. Something like eating food stimulates taste, doesn't it? It's the easiest way to feel some gratification. People often go out to dine just to pass the time. If you get bored, you munch on a bag of crisps. When the kids are wailing, you shove something in their mouth. Food is an easy thing to absorb into, especially on retreat, as we have ruled out music, sexual activity and even conversation!

I hope you are using this rule to abstain from conversation. Conversation is something to get drawn into, isn't it? It stimulates the mind, it makes you tingle and buzz with ideas, thoughts and words. The refraining from reading is also interesting. You wouldn't imagine that reading would be that strong of an attraction until there is not much else to do. I have seen people on retreats looking at the back of cornflakes packets, sauce bottles, washing-up rotas, anything! The mind wants to be tickled by something. If you have chanting sheets, you can look at them. Our energy and effort normally want to absorb into things. If

we can't absorb into something, we can feel a sense of loss and our energy goes around restlessly hither and thither; it can feel confusing and unpleasant.

Of course, the one distraction that is still legal is sleep – the 'fourth refuge'! Our mind can create tiredness. When we feel resistant and negative and we don't want to bother with anything, we can make ourselves feel tired. We are conditioned to sleep at a certain time. If we are having a hard time and our enthusiasm wanes, we start to feel a bit droopy and this can create tiredness. If you pay attention to tiredness you will see that it is quite a busy thing. The mind is popping away; it's not going in the normal channels. When you are feeling tired, your mind can be quite active, creating lots of fantasies, notions and unsteady states, even though it might feel like you're dropping off. There's actually plenty of energy there. When we dream, it can be quite a vigorous experience; sometimes it's much more interesting than meditating because you can really let it rip in your dreams, whereas in meditation you try to keep a sense of propriety about your mind movements.

Restless drives hither and thither occur because our energy is normally conditioned to be attracted towards or repelled by something. These drives are under the power of interest, desire and aversion. The energy of our system can be freed from desire and aversion, and right effort is the way to do it. First of all, we use effort to put aside what isn't helpful. There can be a real vigour and sharpness in the way we put unhelpful things aside, in the way we determine to refrain from these things. It requires a certain sense of firmness sometimes. If you just let your mind flop around all over the place, you are not really being attentive, you are not unwinding, you are not bothering. You feel run down. That loose mind-state tends to dissipate your energy, so you need to refrain from that, and concentrate the mind when it gets loose and starts swaying. You need to decide that you're going to practise putting your attention on the breath or on the meditation object, moment by moment. You

firm up your mind when it starts to flop around and you do this again and again. That can bring a lot of vigour into your practice.

Right effort is the result of being more responsible, of learning not to let our energy attract, grab and hold on to an experience. Instead we use that energy to simply *relate* to an experience. That's the difference between the spiritual path and the inert path, or what we call the 'worldly path'. Here 'worldly' is not meant in the sense of geographical world. It's also not 'worldly' as opposed to 'priestly'. The worldly path is the path that takes us out into physical things, into materialism, into birth and death. The spiritual path takes us beyond all that. Worldly energy is all about grasping, grabbing and having things. Spiritual energy is about responding to things skilfully. We learn to respond to our feelings appropriately. It's a very full way to use energy; it requires everything we have. There's no need to feel bored. There's no need to feel there's nothing to do or nothing to employ ourselves with. There's a lot of need to steer, to balance, to firm up and gladden the mind, to be kind, to be generous and to open the heart. The right effort is the one that keeps putting aside and refraining from what isn't helpful (the worldly path) and keeps picking up, holding and staying with what is helpful, what is fruitful and what is conducive to a skilful practice. This kind of effort is very productive because it is conducive to creating further energy. It is a brightening and gladdening force.

If you put effort into concentrating your mind, into firming it up, you will find that it's certainly not easy. You have to keep doing it again and again and again. And you have to do it in the right way; you can't do it in an angry or impatient way. You have to do it every time with great patience, with a sense of wanting to help, not with irritation or frustration, and not with the feeling that you are doing it in order to attain or become something.

Imagine you see a drunk wandering along the road and you want to help him to walk along a straight path to get to where he wants to

go. You pick him up and he falls over sideways so you say, 'No, come on, stand up!' Then he falls back the other way. There's no point in picking him up and pushing him to the other side and expecting him to stay there. You have to stand right behind him and guide him as he is swinging and swaying: 'Oh no, not this way! Careful now ... steady on ... here comes a rough patch ... easy as you go ... slow down here ... now, speed up here ...' so that it's balancing. That requires energy, not power, force or an opinion saying, 'It's this way, not that way!', but a continually sensitive and caring quality of mind.

This is the energy that gives you concentration – the one that leads to unification. This concentration honours and responds to the mind as it is. It's not a dismissive concentration whereby you are holding on to something and ignoring the wavering of the mind, the uncertainties you experience or the feelings of discomfort or dis-ease. It's the concentration that comes from taking all this into account and finding skilful means. Concentration of the mind is not just one-pointed attention upon a meditation object. It involves much more than that. This is why *samādhi* or unification of the mind comes late in the path. It's not just a matter of focusing on an object; there's much more to it than that, otherwise you would get into *samādhi* every time you watch TV or look at pin-up magazines! But that wouldn't be *sammā-samādhi*, that would be naughty *samādhi*! The four unifications of the mind don't come by gluing the mind onto an object. We need to investigate: 'Why is it that the mind is wandering around? What is happening here?' It requires a certain degree of wisdom, a sensitivity and a wish to help. You have to be patient with this; it is going to take time.

The fact that you came here on this retreat means you've realized, 'Well, if I want to apply effort into cultivating the mind as best I can, I should put it into a situation where there won't be too many distractions.' Here, you don't have to use too much willpower. If you were home, maybe you would be looking around thinking, 'Yeah, meditation is

important, but I ought to paint this and fix that. So today I will get it done, get it out of the way, and then tomorrow I will meditate. It will be calm and peaceful tomorrow. That's it!' And so it continues ... After a while you think, 'This is hopeless! There is no end to this!' You need to be wise and see that there isn't any end to the number of things that you can do, should do, ought to do, that really *need* to be done. So it's helpful to be in a situation where you can devote yourself to this exercise of unifying your mind.

To take care of the mind – the organ of our expression and our volition – rather than letting it get burnt out and dulled by endless activity, is quite a reasonable thing to do. When we are applying effort for unification of the mind, it doesn't come about through ignoring things. Sometimes people imagine, 'Well, if you meditate it means you forget everybody else and just ignore everything. You get away from it all. You go in your little hiding place, contemplate your navel and say nuts to the rest of the world!' But that comes from people who don't practise, obviously. My navel has never allowed me to forget about the rest of the world, not for one moment! It's a completely uninteresting part of my anatomy. Almost anything is more compulsive and engaging than my navel. When you sit and you try to contemplate, what happens? The rest of the world comes tumbling in the back door, doesn't it? You don't get away from anything nor do you need to, really. You just need to be in a situation where you can apply yourself to make a refuge, a firm point where you can contemplate the world coming and going as it happens to you.

From this firm centre, you can contemplate the restless movement, the tugs, the pulls, the energy that the world consists of. We can see how it's really just contained in our own memory, in our own mind. It's ready to pop out at any moment. The future, the past, people and things: they are all just energy forms, aren't they? If you unify your mind you don't create the world. You are not rejecting it, but you're

taking the opportunity to not create it. A lot of our problems in life come because we are living in a world and we are simultaneously creating a world – and these two worlds don't quite fit together. You are creating a world of, 'What I think, my opinions and views, my idea of what you should be like, my idea of the way this place should be run, what the country should be about, what the government should be doing, what the weather should be like and how we should do this, that and the other.' Only when you are not lost in your own creations, memories and projections, is there the possibility of seeing: 'How is it? How actually is it?' Only then can you apply the mind to clearly and calmly assess, 'Well, this could be better. We could do this and that.' But first of all, you need to learn how to receive your own world.

When human beings are led by opinions and views, by desires that come out of memory and habit, they often don't listen well; they are not particularly sensitive. Religions can be exceptionally insensitive, domineering and crusading: telling people what's right and what's wrong, creating all kinds of ideas, punishing and repressing people ... Even when an idea sounds good, if we are using it in the wrong way, if we are not keeping our minds open, we are not actually responding to the teaching of a religious leader as to what love, goodness, justice or divinity is about, or to what overcoming evil is really about. If we just believe in teachings as ideas, our worldly energies get engaged and we tend to impose our own reality, or even crush and dismiss others. Worldly energies can be used for innumerable things: for so-called spiritual ends, for political purposes and so forth. They are always about grasping and imposing, and thus there's always suffering in their wake.

Since the beginning of this retreat I have been encouraging you to create space around things. It's perhaps a little bit difficult to get the hang of because it's rather vague. It's about the ability to not know, the ability to put aside an opinion, to not emphasize going places and getting things. It's about looking at the resistance we have to the way

things are, learning to open up to that and see what feelings are like. For example, we look at our sense of inadequacy and try to bring more compassion to it. We don't bring power to it, we don't try to change it, but we're feeling more deeply, responding more deeply from the heart to how we experience our life, our mind and our body, day by day. It's a little vague perhaps, but this space manifests from the application of energy towards relinquishment, letting go and opening up, rather than using the energy to grasp.

In your meditation practice, you may have noticed that holding on to something is rather difficult, unless it really fascinates you. The truth of the matter is that unless we are biased, compelled or urged by something, or drawn into something, we don't grasp very well. We have to be pretty much fired up to get a good grip on something. We have to be really attracted in order to want to hold. When we put our attention on something like the breath, which is not an unpleasant experience, the mind doesn't grasp it. The mind's tendency is not to grasp; its nature is much more one of spaciousness. When you feel calm, when you feel at ease, your mind is quite spacious. Peace of mind implies there's no need to grasp anything or become something; there's nothing you need to get to. When we have moments of peacefulness, tranquillity and ease, there isn't a need to hold. That feels like a state of truth, a deeper sense of being. We feel right and real. Know this for yourself. Our true nature is not one of holding on. This is just a dream, a state in which we're engaged through the activity of the senses, which are compelled by attraction and repulsion, not by peace. Our senses don't get compelled by peace of mind: they tend to relax.

This direction of using energy to let go, to surrender, comes from the practice of faith. Faith means openness of mind. It's that in us which wants to say, 'Go beyond,' which inclines towards something further and starts to realize that this process is not going to be a further accumulation. It's going to be a whole change of direction, a sense of

relinquishment, of self-surrender – not of becoming something in the future, but of entering more fully into the present by putting aside our analysis of it, our categorization of it and our glib dismissal of it as being this or that. We're looking into and entering into this breath, this thought, this feeling, this body. Have you really entered into your body yet? Do you know what the body feels like, how to support it, how to relax it, how to gladden it with proper attention? The thinking mind tends to suck all the energy.

Surrender is not a defeat, but an abandoning of something that is not profitable. This devotion, this sense of heartfelt attention, is something that is calming. We recognize calm as a more refined and sublime state than agitation; we incline towards that. So we incline our mind towards something that is calming by this devotional quality. Why do we use a devotional form here? It's not that we are expecting this brass Buddha-image to do anything for us or to express anything by us bowing to it! We are using an image that's a symbol of what we aspire to: peace, serenity, wisdom and compassion. We are using that as a reflection in the mind. We're turning towards that image, remembering what that image means and surrendering our assertion, our pride and self-centredness towards something that's sublime, peaceful and serene. Sometimes we even have a strong feeling of wanting to give up, of being tired of ourselves, of the restlessness, the fidgetiness, the querulousness and the pettiness that our thought-bound consciousness can get stuck in – these little grudges, jealousies and complaints.

In my own life, I'd always wanted to get into something bigger, something higher, something that would be worthy, but nothing seemed to be worthwhile, nothing really seemed to be worth going into. Perhaps there's something we have to believe in first of all. But we don't believe in Buddha, we don't believe in something out there. We are using an object and an image to reflect inwardly. That in you which is wise: give yourself up to it, turn towards it. You know you can let

go, you know there is something in you which can be patient because you are moral beings, people who can have an impulse and an instinct and say, 'No.' You can feel aversion or hatred but you can refrain from acting on it. That ability implies that you have a mind that knows how to let go of impulses and connect to something higher that's not a matter of immediate gratification. It causes you a bit of self-sacrifice but you can do that; you have an intuition to do that.

It's just a matter of knowing how all-pervasive Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha is, how immanent that is; then we can surrender to that. It's right here: that conscience which is not deluded. When we know we are being lazy or foolish, complaining or petty, we try to not use energy to justify, blame or project it outwards, or to feel bad about ourselves, but we try to use energy to recognize those feelings and put them aside. We pick up wisdom, compassion, clarity, calm or a meditation object, something solid. For example, you can pick up the body, which is not a theory but the very presence of the physical form, and attune your mind to that. This is a quality of right effort. It's the right use of energy. Then the mind is unified, it feels gladdened by that. You are not forcing the mind onto it; it goes towards it as a better thing to do. The mind begins to realize its true vibrancies, its true nature, its unity, its calm and its ability to pass through the pettiness of desire and the silliness of it, to a place where we feel self-respect and worthiness as human beings on this planet. This is something that we can learn from. We need to learn to really be human rather than just another kind of animal.

If you attune yourself to the rhythms of the body, to the rhythms of the day – the morning, the evening, the night, the time of rest, the time of wakening, the time of putting forth effort, the time of relaxing, the rhythms of the breath, the rhythms of walking – you find that there is a sensitive tranquillity that's not just a dull blanking out, but a real calm that has rapture and joy in it. Meditation practice is a very joyous experience. The mind likes to be with the body, it feels good there.

Even with physical pain, it works with it and sees, ‘What can we do with this? Can we contemplate the suffering of it or relax into it or adjust slightly?’ It feels gladdened by the opportunity to do good practice; it’s not another hassle or another burden. So make sure your path is always ongoing. As it goes on, you see results and feel encouragement. Then there isn’t any turning back. We just have to live out our life, live with the kamma of the sense-consciousness and the kamma of this world, and use it to develop spiritual truth, spiritual virtue and spiritual strength. There’s nothing else to do that makes sense.

Death and Dying Retreat

THE FOLLOWING EIGHT REFLECTIONS WERE OFFERED ON A
'DEATH AND DYING' RETREAT AT AMARAVATI MONASTERY, FROM 19 TO
21 OCTOBER 1990 – NOT LONG BEFORE AJAHN SUCITTO WENT ON A SIX-
MONTH PILGRIMAGE ON FOOT IN INDIA WITH NICK SCOTT.

Contemplating Impermanence

We can meditate as a way of finding balance with the sensory world by noticing that it arises, changes and passes away. When we contemplate through the senses we focus the mind on a particular sense-object, and then we watch, we listen and we discern that sense-objects change. We can notice that what we're observing is a process of constant change. Within that practice we experience a sense of stillness: the watchfulness or the 'subject' remains still, awake and bright.

One of the most commonly used sense-objects is the breath. You can observe breathing in and breathing out as a sensation of movement or you can watch the feelings in your body, asking yourself, 'How does my body feel?', and then feeling your arms, your shoulders, your back – being aware of them. You can recognize whether this part of the body is tingling or pulsating or warm, and you can discern a kind of vibration in that experience of 'feeling' as well. Also, if you look straight ahead of you or at what's on the floor in front of you – you must really hold your gaze there without moving it around – you can see that visual consciousness changes, the focus changes. The perception of the object you are looking at has movement in it. It's not that the floor or the wall is actually changing, but the visual consciousness is like a TV screen in a way: you can notice that there is a pulsation in it.

Objects such as the breath come and go, rise and fall; consciousness itself is a flickering, pulsating experience. Our attention is constantly wavering, and this is completely usual in normal consciousness. You can observe that the focus of your mind moves, wavers, grips, becomes mesmerized by something and then drifts off onto something else; it's changing constantly. And in the normal consciousness the power of attention itself is changing, flowing.

When you meditate, things that arise sometimes become very repetitive. They keep coming back and repeating, repeating, repeating ... but they change too. Mental phenomena are changing, moods are ephemeral. A powerful, painful mood is still something that arises in the mind, and though we may think it's stuck there, in fact it's rather like a vinyl record that gets stuck and keeps repeating. But it's not immobile, is it? It's changing nevertheless. Even the most obsessive thought is *re-played*.

Above all, the attitude of Buddhist meditation is one that keeps remembering and focusing on the changing nature of everything. When we witness, listen and relate to sensory experience as change, its power to burn, hold and trap us wanes. There is a sense of dispassion, not through rejection or some other kind of negative attitude to the sensory experience, but just through observing it, bringing the mind fully onto it – as fully as we can. Then the heart grows quiet and still.

This is the sign called 'impermanence' – variability, the ephemeral. It's not just that things change, but also that the whole manifest world of phenomena has this mirage-like or dreamlike quality to it. It's not that it doesn't manifest, but you can't hold it nor be held by it. Only when you lose focus, when you believe in it, when you're caught up with aversion or desire, does it seem like *you*, that you're in it, that you belong to it. You seem to be held by it, trapped by it. It has the reality of a dream. Dreams can be shocking, bizarre, funny, terrifying or strange, but on waking one views them with detachment.

When we close our eyes and go within, turn the senses inwards to the centre, we witness the inner world: memories, moods, the psychic, mental, perceptual world of mind-consciousness. This is the mind-base, not the external senses. This is what we feel our 'self' to be, and we can contemplate that too as changing. As we observe the inner world, all that expresses itself as our identity is seen as an object, as something

that is looked at and related to, an experience, something that flows through our awareness, and is therefore not a 'subject'. The subject is nameless, ineffable: beyond thought, beyond perception, beyond feeling, beyond sensation. It's beyond consciousness, beyond the forms of consciousness, beyond the formed, the conditioned. It's what we call the Unconditioned. This is a very powerful reflection.

In meditation the ongoing endeavour is to find balance: a dispassionate sense of right response and right relationship with the phenomenal world – internal or external. This doesn't mean trying to push it away, change it, hold it, find something within it or extract something from it. Our effort in meditation doesn't demand that the phenomenal world should express some profound truth; it's not irritated by its profound falsehood. It has no demands, no expectations, no judgements. There's an emotional cooling. This is the endeavour, the effort of practice.

The more you contemplate everything as change, the less it becomes necessary to defend, judge or otherwise react to things. We can live in harmony, in balance, in peace with it all. The effort we make is not to hold or push away. Using the words 'to contemplate' or 'to reflect' expresses this process of right view, of right observation. Notice what grabs you. What are the things that tend to stick, that you feel caught up with or overwhelmed by? Whenever you feel trapped by something, that is a sign of aversion: you don't want that something. In this case, your practice must be one of developing non-aversion, of welcoming, brightening, of being more willing. You need to bring a good deal of attention and effort to this.

The wish to get something in meditation, to become one-pointed, peaceful, calm, bright or clear, is a kind of greed. Those are the moods, the perceptions, the attitudes, the drives about which you must learn to be more humble. Bring your mind always to the present, to the very quality of wanting or not wanting and to the simple way it is: the

feelings in the body, the breathing in, the breathing out. When your mind becomes swamped or saturated, make your meditation object as clear and as tangible as possible, but not refined. For example, you can practise looking straight ahead of you with your eyes open, or reciting a word as you're breathing in and out – something that gives a stronger effect, has a stronger contact. This is an important part of meditation and something to be quite emphatic about. Meditation is not just a practice of holding or stilling the mind through effort and power. Some of the most helpful results come through reflecting and understanding the nature of the phenomenal world, the fact that it changes, it passes.

Observe the characteristics of the flow of the mind and its objects. The flow is about time, isn't it? It's about going forward in time or going backwards in time. It sees aims and objectives in time: 'How long is the sitting? How long do I have to do this? At some future time will this practice bear fruit?' We remember, think, consider and are affected by things in time: what we did yesterday, what might happen to us tomorrow. Things are viewed as temporal. Aims and objectives are seen in time-bound ways, from the most humble desires to the profoundest kind of aspirations.

What you can notice about all those time-bound drives is that they're unsatisfying. Time is an unsatisfactory experience. It's always about what we'd like to have but don't have yet, or that which we have and don't want, and which we hope will stop in some future time. When we observe this time-bound stuff it gives a dimension to our life, and yet it's always unsatisfactory. It is very important to learn this teaching, particularly in reflection on death. Death is where time stops, isn't it? Death means no future any more, the end. So our minds, which work in terms of time, think, 'When will it happen? What if it happens tomorrow? What should we do? What happens after it?' We're caught up in terms of time.

When we let go of time we can experience deliverance, a spiritual response to death. Then we understand why the Buddha's passing away was seen as a release from time. We are always bringing ourselves back to *now*, trusting, taking refuge in *now*. This process of kamma, this psychic, phenomenal, internal dream is always seeking something, going towards something, trying to become, get rid of, change and so on. When we take refuge in the *now*, that means we have trust and faith. No matter what the dream or the mirage is about, no matter whether it's dreary, anguished or desperate, however powerful the mood is, right now, at this time, we can notice that it changes. There is the knowing of that. The practice of Buddhism is nothing more; this is its essence.

We can always take refuge in Buddha and notice that the phenomenal world, whether it's internal, external, joyful, bright, painful or nothing much at all, is leaving us, passing us by. And rather than trying to catch it, jump onto it or control it, we let it pass. We take refuge in this knowing, at this time. The Buddha refuge is a sense of trust, a very powerful experience. It's essential not to make the effort to have it out of desire, but to truly allow our very personal experience to be reviewed, to be made conscious, to be recognized, to be seen, and to abandon everything else except that. When we chant the reflections on the Buddha, we say that he is 'the knower of the worlds' – this world we feel so much a part of – and that he bestows blessings on us. That knowing is a blessed quality. Then our serenity, our compassion and our strength come not from ourselves, not from our will or desire, or some kind of struggle, but from humbly bringing our minds into the present moment, allowing that moment to be reviewed by this Buddha-knowing. When, from that position, you offer your life to Buddha, to the knowing of your mind, there is serenity and strength, a kind of blessedness, wisdom, compassion and the patience to go on.

However, so often, in meditation as in life, we don't do that. Instead we rely on 'me-ness', on 'I'm going to ... I can't ... I want ... I'm not ... I have ... I don't ...' and all that 'I-ness'. We despair because of it. There's conceit because of it. We grow angry and annoyed with life because it doesn't fit the 'me'. We become annoyed and feel disappointed with ourselves because we are not the way we think we should be. All that is based upon seeing things from self-view. And yet there is this marvellous opportunity to offer our life to Buddha. Then, from this position of knowing, we recognize that all the things which belong to 'me' are changing. All sense of 'me' and 'mine' is impermanent and death-bound. In this awakening there is blessedness, there is transcendence.

Meditation is a very open opportunity, because you can do it for a weekend, an hour, five minutes, or even just for a moment. It's not such a massive act of faith. When we take that opportunity we begin to recognize that beyond the movement and the change there is a kind of strength and serenity. Slowly, slowly, through the valleys, through the clouds, through the mirages of our self-view, a light begins to glow and guide us on to Dhamma: not delayed in time, here and now, leading to liberation; and to Sangha: the good practice, the resolve, the recognition of ourselves as spiritual pilgrims who are living through their kamma.

Beyond the Sense of Self

What does it mean to contemplate death? What is the purpose of it? Is it going to stop us dying? It's not going to change the physiological processes in any way, is it? No, the aim of this contemplation is to resolve the emotional conflict, despair, anxiety and confusion around death. This is what is meant by freedom from death or, in Buddhist terminology, 'deathlessness'. It means that the mind is not caught by the habits of attachment, despair, disappointment, fear and grief. These are all attributes of the mind's emotional plane, which is very limited – basically, it only responds in terms of pleasure and pain. We are excited, interested, cheerful and brightened by things that are supportive and life-sustaining: by birth, increase and light. But darkness, death, decay and separation draw our mind into depression, anxiety and grief. Through our practice, we realize that both our physical form and our sensory form, including our thoughts and feelings, are ever-changing. They are impermanent; they come and go. Yet it's possible for our minds and hearts to no longer be caught in that sense of loss, despair and confusion.

There is a difference between passing away and death; they mean slightly different things to us. When somebody dies and we want to be euphemistic about their death, we say they 'passed away' or 'passed on'. Somehow those expressions don't have the same punch to them as 'he died' – 'he died and his body is rotting away now, degenerating.' That would be a harder way to put it, but what actually is the difference? Why is it that saying somebody passed away is different from saying they've died? Because in 'passing away' there seems to be no loss of self involved. When we say somebody *passed away*, we're implying that although they're not here any more, they're still around; they've just gone somewhere else. Whereas when we say somebody's *dead*, that implies annihilation, a complete breaking up, the loss of that integral self; the subject is destroyed.

When your clothes wear out, you say, 'They're finished! Let's chuck them away!' When your thirty-year-old car finally blows its last gasket and conks out, you probably feel a little tug in your heart. Why? Because when you've had a car for thirty years you start to endow it with a certain character. You call it Esmeralda or Gertrude, you pat it and talk to it, polish its headlamps and treat it as if it's a person. So when it 'passes away' you feel, 'That's the end of Esmeralda (or Gertrude)!' and perhaps you want to keep her wing mirrors or windscreen wipers as a souvenir. But even the most fanatical car enthusiasts probably don't feel the same sort of heartbreak and emotion over the demise of their thirty-year-old jalopy as they would over the death of their brother, sister, mother or friend. You could say, 'Jim passed away. Let's keep his ears as a souvenir!' as if he were just another thing that had broken down, but you don't. We don't like to have skeletons around, do we? Would you like to have the skeleton of your Auntie Bessie hanging up in the sitting room? It would be socially unorthodox! It wouldn't be something you'd look on with fondness as you would look on a piece of a beloved object from which you've been parted. The bodies of people make a very different impression upon us. The one abiding impression we have of them is that they are living beings.

What do we mean when we say someone is dear to us? It means that we have a strong sense of their personality, their identity. If 100,000 Chinese people on the other side of the planet are wiped out in a flood, we think, 'That's terrible! That's sad. It's a tragedy, isn't it?' But it's not anywhere near as emotionally disturbing as when one person you know, who is dear to you, dies. Krishnamurti had an awakening experience when his brother died. He was in the cemetery and saw a woman grieving over her departed relative, and he realized that while he didn't feel any sorrow about that person's death, he felt his brother's death profoundly. So what's the difference between one body dying and another body dying? It's 'self', isn't it? With someone you know, including your own being, you have a very strong feeling of self. What

actually is that 'self'? It's a perception, a memory. You see someone you know and recognition arises, and with it there's an emotional quality of familiarity, a kind of cosiness, comfort or even excitement, thrill, delight. What triggers that? Is it something in them? Is it something they have? If it's in them, why is it that when someone they don't know sees them, they don't have the same feeling? In fact, our reaction is caused by something that we implant in those we know, that we project onto them – or we could say that *memory* projects it.

The function of memory, perception, is called *saññā* in Pali – a denoting, signifying, associative process. It creates and adds a dimension to someone's physical appearance, and that happens in our own mind. If right now you close your eyes and think of someone you know very well, you could probably get as clear a perception of them as if they'd walked into this room, sometimes even clearer. Even with someone who's dead you can get as clear an image, in terms of feeling, in terms of that *saññā* dimension, as if they were physically present here. In fact, sometimes it's easier to remember a dead person, because although this process of *saññā* is going on inside you, living people tend to not quite conform to your perception of them. They do to a certain extent, but sometimes they disappoint or let you down, or you misunderstand them. There's a slight credibility gap between your impression and perception of them, and their independent existence.

When two of you comment on a third person, you may say, 'He's so charming, witty and bright,' while the other person may say, 'He's inane, always coming out with his silly jokes. I wish he'd just shut up sometimes.' You're not seeing the same person. We create a personal world of other people in our own mind. Notice that. Notice the separation between the person you see, feel and experience, and what that person actually is. Sometimes the difference is very difficult to see because we are programmed to believe our own perceptions. We each have our own perceptions of another person, and often it's to those

perceptions that we actually relate. We are in love with and comforted by the familiarity of our own ideas, our own associations, our own mind-stuff.

Our ability to create a perception of a person and then project it onto them is very much caught up with the physical world, the physical appearance of things. When a person dies, our ability to project our perception of them is torn away from us. Then there's a feeling of aloneness, rift, separation and sorrow. If somebody just goes away, we still have that ability. We say, 'He's gone to New Zealand; he's doing this and that.' We feel they're still around somewhere and we don't feel so bereft. Our grief at their absence is not the same sort of grief as if they had died. We can notice this with our teacher Ajahn Chah, who I believe is still technically alive.⁸ His physical processes are probably still just about operating, but as regards being able to communicate, say anything, do anything, that's all finished. There's just a body and a sensory mechanism, and a tremendous amount of effort has gone into keeping him going, so that many people may have the perception: 'Ajahn Chah is alive.' What are they gaining from that perception? The ability to be inspired, to have the feeling that there is a wise master – even though, to all intents and purposes, in terms of what he can give, the wise master no longer exists. Just that perception is more comforting than to think, 'Ajahn Chah is dead.'

In meditation, we learn to liberate our perceptions, to see what they do, why they are so important to us and what kind of refuge we take in them. We can also regularly bring to mind perceptions of values that can be sustained through life, such as wisdom, purity, truth, virtue and awakening. We have Buddha-images as physical signs that we can use to stimulate the perception of what it is that we seek for ourselves in life: support, guidance, refuge, wisdom, compassion. Of course, these

8. Ajahn Chah died on 16 January 1992. This reflection was offered during the time he was still incapacitated with his stroke.

qualities also issue from our own minds when we learn to rise up to them. The two processes go together. Finding the refuge, that which is true, that which takes us beyond the sense of aloneness, separateness, losing and impermanence, is very much associated with the practice of fully recognizing and letting go of that which comes, changes and goes. With this recognition, there arises the consciousness or the mind that does not change: the Buddha which is blessed, which has serenity, truth, wisdom and virtue, which is compassionate and not dragged down by circumstances. When we experience this, our life – the sensory world and the people around us – can be a joyful life, a beautiful life, a life of great harmony.

To Brahmin Mogharāja, who asked how to escape death, the Buddha said, ‘Look upon the world as empty, Mogharāja, then the King of Death will not find you.’⁹ Look upon the world as empty of self, as void of self, then you will not be captured by death. Then your mind will not be drawn down with sorrow, and you will not feel the sense of separation and loneliness, the despair, fear and anxiety. ‘Looking upon the world as empty of self’ means that we see bodies as just ‘bodies’, forms as just ‘forms’, and we respond wisely to them. We don’t abuse or misuse them. We see people’s thoughts and actions, their desires and wishes, as empty of self, as just actions, as kamma, as cause and effect – rather than a self. Then we don’t feel a sense of irritation, despair or fascination, and our mind has a quality of empathy and balance.

So much of our sense of a ‘self’ is based not just upon the physical appearance of people’s bodies, but upon all that seems to make up the person: the way they do things, the way they look, the way they talk: ‘That’s her way of doing it.’ ‘He has that funny way of saying this.’ ‘That’s just typical of her.’ And the same for ourselves: ‘Oh, here I go again, that’s just like me. I like to do things this way. These are the things

9. Sutta Nipāta 5.15.

that I like. That's just my nature.' That's what we see as a person, isn't it? Someone's habitual actions and moods, the way they behave, what makes them tick ... these things mark the difference between a person and a corpse. Corpses don't do very much. We create our perception of a person around their kamma, their actions – whether it is ourselves or other people. We tend to see kamma as 'self'. For example, when our friend Joe comes into the room, we feel that it's not just a body coming into a room, it's Joe. Sooner or later Joe will do something and we find his actions familiar. We trust Joe, we know he isn't going to attack us or do anything weird. We have a feeling of comfort and happiness. Or maybe the opposite: if we perceive Joe as being violent, we may feel threatened that he might attack us. Or perhaps we have a perception of Joe being weird, so we think, 'Wait a minute and then Joe will do something weird. That will be really entertaining!'

Kamma is will, volition, desires, movements, inclinations, intentions, resistances and aversions: all the things that move, create and generate activity in terms of body, speech and mind. That's what we see as self; that's what self is made of. When you meditate you get a very close look at kamma as it works away in the mind, and you begin to recognize that 'It's not mine. It does things when I don't want it to. It goes this way and it goes that way.' There's a strange dislocation, a dissociation experience: 'My mind is not going the way I want it to. It's not mine any more.' For many of us that experience is quite unsettling – to experience what I take to be my 'self' as not mine, to lose control, to lose ownership and not be able to manage and possess and be in charge. We feel lost, all at sea, shipwrecked, uncertain. When we meditate, quite a lot of our effort – often heavily tainted with all kinds of wrong views – is in trying to get the mind under control and calmed down, to make it shut up and behave itself, to produce the kamma that *I* want, not some kind of incessant rambling.

Buddhist meditation is not about control and power, but about the wisdom that sees, that learns from whatever happens. We learn that this unsettling experience is not self: this is kamma. There is a kind

of dying that happens in meditation. Sometimes we even feel it as like dying because the very key point of what 'dying' means to us is no longer being able to create a self, not being able to establish an identity around kamma. So it is when somebody dies: their body is just lying there. They're not producing kamma any more. Where did they go? Whereas even if we don't see them for fifteen years, but we think they're living in Timbuktu, we may feel a sense of lack, but we don't feel grief as we would if they were stretched out right there in front of us, stark, cold, dead. Then our friend hasn't gone anywhere: here is his body. So what's gone? Their ability to produce kamma, and our ability to be able to project a 'self' onto their kamma.

Now, when we look within ourselves in our meditation, we begin to see this very same predicament. Doubts and worries come up – wanderings of the mind. First, if they're not too radical, just a little shimmy here and there, we might think, 'Well, I'll soon get it under control. I'm just settling down now. Dullness will disappear, the pain will probably pass away in a little while and I'll get into it.' And then more kamma comes up, deeper stuff. You find yourself feeling a kind of nameless frustration or sorrow. Emotions well up in the mind, strange stuff from goodness knows where. The Pandora's box is open. Many memories and moods seem to well up. It's definitely not under control! The difference between seeing this as 'me degenerating' and being able to recognize it as simply mental states arising and passing away is the sense of self. As long as the sense of self is there, fear, anxiety, suffering, conflict and struggle are there too.

To resolve this in terms of our own attitudes there has to be a kind of inner dying of the self: an ability to let it go, not to create an identity, not to control, achieve and be somebody – to let it all break up. It's through that kind of dying that the 'spirit' is regenerated or resurrected, because through that dying away, that letting go of kamma, of the mortal, the conditioned, there is recognition of that which is

not kamma. We recognize that which is not caused and created, which does not come and go, that which is not an identity or a person: the Buddha, the sublime, the transfigured, the bright, radiant, wise mind. That possibility is the opportunity of the spiritual path: to go through the realm of death, to go through that breakdown of self and arrive at the promised, the blessed, the pure 'land' where there is total love, wisdom, compassion, serenity and fearlessness.

What do religions say about death? What do they talk about in their various languages? They talk about passing through the gates of death and then arriving in heaven. Can you take that literally, that our bodies float up into the air and play harps on clouds? Are these bodies going to go somewhere else? Can this kammic personality go somewhere else? When we yearn for life after death, what do we really yearn for? That our self will not die, that our personality will go somewhere else. The real dying occurs when we recognize that the personality is not what we are, that it's just another envelope, another apparent prison from which we can break out, through the way we live, through meditation.

'Look on the world as void of self, then death will not catch you.'¹⁰ 'Learn to die before you die, so that when you die you won't die'¹¹ – the teachings of those who have understood. 'Life is a bridge; pass over it, do not build your house upon it. [...] The world is but for an hour; spend it in devotion.'¹² 'Resurrection'. Why are these images brought up? What do they mean? Are they all just fantasies and blind hopes? Why do they spark something in us, some half-remembered intuition? Could it be possible that this process of birth, life and death, which we can only see in very personal terms, as a one-off, is actually a multiple process, that there are many births, many deaths? Just as in our mind-

10. Sutta Nipāta 5.15.

11. Epigram inscribed in a Greek Orthodox Christian monastery in Mount Athos.

12. Indian proverb and traditional Sufi saying attributed to Jesus.

consciousness there are many births and deaths in a day, could it possibly be that we go through this life-and-death cycle time and time again, until we have learned the teachings of birth, ageing and death, the teachings of kamma?

In the monastery, we frequently chant: 'I am the owner of my kamma, born of my kamma, heir to my kamma.' It means we are responsible for our kamma because it's what we do, what we say and what we think. It's where we create self, where our ambitions, our desires, our obsessions rest and roost. It's where our self is born and where it dies. It gets no further than kamma. Seeing this, the wise refrain from creating more obsession with the self; and we begin to do this with meditation. Then there is arising and passing away, comings, goings, endless shuffling around in the sensory plane, but there's no 'death'. There's none of that despair, loss and confusion.

In your meditation, consider these things. As you practise, look first at 'wanting' – ordinary old legitimate wanting, blameless wishes and inclinations: wanting to be happy, wanting not to be miserable, wanting to know, wanting to feel comfortable. Then look at all the blameworthy inclinations, the wild, crazy desires. Look at all the things that you shouldn't do. Contemplate desire without judgement, without belief or justification, so that you see it as just a movement, a constant twitching and thrashing around, like a fish in a net – the wanting to get away, to get out, to have and to become.

Look at the desire to become something. That doesn't mean wanting to become the next prime minister or even a Buddha, but that you want to go from the state that you're experiencing now to another state that you're imagining. That's what we mean by 'becoming'. In momentary terms, it comes down to just that much. It's not that you shouldn't have any desires at all. This is not a puritanical attack on desires. It's a letting go of them to the point where you contemplate them, rather

than forming views about them, and you can see that movement away and the suffering involved in the yearning, the craving. In meditation, the longer you stay in this position of watchfulness, the more your mind can create the most wonderful possibilities of how good it could be ... somewhere else! You'll be surprised how rich and saturated with wonderful opportunities the world seems! Even simply walking out of the room could seem like the glorious possibility of going to a place where everyone experiences boundless freedom and light! Why is it that when you are outside the monastery you think, 'I'm fed up with London, it gets on my nerves. I want to go to a Buddhist monastery!', but when you're here you think, 'This is so sterile and boring, I want to leave!'? It's because desire is the creator of the world.

So be aware of desire. Watch it, and rather than let it create a world, just keep coming back to the edge of it, the dying away. The essential dying process is to endeavour, with patience, faith, love, surrender, sheer tenacity and resolve, to let go, to relinquish, to abandon the possibilities of the future, to die to the present moment. When we die to the present we are born to the timeless, the eternal. When your mind acquires that skill, that faith, that willingness, you see that everything is all right – physical feelings are all right, mental stuff is all right. They're not something that you would particularly relish or find disappointing; they're just the way they are. That sounds so bland and neutral, but you can't really put it into words. It's that sense of great ease, relief and freedom which comes from realizing that it's all manageable, everything's all right: sickness is all right, pain is all right, even death is all right, because what we needed to learn has been learned, what needed to be done has been done, and then there is no more becoming and projection onto the world.

Look at that in your meditation practice. Look at the desire to achieve something in meditation, the desire to conquer and acquire, or the aversion, which is a kind of negative desire, the wanting to get away

from or not to bother. When desire becomes frustrated you can experience a limp state, a sort of sullen, sulky feeling in the mind, but that's not cessation of desire: you're still creating negative kamma with it. In meditation practice we're putting forth willingness, aspiration and effort. We meditate not out of desire but out of a kind of love. We cultivate a supreme, unsentimental loving quality toward our wilfulness, desires, irritations, resentments, resistances and moodiness. It's there, present, encompassing them all.

Then, in the passing away of self, in its dying away, we learn to know the great heart, the great brightness, the great freedom. Life teaches us to be deathless, to rise above self. That's the fulfilment of the human predicament. Just within what we're given, with the system of having physical bodies and desires, we have all we need. We have the perfect enlightenment kit, the perfect key to deathlessness. It's just this one, your one, not anybody else's. This is your Dhamma door.

Walking Meditation

When you do walking meditation, focus your attention on walking along a path of about twenty to thirty paces in a straight line. You walk to one end of the path, stop, let everything go and quieten the mind until it's clean again. Then you turn around and walk back again. In this way, you can witness the restlessness, the feeling of the mind, the mood, and see it change. It's a kind of cleansing process.

You walk, stop, breathe out, breathe in, turn around and walk back again. You can let that be almost like a summary of your life. It's no more pointless than anything else in life, really. What is life? You start at one point, you get to another – from birth to death. It's another pursuit and it's cyclical. When you're hungry and you eat, do you think that's pointless? Ultimately it is, really, because after you've eaten you'll only get hungry again and have to eat again. It's like walking on a path: you just go backwards and forwards, and backwards and forwards ... But when desire is involved, the desire always says, 'Oh, this is really nice, you're getting something now. It's useful. This is good, this is you! You're increasing, developing.' In fact, though, life is just like walking backwards and forwards on a path.

In terms of desire, walking meditation is frustrating, but it leads to wisdom. It brings into your mind a possibility of being free from circumstances and simply taking one moment at a time in awareness and selflessness: dying to it, giving up to it, opening to it.

Mealtime Reflection

During a retreat, the mealtime is an important time for reflection. I think this aspect of practice is not so much talked about, emphasized or developed. We talk more about mindfulness of breathing and concentration, but reflection is an important part of developing the wisdom faculty, which is necessary for true cultivation. Otherwise, the very attitudes with which we concentrate and train our mind can be either distorted or not really encouraged, not enhanced, not fulfilled. The wisdom teachings are really helpful for cultivating the right view and the right attitude, and a lot of this is about reflection. This retreat is particularly helpful because it's based on reflection rather than on a technique.

When we consider the requisites which are actually necessary for our lives – food, clothing, shelter, warmth, protection and so on – we see that we are powerless beings, vulnerable creatures. A little baby is one of the most pathetic, vulnerable creatures in the world. All it can really do is hold on, and that's the one thing that we develop all our life: this ability to hold on. The kamma-forming tendency to grasp, to cling, is right there from birth. It's often only at death that there's a kind of release.

We can see that the kamma of incarnation, of being born, having a physical form in a sensory circumstance, having animal bodies, means that we constantly take things from the environment. We constantly *need*. It's not a matter of greed – though it often can be – but just for basic existence we have to keep breathing in air, eating food, drinking water, chopping down trees to make houses, digging up mud from the river to make bricks, burning up coal for warmth. We are constant, enormous consumers. Life in a physical form is a process of consumption. We take so much, physically use up so much, but we can pare it down to what is really needed, and not wanted just for the sake of gratification,

amusement or entertainment. It's skilful cultivation to know what is necessary, what is suitable, and to live lightly.

Although much of our consumption is not intentional – we're not aware of what we're doing – we're still adopting certain attitudes. We expect a lot. We don't tend to live in harmony, in cooperation with our environment. Instead, we expect it to suit us and we ask a lot from it. Of course, our needs are part of this process, but we should consider that as we take what we need from the environment, we also have the responsibility to give back to the environment. It's a system of interdependence. Human beings can't give back very much in terms of material things, but what we can give back are things like wisdom, love, compassion and virtue. The trees on this earth take in water, sunlight, trace elements, and then they give out oxygen to the earth. They help to control the weather. That's the part they play in the system. We can't sprout leaves or contribute as they do, but we don't have to feel useless. We can learn to live on just what is really necessary and then dedicate our lives to purity, to bringing forth our capacities as human beings. Physically we're very limited, but in terms of consciousness, conscientiousness, caring and skill, our capacities are far greater than those of a tree or an animal.

These are the kinds of reflections to bring to mind upon receiving requisites such as food, rather than just taking them for granted: 'May whatever I receive today allow me to live my life skilfully.'

Learning from the Bitter Gifts of Life

This system of offering and receiving food, of having things given, is a beautiful experience. One receives the food as an offering and somehow, because it's offered, by that very gesture, that very attitude, it is blessed. It becomes special, sacred. This is not about desire or self; it's about the beauty of *dāna*, of giving, of generosity. One of the most constant blessings I have experienced in my life as a monk is being the recipient of *dāna*. By '*dāna*' I mean the generosity of giving, not the gift itself. I don't see being a monk as a life where you think, 'I'm going to get this, I'm going to get that.' Sometimes the offerings are very humble, but when one is the recipient of a generous spirit, the generosity is not impaired by the humbleness of the gift. It's purely dependent on the attitude of giving and the attitude of allowing oneself to receive.

This attitude is something to attune to, and not just regarding food. We begin our reflection around such simple things, but then we can consider the whole of this life. Did you make it? Did you create this world? We tend to think along the lines of, 'This is my life, I do what I like!' or 'I've done this and that through my work,' but in fact, we are given this opportunity, this birth. Did you decide to be born? Did you create a body? Did you engender consciousness? Isn't it the other way around? Who owns this life, this opportunity to be conscious, to experience, to have a human birth, to have a mind that can reflect? These are all gifts, aren't they? The sense of self is a pirate, a hijacker. It says, 'This is me, my life, mine,' but actually, all of this life is a gift, an offering.

We need to extend our understanding, our humility and our receptivity to appreciate that all the accidents, fortunes and misfortunes are gifts

offered to us as opportunities for awakening. You're offered the kind of mind you need to work with, the kind of body, the circumstances of your life. You might think, 'Why does this happen to me? Why is my mother this way? Why ...? Why ...? Why ...?' Life may not offer what you want, but suppose you see it as an experiment. What happens if you see it all as having been dealt out to you as an opportunity to develop wholesome qualities of mind, to work against this self-view, to combat the laziness, the indulgence, the obsessiveness, the self-centredness and impatience that drag you down again and again into degeneration and despair? With this approach, you can even look at sickness, pain and separation from the loved as opportunities for learning. Through these experiences you can learn about the quality of wanting, asking, demanding, consuming, expecting – all that self-focus. You could say it's a hard lesson, but these gifts of Dhamma don't always come with nice wrappings around them. The process of liberation is all-embracing. The goal is sublime, supreme, so to realize it we have to consider, reflect and use our wisdom.

Don't believe in self-view and the way it always tries to limit you: 'I can't ... I don't ... I mustn't ... I don't want ... I can't stand ...'. You can *always* stand it; you don't want to, that's all. We don't want to bother, but we can. When you learn from the hardships and frustrations of life, when you approach them and take full responsibility for them, in the end you feel grateful, because suddenly you realize you're not the limited self that you thought you were. You're actually much grander and larger. I think this is relevant for meditation, for spiritual practice. As you realize that all that negativity, displeasure and dissatisfaction are coming from the frustrated self-view, you begin to have the aspiration to continue through the difficulties. You realize that it's time to encounter the difficulties and face up to them: 'This is what I'm given, this is the way it is. There isn't any other way, so this must be exactly the right time to learn from this experience.'

I'm certainly very grateful for life as I live it, with the frustrations, restrictions and limitations of living in this monastic form. Most of it hasn't been pleasant. As a form, it has almost always been either unpleasant or neutral, tedious to irritating, but it has taught me not to indulge, not to be moody, not to bear grudges, not to linger. It has taught me many good things, like being grateful and not being selfish, which I don't think I would have learned if I hadn't had such an unyielding teacher as the Buddha's Dhamma-Vinaya.

Life, with its events and its timing, is a mystery to me. Whenever I'm about to go on retreat, I think, 'Now, I can calm down, have a nice space and sort things out.' But I usually find that a few days before the retreat begins, things I have to do, think about and worry over suddenly start coming up. I could think, 'Why is everything always messing up my practice? It's a conspiracy!' And it actually is a conspiracy: it's a conspiracy from benevolent forces who are saying, 'It looks like he's trying to get away again. Time to face up to this one! Indulging in escapist mentality is not going to get you very far!'

We have to open to the process of kamma and penetrate right into it, rather than trying to wriggle around it. By doing so, we are noble and honourable. We compensate for all the things we've taken from others and from the planet. We're using the raw materials of life to produce something that will be of immense benefit, not just to ourselves, but to all beings. The world is very much in need of wise, compassionate, selfless beings.

Reflecting on Kamma

Considering the significance of death from the spiritual perspective of awareness gives us a way of appreciating this natural, normal process. We can see it more fully as being a teacher. It can take us away from the appearance of belonging to this physical world, which is a place of struggle and demand, a place of consuming and being consumed by the forces of nature. Then we begin to see that there are several signs involved in death. One of them is impermanence, the fact that things come, change and go. This is a challenge to the instinct for security, possessing and controlling. Another sign is the sense of separation, which challenges our ways of implanting our ideas and views in the world. We tend to see the world as belonging to us, as fitting into our ways of thinking. For example, we have a very strong need for company, for the perception of something 'out there' to bounce off of, for a response. Death challenges this.

Why is there this search for security? Why this need to belong to something, to be held by something? The drive towards security and belonging comes from the basic self-view, which is a separative view. Rather than seeing ourselves simply as physically organic processes, self-view tends to make us see ourselves as set apart. We want to be different, to be a defined individual. We want to be able to get away from things we don't like, to be able to choose, decide and determine. We don't want to just be part of the flow of nature. Once that bias towards being an individual and having one's own way is established in the mind, there's always going to be a sense of separation. Illogically, we attempt to overcome the separation by increasing the sense of self and trying to make it take over the world. As a result, the forces of nature become enemies or problems.

One aim of religion is to find the universal connection, to end the separation. In practising Dhamma we are looking for refuge, but we

don't end the sense of separation or find refuge by trying to make things go our way, or by finding things that suit or gratify us. Rather, it's by letting go of the search for self through gratification that we realize the universal connection, our true refuge. When we contemplate the mind, we see that things arise and pass away in it. There is complete continuity and interdependence of thought, feeling, sound, silence, etc. Whenever we stop resisting, craving, grasping, rejecting and favouring the phenomena we experience, there's a sense of the wholeness of everything. The darkness and the light, the movement and the stillness, the pleasant and the painful – all are part of the seasons of life. They are the colours, the flavours of this sensory world. We realize the wholeness.

The meditation teachings talk about impermanence, but what is it that knows impermanence? The more continuously we recognize separation, impermanence, change and mortality, the more this recognition sees these things as part of a whole. Because there is passing away, there is arising; because there is birth, there is death. They all fit together. You can't say that things arise permanently or permanently pass away. They have a wave-like quality to them, they rise and fall. Our tendency is to look for the constantly new and arising. We look for something else to happen, something to go to, something to have. There is a strong bias against seeing things pass: that's not so exciting.

Notice the seasons of the year. When you contemplate autumn and winter in your mind you can find that they are calming. There's something slightly melancholy about autumn: the leaves going to ochre, brown and yellowy-gold colours, the foliage falling away, the skies louring. In winter the trees are bare and there are fewer animals around. It's quiet and still; there's a certain sadness. Then in springtime everything suddenly seems to be bursting. We see bright colours, growth, movement of creatures and things showing life; it's attractive.

Then comes summer, and then again the fading away of the autumn and winter: on and on like that – the cycles of birth and death.

You can contemplate the seasons and see that because we are incarnate (having a physical form) the whole system of our life is bound up with birth. There is a strong instinctive inclination towards 'birth', towards this pull of wanting to become somebody, to do this or to get that, and a more stilling process with 'death', with the ending of phenomena. We like babies; we're interested in growth, youth and progress, rather than decline and fading out. There's a strong fascination with sexuality and procreation. They're magnetic, attractive, interesting and exciting. To most people, the idea of living a celibate life would seem rather bleak, loveless and without feeling, because of the way we are programmed. And yet autumn is one of the most valuable times of the year, with its seeds and fruits; winter is a time of calm and rest. If it were spring all the time, animals would burn themselves out. If you tried to live as though you're nineteen for fifty years, your body would wear out, your system wouldn't be able to handle it. You're not supposed to have youth and birth permanently. Your system is not built for it. It's perfectly built not only for birth, but also for ageing, and in due course, for death. Death is like giving it all back, resting from incarnation, letting go of the elements – the time to offer the body back to the elements.

Birth and youth are about separateness, physically and psychologically. Before we're born we're just a part of our mother's body, but birth is an act of separation. When we're young we're still very much an appendage of somebody, but as we grow up from being a little baby into being a child, then a teenager and so on, there comes an increasing sense of the need for a separate ego. We want to cut the connection, the umbilical cord, and to have our own way. That's the process of growing up, with its struggles and rebellions. Then, as we grow older, there gradually comes a need to no longer be separate, but to find companionship, settle and be stable. And finally, in old age, our interest in things fades and we go into rest again.

So if there is a problem, it's really birth, not death. You attach to birth, you're trying to be separate, and at the same time you fear separation. You want to be an individual, and yet you want other people and things to belong to you, to your separateness. But when you contemplate the energy of birth, the desire to become and to own, this constant wanting to be born into this or born into that, you can also see the frustration that goes with it.

Another learning process involved with reflecting on death is looking at the process of kamma. What is the result of your life? In the autumn, what fruit is there? You probably feel a sense of regret when you think of unskilful things you have said or done, but you can also experience regret as a result of wrong view. When there is attachment to birth, you always feel there could have been wonderful things to do that you haven't done, or possibilities and potentialities that you haven't realized. You can think negatively of things that have been disappointing, frustrating or difficult in your life, and thus you experience a kind of regret or sadness about yourself. This is the result of self-view, of kamma, of activities based on self, when life is about getting, having, experiencing, becoming, doing and so on. We tend to measure ourselves by these things.

The nature of life's energies is to change and fade, and reflection on death gives a chance to recognize all those forces and have a change of heart. We can consider that one of life's most important abilities is to be able to put things down, to let them go, to let them drop like the leaves in autumn, rather than always be searching for a new spring, a new arising. Autumn is a truly important season, the time of fruits and new seeds, the time when the results of birth can be tasted and re-sown. In the autumn, in the dying, in the changing, we put aside the unskilful kamma, the grasping, the anger, the greed and the restlessness – all the hot, rising energies that go hand in hand with me/mine attitudes – not by rejecting them, but with regret and forgiveness. This is a wonderful preparation for conscious dying.

Dying and death evoke stillness, letting go, liberation from conditions and going back to the source, returning home to the refuge – rather than being thrown out in the cold, torn away from the womb of life. Even just as a physical process, death itself is often experienced as peaceful, as letting go. People who have had near-death experiences speak of them as being experiences of great joy and light, of great warmth and at-home-ness, a great blessedness, even transcendence. Sometimes they speak of their reluctance to be dragged back onto this shore again. Dying is the critical time when we have to undergo a change of heart that suits its season in our life. From birth, becoming, separation and the sense of self, we move to cessation, harmony, being at one with things, witnessing kamma rather than creating any more.

It's often said that at the moment of death, much of life is recalled and reviewed. This also happens in meditation. When the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree just before his enlightenment, he reviewed his past lives. You can imagine the enormous power the Buddha must have had! Trying to review just one life is enough of a carnival, so to review many lives ...! Reviewing this life is not usually something you do deliberately; it just happens. What does that mean? It means that the traces of kamma don't end with the action itself; they stay after you've said your word, after you've done your action. Even with mental kamma, especially if you have strong, habitual, obsessive thought patterns, the traces are there. The seeds of everything we've done, said and thought are left in the mind. In meditation and in the autumn of our life, when our seeds ripen, when our fruits fall off the tree, a lot of this stuff comes back to consciousness.

Many people have a habit of constantly seeking birth, becoming and separateness. They are so attached to ego trips of one kind or another that they manage to keep this habit going right through until the last twitches of life. At the age of eighty-five they're still into birth, becoming, getting and doing, so they don't really have enough time

to attend consciously to the dying process. The result will be very deep kammic impressions, which will strongly affect the creation of the next life. The seed of a fruit regenerates a plant dependent upon what type of plant that fruit has grown on. However, if we meditate on kamma, we begin to liberate the sense of self that is created around it. We contemplate the actions, the moods, the feelings that come up, and allow them to speak to us without justifying, blaming, criticizing or worrying. We let them have their say. This is the clearing of kamma. We listen to its fruit and allow it to be reviewed, because if it's left unattended it will regenerate. So meditation is like a conscious dying process, a dying away of self-view.

The Buddha's teaching about suffering is a guide. It's a reminder that the sense of annoyance, frustration, loss or uncertainty that we may experience is not something to be shoved away, but something to be understood. It's when you review your past experiences in meditation, when you reflect on kamma, that you begin to understand it. The unenlightened being feels, 'I shouldn't suffer! I don't deserve this!' For example, when I fall ill, I think, 'Oh, how annoying!' When someone says something unkind to me I think, 'That's not fair!' When my car breaks down I get out and kick the tyres, 'This shouldn't happen to me, I want to go somewhere!' When failure or disappointment comes it can seem like an affront, something that's gone wrong with life, but the being who wishes to awaken realizes, 'There's no reason on earth why things should go my way.' These difficulties are opportunities to have a change of heart, to let go of the impatience and the demands, to purify kamma, so that we're using our life to make amends for grasping, impatience and selfishness. And of course, the fruit that comes from this is a deepened purity of heart.

Consider: what if this is your last day? Think of the people you know who have died. What does that mean to you? Is there something you wish you had said or done – or wish you hadn't said or done? What is the

kamma involved with other people? What is the kamma involved with yourself? Do you have a sense of loss, shame, regret or incompleteness? What do you feel you have left undone, within yourself or with others? If you consider these things with a sincere wish to resolve them and let them go, if you honestly regret them, you'll find that the effect of that kamma ceases.

It used to be considered very important socially to have proper mourning, proper rites and rituals, but I don't think people know much about this nowadays. Funerals are often so abrupt. Rites and rituals enable you to recollect the person who has died. You let their presence sit in your mind. Then you search: 'Is there something that needs to be said internally? Is there something to regret?' The mourning time is an occasion to work those things out, to resolve them in consciousness, not a time to feel sorry for yourself. Regret is not about feeling sorry, it's about understanding the roots of unskilful action. We fully recognize that we have done an unskilful action, we open up to it with complete honesty, and then we forgive ourselves and resolve to start anew.

The reflection on death can form part of each day, viewed as a lifespan of one day. What do you take from one day to the next? At the end of the day, do you have a chance to stop and look around? What is left lingering? Are there grudges, irritations? What kind of demands have you made on the world? Have you used others for your own welfare? Have you done things that you regret? In meditation, we honestly recognize all that, we bring it to the level of 'Buddha'. Rather than going into the emotional plane of wringing our hands and feeling guilty, we consciously look at those things and use them as another chance to understand what is unskilful, and then we vow to begin again. This is redemption. This is what life can teach us.

Every evening in the monastery we chant: '*Kāyena vācāya va cetasā vā. Buddhē kukammaṃ pakataṃ mayā yaṃ. Buddhō paṭiggaṇhatu accayaṃ taṃ.*

Kālantare saṁvaritum va buddhe. (‘Whatever kamma I’ve created in terms of body, speech and mind that has been offensive or wrong in terms of wisdom, in terms of Buddha, I sincerely regret so that I may try in future to act more skilfully.’) We recite this referring to the Buddha, then the Dhamma and then the Sangha. Of course, you can just mumble the words as devotional trappings before you start the practice, but if you know what they mean and what they’re pointing to, you can take this little section of a chant as a basis for reflection.

‘All that which has been wrong in terms of Buddha’ refers to every time you were heedless, inattentive or careless. Maybe you were not directly malicious, but you let the mind run recklessly away. Where does the mind go when we’re inattentive and heedless? It goes back to *me* and *mine*, doesn’t it? When there’s no other program running, that’s the default setting. We may think we haven’t done anything particularly wrong – we were just being normal. But ‘being normal’ all too often means being selfish, self-conscious, greedy and grasping, in ways that we might condone or that are acceptable socially, but not acceptable in terms of ‘Buddha’. Whether socially approved or not, they leave traces. Careless action and speech such as offending, gossiping, quarrelling, embarrassing people, lying, exaggerating, using people, sexual carelessness, carelessness involved with drugs and drink, heedlessly killing creatures, can leave very strong kammic traces. Even just carelessness in terms of mind leaves its traces: when we let the mind wallow, obsess, linger, flap around loosely, be sullen or grudging, instead of training and supporting it.

These are things we want to recognize consciously in that reflection at the end of the day: ‘This is the end of the day, this is the sign of death. If I die tonight, what do I leave undone? What am I taking with me?’ Then we can consciously recognize and sincerely regret and forgive our carelessness and heedlessness, so that hopefully the next morning there’ll be a little more of a sense of knowing what responsibility

means. Responsibility is not a heavy, guilt-ridden, anxiety-inducing thing. It's the sense of being careful, of caring for things. We care for our mind, are careful with it; we don't let it run into the mire. It's a precious thing, an enlightenment vehicle. It's not something we should just use to enhance self with. It's a beautiful, sensitive instrument, but we often use it merely for greed, hatred, ambition and grudges.

'Kāyena vācāya va cetasā vā. Dhamme kukammaṃ pakataṃ mayā yaṃ. Dhammo paṭiggaṇhatu accayantāṃ. Kālantare saṃvaritum va dhamme.' ('By body, speech and mind, whatever wrong action done in terms of Dhamma, in terms of truth, I wish to recognize and regret it so that in the future there may be more skilful practice in terms of what is right.') What is right is not 'what suits me' but what is proper, what is for the welfare of the whole system of which we're part: our family, our society, our world, our planet. We ask ourselves, 'What is right?' Rather than seeing things always from the viewpoint of what suits us, we follow the right way: right view, right action, right meditation – the Eightfold Path.

In terms of Sangha, the reflection means honestly beginning again with the sense of using this human form for its highest ends, directing its energies towards what is best for the welfare of all. In this way, we release ourselves from the bitterness of death, so that death becomes simply rest.

In your meditation consider again what you are carrying around. Consider also the demise of others to whom you were close. Probably all of us have been touched by death in some way or other. What does that mean to you? What does that departed person mean to you? What kind of response does that thought bring up into your mind? Perhaps things you remember about them, things you have not resolved, things you've not forgiven them for or things for which you'd like to be forgiven. Bring up the image of that person in your mind, and let your mind

forgive them and ask them for forgiveness. Thus, you're learning to use the sign of death as an antidote for birth, rather than an antagonist to it. Death is the remedy, the chance for us to purify some of the excesses, some of the wrong views and recklessness of birth, becoming and self.

Honouring Life and Each Other

Take the time to allow the mind to touch and open up to the perception of death. As I have explained, death is a perceptual experience in the mind. We're conscious that bodies die; we can recognize this as a cessation of physiological processes. It's something we can objectively witness: degeneration, decay. But death as the sign, as the messenger (*devadūta*), is a perception which gives us a feeling of 'no future', of separation, of not being able to hold on and control. Thus, it jars with the perceptions based around the sense of self as the one who manages things, who is going to do something, who feels he owns things and is secure.

You can notice this teaching in small ways. What happens when your body breaks down even temporarily? If you break your leg or your organs mutiny and refuse to function, what's your response to your body? You probably have a sense of estrangement. When the body is working well and we're able to use it to follow our wishes and aims, we perceive it as being 'me', but when it breaks down, it suddenly becomes 'a thing' to be dealt with. When it's ill, it's an 'ill body': it's that damn leg, that rotten pancreas, lousy colon, filthy lung, stupid ear ... It's no longer 'me'. It becomes something from which we're inclined to stand back. The jarring of that perception itself is not usually received with awareness. We tend to respond to it in an ignorant way; we don't learn from it. We still assume that 'we are', 'we should have' and 'things should be *me* and *mine* and able to be the way I want them to be', so sickness often isn't a teacher for us. Instead we rebel against it, ignore it, curse it and feel that *me* and *mine* are being unfairly treated.

Death is the final teacher, which says, 'Stop!' You can't justify it, you can't make deals with it and you can't really complain about it. Death is beyond all that. It doesn't fit into any values: it isn't just the 'bad

people' who die. Death can always come up with surprises. I heard of somebody who died of hiccups. It took him quite a while to die of that wear and tear on the system. So next time you start to have hiccups, worry! Somebody told me about a woman who choked on a peach skin. She was eating a peach and a fragment of peach skin lodged the wrong way. Usually when you swallow something the wrong way, you cough and splutter, and that shakes it out. But in this case the peach skin went down in such a way that it didn't come out, so she died, choked on it. I heard of a young woman on a bicycle who was dragged under one of these thirty-two-ton juggernaut lorries, which ran right over her abdomen and squashed it out, and she recovered! They first managed to patch up her bones, and then they got the guts working but couldn't get them back in her body. So her guts were in a little bag outside her body for a while, until eventually they managed to pop them inside again. She even had children afterwards. These examples show how death finds ways to puzzle our sense of reason by its decisions of why and how it should come, and whom it should come to.

We can make ourselves gloomy about death, but it's not always gloomy. Sometimes it's absurd. Even if you respond to it in awareness, it remains a kind of mystery. The only thing you can know about it is that it will always trip up any position, any self-view that you adopt. Some people live to be 110 years, others don't make it past a week. People die of the oddest things, in grand ways and pathetic ways.

The perception of death – the recognition of our mortality – is very valuable. It keeps us on our toes. It's saying, 'Don't take things for granted. Don't even take the next moment for granted.' Life is a mystery, a precious moment-by-moment mystery that stops in a moment. We can take the presence of others so much for granted. Even if we don't always think like that, we perceive them as 'my person': my friend, my neighbour, my wife. They are imbued with our needs, what we see them as and what we expect from them. They carry our hopes,

our sense of security and belonging. They give us a sense of order in the world. When we allow this habit to cover everybody around us, we become very careless and heedless in the way we relate to others. We don't really respond to them, but only to what we perceive or imagine them to be. The recollection of death helps us to live more mindfully and carefully in relation to others.

My first personal contact with this teacher happened when I was about thirteen or fourteen. A friend of mine was killed in a car crash, and I would go to that place where he was in my mind, that memory of him, and there was this strange numb feeling. Years later, when my father died, the experience was far deeper. At that time, I had been a monk for a couple of years and I had been doing a lot of meditation. When he died there was a profound sense of appreciation of that person for the way he had treated me in his actual life, for all the generous support he had given me, but also a kind of mystery: 'Who was he really?' I don't think I actually knew that person. I related to his role as my father and to my perceptions of him, but I never fully took the opportunity to go beyond them. The qualities that my father represented in my perception weren't related to dying. They were about security, strength, a refuge, a person who helped, the one who looked after me, someone to rely on, someone stable ... and then he was gone! And I felt that shock. Then I realized that he wasn't just my father, he was also a real human being, and that seemed to profoundly enrich my appreciation of him.

Since you were born, your father has always been your father, so you tend to assume that he is a man whose sole function is to be your father; that's what he was born for. He's there to hand out the pocket money and to provide free food and lodging. He is someone you can fall back on, a refuge-being. You don't think like this but it's very much the mood, the emotion that comes with your perception of him.

Perception is not thought, it's a certain set of almost subconscious assumptions, our way of recognizing things. So when I would see

my father, a certain kind of feeling would arise, a subtle feeling. For example, when you see someone, you may feel that 'He is superior to me' or 'He is lesser than me' or 'He is someone I feel a bit apprehensive about' or 'He is someone with whom I feel a sense of trust and comfort in myself'. These are what we call perceptions. They're not rational; you don't think them. They're about kamma, about the attitudes that are created through habitually reacting and relating in a certain series of ways. And as long as you live in terms of that kamma, then all you ever really experience are these kammic perceptions. You see authority-figures, comfort-figures, need-figures, excitement-figures, fantasy-figures, basically people who take on, for you, the fulfilment of the need you have to be somebody. Fathers and mothers particularly are seen in that way.

Once I stopped seeing my father only as 'my father', and instead viewed him as simply a man, I could realize that he had done an amazing number of good things. He must have had his own worries, doubts, headaches, problems, interests, fantasies, hopes, dreams and so on, and yet he did all this 'fathering thing'. When I learned to appreciate him as a human being rather than just as my 'old man', as a kind of model, I also respected him more fully. I felt a great sense of respect, honour, reverence and gratitude for that person and how I wished that I could have seen him in that way before, when it was still possible to have related to the person and not only to his role as my father.

Of course, it was always certain he would die. Death is the most obvious fact there is, we all know that. Why don't we take it into consideration? Instead of seeing each other as surrogates for our needs, people we bounce off of, we should value the mystery of each other's presence in our lives and drop some of the perceptual projections we create about others. With the practice of mindfulness and attentiveness, we see things as they are. We let our perceptions of a person die before the person dies, so that we have an opportunity to live fully

and mindfully in relation to that person in each present situation, rather than merely being caught up in the nether world of fantasy and projection. ‘Mindfulness is the path to life; heedlessness is the path to death. The mindful do not die; the heedless are as if dead already.’¹³ Through heedlessness, our experience is one of deadness, of inertia, of not having access to anything that is original, new, nurturing and regenerative. When we’re heedless we create a world out of our own regurgitated habits, needs, wants, hopes and fantasies, and then we project it onto others without realizing it. We tend to see and relate to each other in a blind and programmed way.

Ironically enough, death can actually wake us up from heedlessness, if we respond to it with awareness. We can investigate the feelings that arise when we are truly aware of it and recognize the transitory nature of this life, rather than taking it all for granted. How poor our lives would be if this physical realm were an immortal place! How destitute it would be! How dead it would be! Imagine if we were all immortal: we wouldn’t care about anything any more, would we? There wouldn’t be any sense of a need to do anything. What would there be to do? There would be no sense of caring for another. Why would it matter? If there’s nothing to be lost, what is there to be? What would there be to live for? If things were permanent, why bother to appreciate them? But although we’re not immortal, and even though beings are dying every day – it’s the most obvious, normal thing to do – it still comes as a profound surprise when someone near to us dies. Although we don’t think we’re immortal, our perceptions and attitudes almost suggest we do. We don’t appreciate the present moment because we believe there’s always going to be another one, so it doesn’t matter. We don’t take stock, we don’t value. We don’t put full attention into what we’re doing, because we believe that it’s just ‘one of an endless succession of actions’ and ‘tomorrow is another day’ and so on.

13. Dhammapada, verse 21.

When my father died, the need for transcendence, for a real spirituality, suddenly became very clear to me. At that time, I had been practising meditation for a couple of years, and my motivation and ideas about meditation were basically that it was doing something so as to try to get the mind into a reasonable shape, to straighten and tidy it up. I was trying to quell a sense of disillusionment or world-weariness, to identify the problem, the sense of doubt or dis-ease. I was trying to find a way in which I could make my mind brighter, clearer and sharper, so that I could go about doing what I needed to do with a refreshed and bright mind. However, the death of my father made me recognize that there were things which no amount of improving conditions would change. Nothing would change that sense of loss, of separation; nothing could stop us losing that which we love. Then it became very important to me to not just live on the level of manipulating conditions by means of meditation or other techniques, in order to improve and appreciate them, but instead to learn to understand truth. What is human life about? What are we here for? What is this mystery? What is this strange life that can be suddenly removed? What are relationships about? I also understood that all these things were beyond my power of thinking. The power of life and death, the true order of the universe, was way beyond my grasp, beyond my ability to make it go my way. I realized the need to bow deeply to whatever that law is and not to try to make it work my way but to make myself work its way, because life and death are a mystery.

Consider that for each of us in our lives there will be a time when we say 'goodbye' to somebody and we won't see them again – because they (or we) have died. There'll be a time when you say, 'Look after yourself. Bye now!' – the kind of thing you say to the milkman, to the children going to school: 'See you later. Bye!' But there won't be a 'later'. How easy it is to assume that there'll be a 'later' for us. We're so certain that we can order and control our lives, but the more we bear death in mind, the more we realize the need for something in us to learn

to obey life, to listen to life, rather than trying to run it and make it follow our wishes. We have to learn to respect and revere life in its momentary nature, to make each moment count, and not to cheapen it or squander it, not just through violence against it, but in the half-hearted, inconsequential millstream of it all. We're very rarely fully with an experience, another person or with ourselves. It's always: 'Hi! Hello! Bye! See you later! Yeah! Right!'

The presence of death helps us to honour and respect life, to develop a true sense of reverence for it. That doesn't mean thinking life is always a positive experience, but seeing it as all worthy of attention – appreciating that all its aspects have their own quality. As a result, our wilfulness, impetuosity, compulsiveness and bossiness die away. When we can respect life and genuinely be alive, there is a peaceful, clear and bright heart. We're no longer heedlessly churning out projections and ambitions, living in the past or the future, and taking things for granted. When you live with a clear mind, you have the sensitivity which makes it possible to respond with compassion. So death also teaches us great compassion. It's the leveller. It's the one thing that we all meet on the physical plane. It's our only certainty. We're all brothers and sisters, fellow travellers on the way of life, and all the differences that our choosy minds can make over each other can be suddenly swept away by the awareness that we are all mortal. Then there is a feeling of respect for others: 'May you go your way. This is the way you are, may you live it out.' We honour each other. We put aside our response of: 'Why aren't you like this? You're not like me. You don't fit into my perceptions and values any more.' Instead, we are able to allow others to be different. We recognize that we are only different in degree, and we all have to live out this 'personality experience', so we wish each other well in doing so. We can learn from this 'personality experience', while bearing its limitations in mind.

In our chanting 'sharing of blessings' we share the blessings of our life with those who support our transcendent nature: our teachers; those who support our physical nature: our parents; and then down

through the list of friends, relatives, rulers of society, people who mould and affect us, and then all beings. You can extend the sharing of merit to all beings with whom you have contact, either physically or in consciousness, to all those who make an impression on you. When you honour and respect them all, that doesn't mean you think they're better than you. You don't have to feel anybody's better than you in order to respect them. You respect them because you recognize and respect their right to be what they are and to work through their positions, their roles, their personalities and their responsibilities; you wish them well in doing so.

Whatever wisdom, understanding or compassion comes to us, we reflect it and spread it around. We realize that, in this way, we're doing very skilful actions for ourselves, in that the more we radiate generosity and kindness to others, the more we are able to live with sensitivity and see beings as they are. So it's good for ourselves to share merit, as well as being good for others. Sharing merit clears away your own stale perceptions and attitudes. It's the beginning of a truly awakened response to life. Through it, the results of our practice are regenerated back into our views of the world, and refresh them. Thus, our practice brightens our world; and when we view the world with brightness we tend to act and speak in the world in that same bright way.

Struggles of Life and Death

If you've ever been with a person, or even an animal, in the process of dying, you may have noticed that it can be quite a struggle. It can also be a struggle for us when we're involved: we may feel a tremendous sense of helplessness. There can seem to be so much unnecessary pain and conflict. But of course, we see the process from a particular viewpoint, looking at it from the outside as it were, believing ourselves to be 'some-body' who is alive. We may see the struggle as painful, unpleasant, maybe even disgusting, and feel a strong sense that: 'This is what happens to bodies and someday this is going to happen to me.' Naturally, just because this is another living being, we feel that empathy. This is our common lot and there's a painful feeling of fear, of apprehension. When the mind goes first, we can see the personality break up, change and begin to disappear. When our time comes, it would be nice if we were all able to lie down in a composed way, say a few final grand words and then, with a peaceful smile, drop across to the other shore like dewdrops slipping into the shining sea. Yet it doesn't seem to be that way all the time.

I remember seeing a little two-year-old girl who died of severe burns. We sat around her dying body for about ten hours, just contemplating, watching and feeling. The mind is highly focused in such situations. The impression is so powerful that it's almost hypnotic and you could go on watching for hours and hours. Something seems to be happening in the process of watchfulness, of being there, because it naturally brings the mind to full attention and concentration, and you witness the struggle, the conflict and the pain. Actually, these are all perceptions in your own mind, things you infer and read in from your own experience, which might be disturbance, agitation or anxiety. The usual reaction is to try to find ways to change the situation, to make yourself, the dying person and those who love them, feel better. But eventually, as you

contemplate and stay with that experience, you start to come to terms with your own attitudes: your apprehension, resistance, fear, sorrow and anxiety about pain, conflict, dying, being overwhelmed and so on. When you practise in this way, somehow the perceptions gradually lose their searing quality. They're not neutral, but you begin to see that dying is part of life.

The only thing we know that resembles the dying struggle is the birth struggle, the struggle to be born. What an amazing pain and struggle that is! Birth and death are rather similar: the struggle to be born, to take the first breath, to be incarnated; and the struggle to pass on, to lose incarnation. In other words, the doorways in and out of incarnation give rise to struggle. When you look at it, all the time in between also involves a considerable amount of struggle: picking up, putting down, falling over, starting again. Life is a kind of slow wrestling match. Yet, while we tend to see death as painful, sad and tragic, birth seems more like watching a race: somebody's running towards the finishing line, gasping, getting out of breath and struggling, and you're saying, 'Come on! You can make it!' 'Ageing', which stands for the whole period between birth and death, can be an interesting challenge with all its vicissitudes, but we wouldn't call it 'tragic' because we can still imagine a future. We feel that there is a possibility of a happy ending, whereas we don't tend to feel that about death. Yet the one inevitable thing we can know is that birth and ageing end in death. Being born is very much like being put on death row. There are some quite nice cells on death row, and most of one's needs are taken care of, but the one inevitable thing about the future is death.

What happens after we die? We can't really say for sure, but one thing we can ascertain is that there's no one in the dead body any more. Dying can be a struggle, a conflict, but struggle and conflict are part of this sensory predicament, so there's nothing shockingly unusual about them. We experience death as a shock because we have become blind

and biased. The birth process and the sense of a future give rise to the sense of self. We feel we are a separate entity who is the recipient of life inside one of these body forms. These 'entities' don't actually live life: they receive it, judge it, decide and give orders, and then the body obeys and does this and that. So the sense of self is the real source of the sorrow, the anguish and the desperation about death.

Rather than getting caught up in and trying to change the situation, which usually results in agitation, one of the most helpful things we can do is to develop an attitude of love. This becomes increasingly natural as we practise with pain, conflict and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. In other words, we encourage awareness, dispassion and reflection in other people. We enable them to rise through the zone of pain and conflict, to die into it, rather as they died into life when they were born with the necessary struggle to leave the womb. Instead of adding apprehension and negativity to dying, we can take a positive, encouraging, 'You can do it!' attitude towards it. The encouragement is to be free from fear, free from the sense of failure that can arise at the end of people's lives, free from the feeling of being rejected because death is such a taboo, and free from the feeling of being useless, unpleasant and disgusting. Any attitude, any practice we encourage in that way, will always be for the ultimate benefit of others.

For contemplatives, the nature of the practice that covers all this is transcendence of the perceptual world, of the way in which we habitually regard things. We tend to see the body and its actions as a self, a person, though nobody is inherently there. All you can see is that there's a physical form. You can see actions and hear words, and you infer that there's somebody producing them. Certainly, there are thoughts and physiological processes, which are all caused by other processes. The body is the result of reproduction, birth, food, water, air and life energy – it's not the result of 'me'. Actions are the results of the brain, the intelligence, the motivations and the psychological

aspects, which pick up, learn and respond – all these are constantly changing. Bodies change slowly every day. Think of a person who is five months old, five years old, fifteen years old, fifty years old and eighty years old ... Is it the same body? All we can say is that it follows a kind of pattern, but it can undergo profound change, not only as it ages, but also because parts can be cut off. In fact, as we're probably aware rationally, not a single cell of the body we're with now has been with us for more than seven or eight years. The mind too is very much subject to change. The personality, hobbies, habits, amusements and drives can change. We can be trained and changed. So *who* is it?

The more we investigate and penetrate the perceptions, the more we come up against certain strong underlying tendencies – towards existence, becoming, having and holding. One may no longer be attached to jelly babies, rattles, motor cars or train sets, but there's always a strong tendency to want to hold something: maybe it's an idea, a space, a mood, a position of some kind, the possibility of the future or some sensual experience; we want to hold on to our 'self'. There's a strong wish and desire, like a magnetic pull, to be able to define ourselves, to have our way, to have personal views and be able to sustain them. You don't really see these tendencies until you're in a position where you can't follow them any more, when you can't be in charge of things or do what you want to do, or when you're on your own and not getting familiar feedback from other people.

What does loneliness mean? You can feel lonely in a city of ten million people because you're surrounded by people who don't know you, who have no perception of you except as a stranger, as just another 'somebody'. Then the only feedback you get is, 'I don't know you: you're a stranger.' You don't get the feedback of, 'Hello, Joe! How are you doing?' Even that superficial kind of contact, that simple social gesture, can give you some sense of being, and when you can't receive it you realize how much you are inclined towards it. Being with a group of

strangers can be more alarming than being on your own, because when you're on your own you can still pick up and follow a view of yourself: 'Well, now I'm here I can do this, then I can do that.' To be confronted with the perception of being a stranger can really be difficult; in a way, it's rather like dying. We feel that people regard us as 'somebody who's dying', 'a stranger' or 'someone different', and so we're seen as upsetting, frightening or weird.

The Buddha pointed to grasping: not the things we grasp in themselves, but the very fact of needing to grasp. He said that dependent upon this grasping is the sense of becoming, of going towards the future. Dependent upon becoming is the sense of identity. Dependent upon the sense of identity is the sense of loss of it, losing control, going mad, degenerating. And dependent upon that loss of identity are sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. Then with the cessation of grasping is the cessation of becoming, the cessation of the sense of identity, the cessation of the sense of separation, dying away from being somebody, and with that the cessation of sorrow, pain, lamentation, grief and despair.¹⁴

The Elder Sāriputta was the Buddha's chief disciple and one of the great leaders of the Sangha. When he died, the Venerable Ānanda, who was not yet fully enlightened, said to the Buddha, 'Since I heard about the final passing away of the Elder Sāriputta, my body has become weak, I feel disoriented and the teachings are no longer clear to me.' The Buddha asked, 'How is this, Ānanda? When Sāriputta died, did he take from you your portion of virtue, your portion of concentration or your portion of wisdom?' The Venerable Ānanda replied, 'Not so, Lord. But the Elder Sāriputta has been to me a mentor, one who roused, inspired and gladdened me. He was untiring in teaching the Dhamma, a helper of his fellow monks. And we remember how vitalizing, enjoyable and

14. This paragraph refers to Sāriyutta Nikāya 12.1.

helpful his Dhamma instructions were.’ The Buddha said, ‘Have I not taught you that that which is born is subject to dissolution? What else is there to expect? It’s impossible to prevent anything that is born from disintegrating. Therefore, Ānanda, be a refuge unto yourself, seeking no external refuge. Let the Dhamma be your refuge; seek no other refuge.’¹⁵

Just before he became eighty, the Buddha said to the Venerable Ānanda, ‘I am now old. This body is wearing out. I have reached the term of life. Three months from now, the Tathāgata will take final nibbāna.’ Then the Venerable Ānanda pleaded, ‘May the Blessed One stay for a century for the benefit and happiness of *devas* and humans, out of compassion for the world!’ The Buddha replied, ‘Enough, Ānanda! Have I not always told you that all which is born is bound to pass away?’¹⁶

All sages have probably practised with pain and disease many times in their lives. They have found determination and strength in dealing with them. We have a lifetime to practise with physical pain, sickness, weakness and discomfort. Particularly as you grow old, you may have a number of trial runs on dying, a few warm-up sessions so you can get an idea of what it will be like. We should welcome these opportunities and life may offer plenty of them. From the moment we’re born, there’s the struggle to maintain selfhood: we’re trying to be ‘something’ at every moment; and the struggle with the sensory world: we’re trying to make it always comfortable, on the pleasant side, and keep the unpleasant, painful, disagreeable side away.

The sad thing is that so few people genuinely try to listen to life; the perception of self blots it all out. We feel ourselves to be a permanent self, an eternal being who remains ‘detached’ from life, someone who should not feel pain, discomfort or loss, a pleasant, agreeable person whose wishes can be fulfilled, at least to some degree. We cherish our

15. This paragraph refers to the *Cunda Sutta*, Saṃyutta Nikāya 47.13.

16. This paragraph refers to the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, Dīgha Nikāya 16.

ability to abide in a fair degree of comfort and security, and we wistfully fancy that this can go on indefinitely and that it's our right. Yet when we learn to open and listen to life, when we can accept and practise with its discomforts and its losing side, the struggle can cease. Then we can find something far greater than the sense of self, something that can take us through this lifespan, and even through dying, in a very bright, wise and peaceful way: the Buddha, wisdom, awakeness. Through effort, practice and patience we can learn to let go, little by little, of the need to be, to have and to hold.

Even as he was dying, the Buddha was still in charge of what was going on. He asked a monk who was standing in front of him, fanning him, to move aside because the gods and the *devas* had gathered to see the Buddha and this monk was preventing them from getting a last glimpse of him. He then gave instructions about what should be done with his remains. A man came to him and requested to become a monk in his presence. The Buddha granted his request. Then he asked his disciples if they had any questions on Dhamma. Having ascertained that nobody had any particular doubts or questions, he left his final teaching, '*Vaya-dhammā saṅkhārā. Appamādena sampādeṭṭhā.*'¹⁷ ('All compounded things are impermanent, subject to change. Strive on, keep practising with mindfulness.') There's a kind of non-conclusion about this teaching which is interesting. Some of the early translations read: 'All compounded things are impermanent. Attain salvation through diligence.' But the Buddha didn't mention attaining anything. He just said, 'Be very mindful. Keep practising.' So we may wonder, 'And then? What happens then?' Well, the Buddha proceeded to demonstrate what happens then: what happens is that you die, so then he died. The Elder Anuruddha, whose mind was so sensitive that he could actually read the mind processes of others, followed the Buddha's consciousness as it moved through the various states of absorption until, rather like a mist, it just evaporated.

17. Dīgha Nikāya 16.6.7.

You may think, ‘Where did the Buddha go? Do Buddhas live in nibbāna when they die? Do they go to heaven or not? Will they be reborn on earth or will they stay above forever, looking down on us and occasionally coming down to give us pep talks, or guiding us from afar? Or do they just not exist?’ Whenever one of these questions was asked, the Buddha would say, ‘Not a valid question.’ What he meant was that if you want to know what happens to a Buddha when he dies, you should first be able to say where the Buddha is when he’s alive. The Buddha’s body is just a body and his words are just words; they’re not a separate, permanent entity. When you go through all you can discern about a person, you can see that none of it can really be identified with that person, because it doesn’t last. You can watch thoughts and see their cessation, so you’re not a thought. You’re not a feeling, you’re not a body. Does that mean you don’t have feelings, thoughts or a body? No, there are thoughts, feelings and a body. So you can’t say that the Buddha either *is* or *isn’t* a body, thoughts, words, feelings and actions. Buddhas certainly manifest, act in certain ways, and have wisdom, blessings and compassion, but you can’t say they either are or aren’t. And if this is the case for the Buddha when he’s alive, how can you possibly start thinking about what happens when he dies?

We can see this in ourselves. Who are we? As we’re not yet completely awakened, there are some things we definitely seem to be. What we seem to be will be a source of conflict when we die, because then it will be taken away: our body, our moods, our feelings, our ability to understand and think, our physical well-being. What we are lodged in now will then be our source of sorrow. From grasping arises becoming, the sense of self, the feeling of losing it, dying from it, sorrow, pain, grief and despair. Yet we have an opportunity to practise in such a way that there is a body, but no holding it; there are feelings, but we’re not grasping at them. We’re not self-conscious, conceited or despairing about feelings. We know feelings are just feelings, thoughts are just thoughts. Then there’s a lightness to them. This is not a rejection of

body, feeling or thought, but a non-demanding, non-obsessive, non-anxious and non-indulgent attitude towards them.

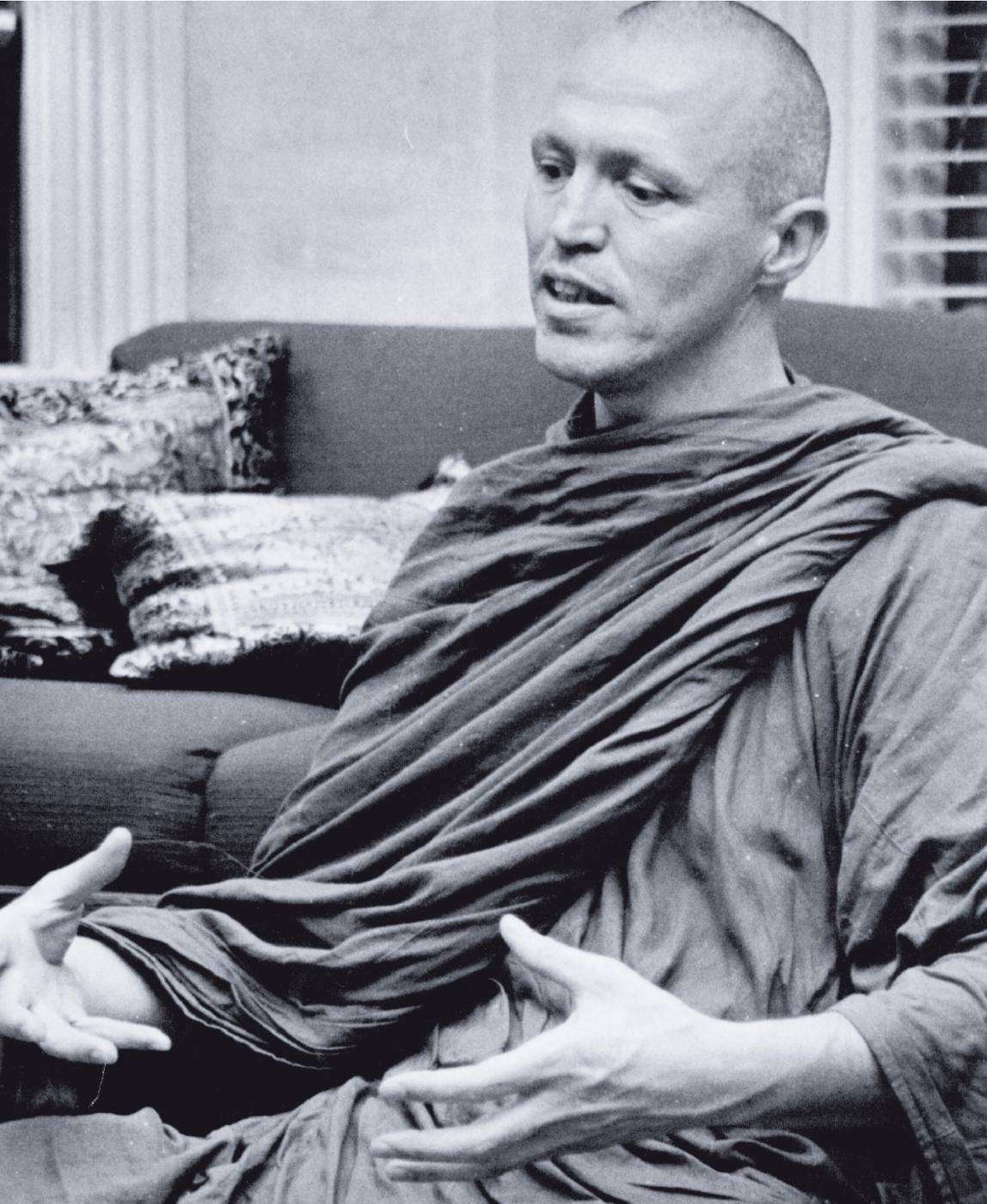
We practise internally as well as externally. We don't blindly react to the bodies, moods and feelings of others. We can respond to the dying of others with non-attachment. Rather than giving in to the reflex reactions of anxiety and despair, a response of support, encouragement and kindness brings much more benefit. Wonderfully, when we're in such a critical situation, we seem to have a stronger possibility of allowing that response to come through us. When none of our normal responses and reactions seem to work, something in us begins to become wise, as it were, and so dying can be a profoundly beautiful experience for both the person dying and those around. If it's done with attention, wisdom and awareness, dying becomes an experience of truth, a deeper realization of life, of what it means, of who we are and what we're not, a joyous experience. Sometimes it's called 'dying into life'.

With people we know well, very dear ones, this is a very challenging experience because it tends to bring up into full consciousness all the highly evolved perceptions we have around such people: not wanting them to be hurt, wanting them to feel happy, wanting them to be this way and not that way, wanting to nurture and succour – all that within us which is trying to see and maintain this as 'a person'. There's nothing ill-intentioned in this, but it limits us. That strong and natural emotional response binds us to the plane of sorrow. Those of us who have lost dear ones with awareness can recognize that. At that time, something in us seems to die as well.

When my father died, it was like having a tooth out. I actually had a tooth out at about the same time. Teeth are just there. You chomp away and scrub them every day, and when you lose one you find your tongue keeps going to the hole where it was and it feels strange, like a numb space. It was the same with losing my father, though of course that was a more profoundly emotional experience than losing a tooth!

I didn't realize how much he was part of my life because I didn't live with him and I had my own way of doing things. I had carried with me the memories of my father. They lived with me, but when I could no longer ground them on a living person I felt a strange, numb, empty feeling. This is what grief and mourning are about. They're about noticing that space, and with it I felt a sense of wanting to live properly and rightly, but also a slight weariness with life, a lack of much interest in it all. It seemed that everything was just part of what has to happen. Eventually the balance was restored. Death has that sobering effect. It helps us to not be so reckless or compulsive, or to take things for granted.

Being with the dying, particularly those near and dear to you, calls on you to look at and resolve your emotional conflicts. One of the most painful, confusing experiences is not being able to help, not being able to do anything about the situation. Eventually you realize that the only thing you can do at that time is to practise with that feeling, live in the moment and do what you can. There's no answer to death, no escape. All things are impermanent; be mindful, practise well. Practise with diligence, not because it's going to halt physiological processes, but because there isn't anything else to do. If we wish to put an end to death, sorrow, lamentation, grief and despair, it can only be done through this practice, for ourselves and for others.



1992-2014

AS ABBOT OF CITTAVIVEKA MONASTERY

The Brahmavihāras as a Deliverance of the Heart

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED ON 12 SEPTEMBER 1994
AT CITTAVIVEKA MONASTERY.

Tonight, I thought I would give a talk to encourage us all to consider, to remember and to investigate the cultivation of the four *brahmavihāras* – that is *mettā* (kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (appreciative joy or joy at the goodness of others) and *upekkhā* (equanimity, even-mindedness).

Today I was looking at a sutta where, at the time of the Buddha, some bhikkhus went on alms-round, and since they had some spare time they went to see the wanderers of other sects.¹⁸ There were many different kinds of teachers at the time of the Buddha and many wanderers of other persuasions. The wanderers these bhikkhus talked with in this sutta were saying, ‘The ascetic Gotama teaches the *brahmavihāras* and we teach them too. We too say that you should spread kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, so our teachings are very much the same.’ The bhikkhus didn’t agree or disagree and, after their alms-round, went back to the Buddha and reported to him what these wanderers had said. The Buddha replied that when wanderers of other sects speak in this way, they should be asked: ‘How is the deliverance of the heart developed by these *brahmavihāras*? What is the aim of such cultivation?’ In other words, what’s the intention behind it? Do we use it as a reflective teaching, something which enables us to enquire into the nature of the mind that’s practising? Why do we cultivate these *brahmavihāras* and how far does it go? What are the results personally?

18. Saṃyutta Nikāya 46.54 – Ajahn Sucitto will refer to this sutta throughout this Dhamma reflection.

What's happening to our minds when we cultivate in this way? This is what distinguishes the Buddha's teaching from those of other sects.

Of course we would all agree that values such as kindness and compassion are good ideas, but many conflicts are created over these ideas, about the right way to be compassionate or the way to bring love and peace to the world. Love and compassion are easy things to ascribe to. The Buddha said that it's easy to think about these values and even to practise them on an external level, but the point is to really understand how this practice is affecting us, how it's changing us. He said that these four kinds of radiances are based on detachment (*viveka*), dispassion (*virāga*), cessation (*nirodha*) and complete relinquishment of the sense of self (*vossagga*). This is their aim, this is their direction, this is their result; they bring this around.

It's different from saying that the compassionate practices bring around the welfare of other people and help to build hospitals, schools and so forth. It's not that these things are wrong: we can perform acts of kindness and compassion – small and great – in ways that are externally useful, but internally we may not feel any different. We can still feel anxious, restless, sorrowful, frustrated, begrudging and very much caught in the ups and downs of success and failure. We can see people having compassion fatigue. Often the teachings of love are backed up by tremendous righteousness and hostility towards people or things we don't regard as loving: we wish to eliminate that which is evil. We can be quite hard within ourselves, even with these very lofty ideals. We can be miserable, insecure and going up and down all the time, even with these lofty ideals.

I knew a vicar who had this compulsion to be kind and charitable all the time. He could never let himself be anything other than kind and charitable, so he just suppressed whatever emotional difficulties he had in his life and kept putting on a brave, smiling face. He felt it would

be wrong to look after himself. Although he was doing this practice of love and compassion to all beings on one level, in fact it was killing him. Eventually he got to the point where he was so drained and depressed by having to be loving and compassionate to everybody that he couldn't do it any more, so he asked if he could take a year off from the church and they said, 'No. This is a lack of faith in God! You are supposed to be serving, so get out there and be loving and compassionate again.'

Eventually he started to crack up. He had more or less come to the point of a nervous breakdown when he decided to come and stay here at Chithurst for about eighteen months – with us Buddhists who are not necessarily renowned for our great charitable works. He found a place where he could begin to work on himself, and eventually he retired from the church. This isn't to criticize Christianity but to say that there are mundane and supra-mundane ways of practising these things. The mundane ways are ways in which we affect things outside ourselves. The supra-mundane ways are ways in which we affect both outside and inside. In the Buddha's teachings there are both the mundane and the supra-mundane aspects – it's not just a mundane teaching.

This kind of cultivation is based on detachment, dispassion, cessation and self-relinquishment. These terms are pointing to the volition of our own mind – our particular drives and motivations. When we are attached, we feel very much compelled to do something. When there's detachment, doing is no longer a compulsive thing; it's no longer a wired-up, tensed experience but a feeling of freedom. When there's dispassion, again the motivation or energy which comes out of the urge or the volition is now much more balanced. It's no longer: 'You have to hurry up and get this done, and make sure this really works.' It becomes something more pure; things are done in a much more cool and equanimous way. We are no longer caught up with the need to achieve, to succeed or to make things work, be right, fair, equal or better. We can practise like that in our own lives so that the feeling

of kindness is a feeling of well-being flowing out of us rather than a compulsion to make sure we look bright and turn everybody on.

When that happens, compassion is not anxious. When compassion conjoins with dispassion it's purer; it's a caring sympathy, a sense of connectedness to other beings. We are prepared to listen, we are prepared to see other people's viewpoints, we are prepared to share and receive the plight, the suffering or the situations which other people are in. Compassion goes wrong when it becomes anxious. Anxiety is when you don't want people to suffer, so you want to do something because you can't bear that feeling in your own mind. For dispassion to arise there has to be the willingness to open up to the unsatisfactoriness of life – people and situations. The vibration of the pang that the world brings up can actually be stilled in our own heart rather than just drawn into ourselves. We don't have to come up with panicky reactions or desperate, frustrated feelings to make sure we change the situation. When there's compassion and dispassion there's going to be suitable activity, but it's much more holistic than just 'me sorting things out'. It's a matter of being prepared to open the mind (both the intelligence and the emotions) to a situation, apply it and see what comes up, see what can be offered. That's different from anxiety, isn't it?

Cessation or *nirodha* is a kind of furtherance of that. It implies rest. I think 'cessation' is a frightening word to many people, but if we think of it as rest, stillness, then we can see that there is a logical sequence from detachment, dispassion and then the mind at rest, still and at peace. Again, it applies the quality of volition. When we have something on our mind, our mind is not at rest. When we have something we feel identified with, then our mind is not at rest. We get identified with activities to make sure they are right; we carry them around in us. We identify with people. We can look at our mind and see the people we worry about or feel we have to sort out, or the things in ourselves we

fret about, and we see how the mind is not at rest. Even when it's not continually thinking, it's always in a slightly tensed state. It doesn't have a sense of well-being; it's cramped.

Self-surrender or complete relinquishment is a step further than stillness and rest. As you try to cultivate stillness, consider: can you go further than that? Perhaps everybody finds their own definitions or ways of thinking about it, but to me it implies the freedom to move when it's time to move and to stop when it's time to stop. Feelings come and feelings go; it's not as if we're trying to hold on to the mind being completely calm and still. There's a feeling of just letting it be what it is. There are times when you can feel an emotional response to things, and there are times when the mind is thinking and active because that's a suitable response to that particular situation. It's always due to a purpose; it's due to that which is appropriate rather than an irresolution, something festering inside, a holding on or an accumulation of experience of ourselves. There's an end of personal history, an end of personal meaning, an end of personal purpose. So when there's nothing, there's nothing, when there's something, there's something, and either nothing or something is OK.

I'm talking about these things in a way of trying to open up a field for investigation. I'm not claiming that I abide in these things as a constant state; these are things I aspire to. I find it helpful to bring up these definitions in the mind to see what I'm hanging on to, where I'm caught and how the mood of the mind vibrates. Usually, the vibration gets subtler and subtler down to a residual, tense, grudgy feeling, a feeling of holding on to things or a feeling of having to do something. That's still not stillness, is it? During those times when there's complete rest, then there's perhaps the feeling of treasuring it and not wanting to give it up. We want to hold on to the stillness and not be bothered with things. These are ways we can reflect and notice the attachments – the subtler attachments and the grosser attachments – and how they

happen. It's through recognition and full, honest awareness that we can gain the confidence and the collectedness of attention to unwind these things. Of course, insight itself and the exercises like *ānāpānasati* and so forth are also founded on these factors of *viveka*, *virāga*, *nirodha*, and *vossagga*. You see them coming up time and time again, but in this particular reflection we can apply them to the four *brahmavihāras*.

Mettā is not something we do, but a particular mood where some of the agitation, tension and drive of the mind is relaxed or at least comes into a more harmonious form. It's defined by the quality of well-being – one abides in well-being. The Buddha actually related that it could be developed into a quality of what he called 'abiding in the beautiful' as a deliverance of the mind from stress, self-criticism and self-hatred. How to abide in well-being rather than looking purely at how nice you are to other people? Is your niceness to other people coming from a feeling of anxiety? Are you always trying to placate people or trying to win them over because you are rather nervous and timid? Some people take *mettā* as a sort of campaign: 'I believe in love, the power of love!' and they slush it around everybody, whether they want it or not. There's a kind of aggressive quality to it sometimes.

If any of you have ever been caught by an evangelist trying to hit you with his love, you probably remember it as a pretty ghastly experience. Often, they're coming from an overpowering egotism and desire to catch you into their orbit. Sometimes people recognize this on a subtle level. You give 'love' so that you can get feedback. You turn people on and you get this contact high; it's a way of taking power, taking over people's emotions. Everybody likes the idea of love so we all are open to it, but it can almost be an emotional tyranny whereby you manipulate people: you win them over with apparent love and you gain power over them. It's certainly something we can see in various spiritual teachings and teachers. People do get caught up in this stuff and buried by it, but it doesn't allow them to abide in their own well-being. They tend

to abide in the feeling of needing to be with the source of this love or needing to turn everybody else on, or needing to pump it out, or feel its emotional charge.

The Buddha's *mettā* is based on detachment, dispassion, cessation and self-relinquishment. It has the quality of ease, of well-being, of feeling relaxed, and if we can't do anything more than that, we are still cultivating *mettā*. In the Buddha's understanding we are not talking any more in terms of people and things, we are looking at kamma, at energies. Where are you at? Do you live with other people or do you live with your own doubts and worries? Whatever you are living with, whether it's your own moods, darkness, worries or frustrations, then that's the world you practise *mettā* with. It's not that you don't practise *mettā* towards other people, but rather that you don't ignore yourself either. You practise with whatever manifests in consciousness. So *mettā* can seem very undramatic externally.

Karuṇā is a complete absence of cruelty, ill-will and anything of that nature. Cruelty is a strong word but we can certainly notice things in our actions, speech and ways of thinking that are dismissive, rejecting or hard and fast: 'Cut them off!', 'That's the way it is!', 'Shut up!', 'Watch your mind!', 'Let go!' and so on. You can even use fairly good Buddhist terminology, but the actual movement of the heart is rejecting, dismissing; it's not compassionate. I can see this in myself; the mind can move like that. It's not always moving in terms of compassion because very often the mind doesn't really see people as they are. It sees people in terms of my own aims, thoughts or feelings; it's not open to understanding where people are coming from. It sees things in terms of 'I want this to happen or that not to happen, or this to be that way.' The mind can have its own aims and attitudes, and if things don't fit in with them, then the thoughts are: 'Oh, well, shut this up, cut that out, and let's do this instead.' There is a quality of dismissiveness

and cruelty, whereas compassion recoils from that hard-line gesture of the heart, that black-and-white righteousness – towards ourselves and others.

We tend to think of compassion as involving somebody else, but here compassion can also be towards the things that we see as *other than* what we are aiming for or interested in, or *other than* the particular game we are playing at this moment. It's a very important quality because it brings a great deal of flexibility: we are able to suddenly drop our own trip or our own values, or at least see beyond them. We are working with this quality of volition. Volition creates a field of attention and works within it. When we are preoccupied with our own world, this is the world of our own attention: our own aims, perspectives, values and so forth. 'This is real for me, therefore I aim for it and I aim to do good in it. I try to not be mean or stingy. I'm trying to do the best I can in the world that I see.' So there is volition: our trying, and attention: our world.

We can feel quite certain that we are doing good deeds, honestly trying the best we can, without recognizing that it's in our own world that we are trying to do it. Maybe that world, that field of attention is a very subjective thing, pretty limited or slightly blinkered. Certainly, the stronger our volition or sense of direction is, the harder, sharper and narrower our attention will be. You can see something you particularly like or hate in tremendously fine detail because there's a very strong urge, either to have it or to get rid of it. Because of that urge, your attention becomes highly defined, whereas the things you feel indifferent about are kind of fuzzy. You don't really mind one way or another. For example, if you especially like gardens, when you come and visit Chithurst you will definitely see and enjoy the rhododendrons, the hogweed and the stitchwort, but you might not notice the bricks or the stones.

The other day I was talking to one of our friends about building our workshop and he was extolling the great virtues of handmade bricks. Instead of being shoved in a furnace, they are laid out in the sun for a few days and then carefully baked. He was saying that it's very important to build a workshop out of these handmade bricks. I replied, 'Yeah ... but that's because you are a builder. Most people wouldn't even see the bricks. They would just see the shape of the building or the hedge around it, and if they were going to work, they probably wouldn't see it at all. They would just walk through the door and get on with their work.' He looked a little chagrined. When he goes into a house, he doesn't see the curtains, he doesn't see the garden, he probably doesn't even see the people in it; he just sees the bricks! If you go to his house you can see some lovely brickwork inside his living room.

That's how volition (*kamma*) and attention work together. Once we begin to realize that, and remember it over and over again, we can see how subjective it all is. The quality of compassion is a softening of our world, and, as the Buddha says, if you cultivate it, your mind is suddenly no longer so narrow. It's infinite, it's not finite. It's not defined according to this particular trip or this particular preoccupation. Instead, if you fully cultivate it, you come to what's loftily called 'the sphere of infinite space'. When you hear those words you may think, 'Wow! What's that? Andromeda? The stars? Something vast out there?' I think of it as the space in the mind. When is our mind spacious? Perhaps our mind is not spacious. Can we understand how it gets hemmed in by our own world? When we start to see other people's worlds and angles, then suddenly the walls go down and we are much freer; there's much more space in the mind.

Muditā is difficult to translate. There is no easy English translation for it because it's such an uncommon reference in our language, so we say something like 'sympathetic joy' or 'altruistic joy' or 'appreciation of the goodness of others'. It's all a bit clunky really. I like to think of it in

terms of cultivating the quality of appreciation. Appreciation means we enjoy, we rejoice, we feel the feeling of ‘Oh, that’s nice, that’s pleasant.’ Yet this appreciation is not grasping and wanting to have things. We appreciate each thing and we leave it there. We appreciate them in their own such-ness, in their own this-ness. We appreciate them as they are. The mind is lifted up by them. This is probably something quite rare for people. When the mind is shut in we don’t even appreciate our own goodness, let alone anybody else’s, because we get so involved with trying to achieve aims and ends.

Muditā is very significant and it’s actually considered to be a step beyond compassion in terms of the cultivation, the refinement of the heart. We tend to see compassion as being more important because with compassion we get things done, we help the sick, the poor and the starving, and that’s an important thing to do. Comparatively, the appreciation of the flowers or a good action may seem a bit like: ‘Well, so what? It’s not doing anything. You’re not achieving anything by having *muditā*, but with compassion you get things done, that’s more important.’ That’s probably the value most of us have in our lives: *doing*.

In the Buddha Dhamma there’s something higher than doing. That’s not to put down the world of activity, functioning and achievement, but to say that actually, in terms of the movement of the heart, there’s something higher in which we can abide. With compassion, even though we are opening up to and bringing in other people’s worlds, there’s still the sense that ‘I’m opening up to it, and now I want to help you.’ We feel very much defined as ‘the other’ in this – even if it’s in a sympathetic way: ‘I am other than you and I’m OK. I’m listening to your problems or dealing with your pain, and opening up to that.’ *Muditā* is much more selfless; it’s more a feeling of being supported by goodness. When you appreciate goodness, you feel lifted up by it. You’re not doing anything any more. You are in some ways being acted upon or being affected by something, so the sense of self is far softer.

Living the mendicant life is certainly a way to improve our chances of experiencing *muditā* because we receive so much support and goodness that it's much more possible to recognize the goodness of people and abide in it. We're actually continually living on it; we are living on people's generosity continually. We live in a place where people come and bring forth their goodness. This is where people are probably the most disciplined, the most generous and the most well-intentioned. That's where they bring forth their best, so we have a great opportunity to experience a sense of the goodness around us, and feel lifted up by it ... But of course we don't do it! Many of us are so hemmed in by our own stuff that we don't really see it, but it's certainly there. *Muditā* is subtle, because in a way we're not doing anything, but it's higher than compassion because the sense of self-positioning is no longer fixed. When we're experiencing compassion there is the sense that 'I am relating to you.' When we're experiencing *muditā* we feel part of and lifted up by the goodness around us, like a sea of goodness.

The qualities of both of these *brahmavihāras* bring around a recognition of unity: a unity of beings in their qualities of *dukkha*, of suffering, and a unity of beings in their quality of aspiration and goodness. Consider which one of these qualities lifts you up further. Which furthers you? You can see that *muditā* is that which gives you this strong, greater sense of confidence, uplift and ease. When we say it's higher we are not saying it's any more insightful. 'Higher' doesn't refer to a state of perfection, it's just a finer, softer, calmer, gentler radiance than compassion. *Muditā* is then something to recognize and cultivate.

The absence of *muditā* is marked by a quality called *arati*, which is sometimes translated as boredom or aversion, but really means something like grudge, resentment or self-pity – a continual fed-up feeling. It's a sullen resentment rather than hatred. We feel put upon: 'Nobody helps me ... I never get a break ... Nobody is on my side ... Everybody else is doing well but I am not ... Nobody looks after

me ... I have to do so much ...'. In this state there is no possibility of experiencing *muditā*, of experiencing the sense in which we are lifted up by the trees, the air, the elements, food, sunlight and by people's acts of kindness – or at least by people's acts of non-aversion: nobody is beating or flogging us.

The *brahmavihāras* are reflections. We cultivate a mind that turns things over, thinks, measures and sweeps around in the heart. You can do these practices with the qualities of sustained thought and reflective enquiry until you reach the point when such things become unnecessary: when the mind can practise without sustained and reflective thought.

The fourth *brahmavihāra* is *upekkhā* (equanimity), and its quality is the sense of not craving or longing for anything. Longing for things is more than just wanting food or something fairly simple and sensual to experience. There's also the craving for admiration, fame, respect, success, influence, positions, friendship and intelligence. You can see how deep it goes. If we think like this, then sometimes we arrive at rather painful realizations of how much things mean to us: to be liked, to be known, to be appreciated, to be functioning, to be achieving things, to be intelligent, to be good-looking ... So equanimity is a very fine thing, it requires a great deal of humility. Ajahn Sumedho used to say that equanimity is a kind of humility. We don't need things: 'It's all right when nobody talks about me. It's all right when nobody notices me. It's all right when I don't know the answers. It's all right when somebody else is getting the attention ...'. Most of us are not always coming from that place.

How do we arrive at that? It's through recognizing the empty nature of things, not just the physical things but also these objects in our mind, these mental formations, these *dhammas* of praise, self-position and so on. We see them as being empty. They are like a gesture of the mind; they have no particular substance to them. It can take a while to be

brave enough to look closely at these things that we hold dear with dispassionate attention.

For example, I recognized in myself the urge to always be a good example, to try to live in a way that's good – even without thinking it. You may not think I'm a good example, because of course it's a subjective thing. It's not something I have thought about that much and yet I feel I don't want to look foolish, I don't want to be looked down upon. I want to feel that I'm someone people approve of or feel uplifted by – it is a desire to feel worthy. But when we act on this urge in a mean or selfish way, then the mind is not free or joyful. We are driven on by the compulsion to be the best. You may be the person who eats the least, sleeps the least, talks the least, works the hardest or sits the longest, but equanimity is humility. When there is equanimity, you may be the person who sleeps and eats the least, but it no longer means anything; that is just the way it is.

A mind of equanimity is free from those kinds of bonds. It sees that there's nothing really, just unresolved volitions creating objects that we feel we have to have and be. The Buddha said that if you cultivate this thoroughly, you arrive into the experience of 'no-thing' or nothing. Things are notional rather than real. When there's nothing or 'no-thing', what happens to volition? What happens to the urge? What happens to the direction in life when there is nothing to achieve and nothing to get away from, nothing to become or annihilate? There's a deep quality of peace, and that's a peace that's not held as: 'I'm the most peaceful person,' but a peace that's shareable. We can let things move through our peace. We can let people and objects move through our peace because we know that there's nothing – nothing to disturb or be disturbed by, nothing to have to hold on to. This is the abiding of the fully cultivated *upekkhā*.

In practice, one of the things that leads to *upekkhā* is patience. Be prepared to wait, cultivate patience. Notice those times when your mind starts moving toward: ‘Get on with it! I don’t want to hang around being pointless!’ and then be prepared to drop that, wait and be nothing. Certainly, monastic life is set up for that! The point is to wait consciously rather than be held down, otherwise it just brings up frustration and resentment. Why are we doing this? It’s not because somebody else is telling us to wait. We wait for our own understanding. We become conscious of the movement in the heart, the surge of volition, the urge to do, to become, to hold, to have, to reject ... with the most timeless waiting and patience with ourselves, with the world, with others and with whatever feeling is present. That’s what takes us to that place of humility. We recognize: ‘I can’t do this ... I’m not achieving ... I’m not meaningful ... I’m not in a good state ...’ and beyond that there’s equanimity and a dropping of self.

We could cultivate these qualities of mind for a lifetime. Even if we can address them in an hour-long talk, it doesn’t mean they can be achieved so easily. But at least if we understand where they are happening, what they mean, where they come from and what the goal is, then we can direct our mind to these practices in an insightful way. That’s the way the Buddha taught.

The Supreme Giving

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AT CITTAVIVEKA MONASTERY.

The quality of giving and generosity has always been an easily recognizable sign of goodness. It's universally recognized in all religions and in all walks of life – any kind of charitable action is a good one. In Buddhism, generosity is recognized, understood, honoured and is a foundation of Dhamma practice. We can look at generosity in different ways. It's good to study it. Buddhism tends to study things in a very full way, particularly in terms of our own mind.

In the case of generosity, we can consider the particular external things we are giving and the people or organizations we are giving things to – which we consider deserving, worthy or needy. We give what we can in terms of money, food and requisites to poor or needy people. These are the external signs of giving, but they're also related to certain internal signs, such as the feeling that something is worth giving. You understand, 'This is worth giving' and also, 'This person is worthy of giving to, or is needy.' Then you understand in yourself, 'I have something that's worth giving. I can do this.' After you have given help, you know in yourself, 'This is good. There's a result in my own mind that feels good.' We look at it very broadly. We can feel that giving this thing to this person does them some good and that's why we're doing it, and we also recognize that helping another person makes us feel good. So it benefits both ourselves and the other person.

Certainly, in Buddhism there's an emphasis on understanding by studying what happens in our own mind, and by doing so, we see things that perhaps we wouldn't see otherwise. Our attention goes to, 'She needs that, he needs this. I have this. I can do that,' and we value giving

in those terms. But in the understanding of the Buddha, we also learn to value it in terms of what's happening in our own consciousness. In studying it closely, you gain a far greater aptitude and understanding of giving, because you begin to understand what's happening in your awareness. You see the benefits of giving, the far-reaching effects of it. You begin to learn that this gesture is something that does not have to be constrained by material requirements or things of that nature.

When we find ourselves in a situation where we are unable to give, we perhaps feel sad and impotent. When I see people in need and don't have anything to offer them, if I'm open to that experience, certainly, it makes me feel sad or constrained. In these situations, we tend to look the other way and think, 'Oh, that's just the way it is. I can't help them. I'm sorry about that.' It's an unpleasant feeling. We feel limited, powerless and joyless.

When we have something to give, it makes us feel empathy, joy, a sense of freedom from constraint in that we've reached that person. There's a feeling of direct reaching and flowing along with that person at that moment, and this is the beauty of it: the sense of loving and sharing. It's a time when our sense of self is no longer so contracted, defensive, petty and introverted. It's made grander and it feels good; we enjoy that.

In Buddhist countries, generosity is not regarded as a social duty but more as a fun thing to do. In Thailand they have a ceremony called *Tort Pha Pa*. It means 'offering cloth'. Originally these ceremonies came from the time of the Buddha. Back then the monks and nuns were wandering all the time. People gave them alms-food, but there was only one time of the year when the monastics were staying in one place long enough for people to be able to give them a lot of robes and other things. That's why there was only one cloth-offering ceremony at the end of the Vassa, which wasn't enough for the Thai people, who really enjoy giving. So they invented these ceremonies called

Tort Pha Pa, which are like alms-giving ceremonies. For us it's quite staggering because you see people coming to the monastery all the way from Thailand for the ceremony. They give you lots of things and go away – that was their excursion! They saw Windsor Castle, Madame Tussaud's, Harrods and Chithurst, then they went back to Thailand. Everybody looks very happy; they enjoy doing these things. It's seen as an exciting, interesting, fun thing to do because of this understanding of what happens to the mind in that particular action of giving.

In the West, we tend to see giving more as a duty. I don't want to generalize or exaggerate, but it feels more like a serious thing. Sometimes you get charities that make you feel guilty, so you think, 'Oh, dear, I'll give them something,' to assuage the guilt. The plate comes round and you put your ten pence in, feeling rather guilty about it! Whereas the Asian mentality is: 'Look! I'm giving this, it's great!' They're making a whole thing out of it. They're not at all bashful or ashamed. They enjoy it; they don't mind publicly enjoying their generosity – perhaps because the giving is stemming from the actual witnessing of the benefits to the mind, rather than a feeling of social obligation.

So there's the generosity, the willingness to give, the feeling that we have something to give and a sense that there is something or someone worthy of giving to. These are all factors that have to be there. If we don't have anything to give or nobody needs anything or we're not willing to give, then it can't happen. When we're not willing to give, it's regarded as a kind of disease in Buddhism. The metaphor used by the Buddha to illustrate this was a kind of stain, blight or mildew: 'the stain of stinginess'.¹⁹ Someone who is stingy is considered to be afflicted with a sort of disease that's actually making their heart go mouldy and cramped. So when we have cultivated generosity, we think, 'Thank goodness I'm not sick! I can feel at ease, I can feel grand.

19. For example, as at *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 55.6, 55.32 and 55.37.

There's some grandeur in my life!' When we look into our mind and see that we are not willing to give – for whatever reason – then our mood is not a happy one. It may be frightened or defensive. It's an unpleasant, contracted state of mind. When we feel we don't have anything to give, it's an impoverished state. When you think there's no one worth giving to, it's a cynical or an impoverished state of mind. You can see the unpleasantness if this possibility of giving can't occur. It's always associated with unpleasant mind-states. This is not to say that we can escape that by forcing ourselves to give things, but we can look and understand what's happening.

When we look at material things, what are the most important things to give? We can think of things being important in different ways. It may be 'the most valuable thing' or 'things that provide the greatest benefit'. But when we look in terms of the mind, what's the first thing we have to give? The first thing we have to give is the most immediate thing and the thing that gives rise to everything else, and that is *attention*. It's impossible to give anything if you can't give attention, but it's often taken for granted.

Very often, we may find ourselves not giving attention to things, so we don't give because we don't see a need for it. Maybe our attention is very limited, closed in or impoverished; it's an attention that has no love, no warmth and no expansiveness. It's a fearful, impoverished, guilty or frightened attention. It's very important for us to see this in our minds. In some ways, anything we do requires some act of attention. This is not a social duty or a moral obligation, it's a fact. Are you well? Are you healthy enough? If we are only living in a ten-per-cent world that we can't give much attention to, then our life is considerably reduced in terms of its extent, its richness.

If we do give our attention to things and make that the primary thing to do, then we don't feel guilty or pressured, or in some way forced or

socially obliged to do things. We see what comes up out of that natural extending of our attention. This is something we can all do, whether we're rich or poor, whether there's anybody around or nobody around, we can still give attention. The mind has a willingness, an openness, an interest in giving its own quality, its own awareness to things. Then we see what comes out of that. It may be that there's nobody around or nothing to give. We can't always have a say over these things, but we have some say over whether or not we give attention. That's something we're directly responsible for. And it's free!

When we consider this topic of giving attention, it opens up the whole realm of who needs to be given things. If we start to develop the giving of attention in a universal way, then it very directly affects our response to and relationship with our experience. A lot of our relationship with experience is quite limited, so we tend to snatch at this and ignore or gloss over that. We indulge or saturate in a particular point, skip over this and wander off on that. The array of attention is very scattered, so we need to be aware and recognize what it is like when we do give attention more steadily. One attribute of mindfulness is a steady giving of attention to things, whether they are great, small, external or internal. And the result is that we live in a more in-tune and in-touch way.

The experience of attention is the present moment. You can think about the future but you can't attend to it. You can only attend to the thought about the future that's happening in the present. In a way, the present moment defines where our giving of attention is and widens the scope of it. We can give loving-kindness to people who have died, because that's something we're experiencing now. We're experiencing a sense of loss or appreciation or respect, or we can forgive something that happened ten years ago. If it's still twitching away somewhere in the heart, then you can be giving attention there. You can be giving attention to your own body or the realm around you – it's what's

contacting you. The meditation itself can be seen in this light, as a scanning. Then you can give particular attention to the *citta*: the heart, the basic repository of our sense of self, the centre of our psyche. The sense of a personal core is the *citta*, so to give it attention must always be a primary focal point because it is the thing that's receiving the living, the dead, the near, the far, the poor, the rich, the needy, the happy ... The whole lot is happening there. That's where it contacts you; that's where you're moved.

You can notice a day like today, when millions of people gathered to pay their respects to Princess Diana who died a few days ago. Actually, what's happening there? Where is she? What good is it doing her? These are the things you could very well ask if you're outside the situation. And yet when you're inside the situation and you're doing it, you feel very much a part of something. These people are obviously doing it, not because they're being forced to, but because there's a real need to do that: mourning, grieving, bringing her into consciousness. Somehow that person or perception has become part of our conscious experience and so it has to be properly attended to. Rituals and prayers are ways in which these bits of our conscious mind can be properly attended to.

We can consider: who are we giving these things to? Who are we doing it for? How does it affect her? Will it make her happier? Well, we can't know exactly by looking at reality through a spatiotemporal lens. We look at things in terms of form, time and space, and it's confusing because our own *citta* is not in contact with that. It doesn't know what day it is, it doesn't know the other side of the moon. All it knows is what's happening here, now. It doesn't know anything else. All the rest – 'Thursday', 'Tuesday' and whatever – that's all happening as a thought; that's the way you think of the world, but the way you experience it is *here, now*. What is there? Grief, sorrow, joy, happiness, love and what's coming out of that. These are *citta* experiences.

In terms of people and impressions, what we're dealing with are perceptions in the *citta*. That's the immediate expression, the immediate experience; you're dealing with a perception in your mind. In ordinary daily life, this is happening all the time. You have a perception of your son, daughter, cousin, granddad or whoever, then you think, 'Oh, I wonder how they are?', so you phone them up. Now, that affects that person, doesn't it? Yet what happened to you was that 'that person' arose in your mind. And when you're talking to them, you're getting a certain audible impression that also feeds into that perception in your mind. When you look at them, you get a visual impression and that feeds into that perception in your mind. So you're dealing with that. That perception in your mind has certain qualities: it gives warmth, it's loving, it's concerned or whatever. It has certain emotional and psychological qualities in it. That's all happening *here*, to you. This is not to deny an external reality, but that's 'your door' to it. Your door to what we call the external world is through the perceived experience. And if you aim accurately and directly for that, you don't get confused; you know what you're doing.

The problem is that sometimes there's a kind of shift between the perceived and the external: you're aiming for this person in your mind, but they've gone somewhere else, they've let you down or they've changed. Let's think of someone like Muhammad Ali, who was an ebullient, bouncy lion of a man. Now he's this rather shrunken figure with Parkinson's disease, this kind of saddened old guy. But Muhammad Ali in my perceptual mind is always this bouncy, fast-talking, sassy, punchy, big, strong man. So if I were to see him there would be a feeling of, 'Who's that?' There would be a sense of dissonance.

When somebody dies, we might think, 'What happened to you? Where have you gone? You're not doing *it* any more.' I was looking at the corpse of one of our supporters who was never short of words, and it's the first time I've seen her shut up in years actually! There she

was, not saying anything, being quite composed and calm. She was not particularly composed, calm or quiet when she was alive. The animated experience had died away, so you think, 'Who's that?' Suddenly you hardly even physically recognize them. But when you bring up your memory of them, you think about 'that person who had that kind of way of speaking', and there is that particular feeling in your mind that you have become used to, so you give through that. Certainly, when we're relating to each other, we tend to have these kinds of images and feelings, that, if we're attentive, we keep adjusting so that we're not holding a false image. That's what we have to steer through.

When they had the funeral of Ajahn Chah, a million people came through Wat Pah Pong monastery. This place normally looks like nothing is happening: twenty people turn up and it's a crowd! There were a million people going through, 500,000 in one day alone. Even the king and the queen came to pay their respects. Everyone was giving attention ... to what? This man died a year before; if you were to be crudely materialistic about it, you could say it's just a bunch of rotten meat in a box. But the perception of Ajahn Chah for all these people was that of a really worthy, honourable, noble being, someone who was able to bring into daily life many beautiful values that people honoured: honesty, diligence, effort, scrupulousness, mindfulness, wisdom and compassion.

There's a need for people to find a way of addressing that perception and to give themselves to it, so we do these ceremonies. We haven't really given anything; we bow, light some candles and incense. These are just ritual actions that we need to do to express that feeling of giving: giving our attention, giving our hearts, giving our love, giving our respects ... to what? An image, a perception. That's not an empty thing at all. The perceptual world, however changing and tricky it can be, is where our *citta* resides. And if we don't have perceptions of things such as nobility, trust or kindness, and we don't have people who are

able to carry that for us to some degree, then our world is very sad indeed – because of the inability to give and extend outside of our own contracted state of being.

The highest kind of giving, not in material terms but in terms of extending the mind, is the fullest giving of the brightest kind of attention towards the things that mean the most to us, towards the things that sustain our perceptual realm. This is the emphasis the Buddha placed upon it. From the material, charity point of view, the Buddha said that it's more worthwhile to give alms-food to a virtuous person like a Buddhist monk than to an immoral person.²⁰ The cynic in your mind might think, 'Mmmm ... I think he has a bit of self-interest there!' The Buddha also said that it's even more worthwhile to give things to a Buddha than giving to a hundred arahants.²¹ So, if you're extremely cynical, you could think, 'That's self-interest. It means "give everything to me, I want it all."'

If we suspend that way of looking at it for a moment, we can consider what is really being taught here. What can you give a Buddha anyway? They don't want a new car, they don't handle money, they don't accept gold, silver or land. You can only give them rice, cloth or a candle. But in order to give that, you're actually extending your mind, you have to attend to the thing you're giving, attend to the person you're giving to, and to feel that the reason to give is a sense of wanting to connect. What you connect to and what you relate to is something that, for you, means enlightenment, supreme wisdom and compassion – someone who has managed to live that way. It's not really for their benefit, but it's in order to firm up your own perceptual realm, to have that feeling of connection to an enlightened being. If you don't have that perception, then your life is incredibly impoverished.

20. Majjhima Nikāya 142 and Saṃyutta Nikāya 3.24.

21. Aṅguttara Nikāya 9.20.

We all have a perception of people who make money, deal in power and operate nations and countries, and it's OK on one level, but if that's all our perceptual world contains, it doesn't go very far. Our perceptual world could also contain things like empathy, liberation, awakening, peace, freedom from delusion, joy and compassion; these are tremendously important things to have going for you in your mind. This is where that sense of generosity, extending your mind, extending yourself into that realm, gives you the highest kind of happiness and uplift, and sustains you.

I was reading something from a talk of Ajahn Sumedho that touched me very much. He was saying that when he'd just become a monk, he didn't speak Thai at all and he met a Thai monk who had previously been in the Thai Navy, so he'd met Americans and knew a bit of English. This Thai monk had been with Ajahn Chah for a while, so he was quite diligent in terms of discipline and meditation. Ajahn Sumedho got quite inspired so this monk said he would take him to see Ajahn Chah. This is how Ajahn Sumedho got introduced to Ajahn Chah, so he always felt grateful to this monk. But later on, this Thai monk disrobed and went right downhill. He became a drunkard, an alcoholic and a wastrel.

He became quite renowned in that province as being 'a real no-good', so Ajahn Sumedho no longer wanted to feel connected to this person. But Ajahn Chah said to him, 'Whenever you come to Ubon, you should always make the effort to see this man, because when you do, he can remember one good thing he's done in his life. Your act of generosity would just be to make contact with him. Even if he's a complete wastrel and degenerate, at least maintain contact. This is what you can do: give of yourself to just be in that person's attention. It reminds him of one good thing he has done in his life, so he is a little bit stronger than he would be if you didn't do it.' Ajahn Chah had a remarkable sense of compassion and insight to point to that and ask Ajahn Sumedho to give himself in that way. It really shows the understanding of how generosity can be practised by anybody, when we're giving attention.

We all know how, very often, when we have problems or difficulties, all we really want is somebody to listen to us. If you have somebody who listens fully, gives their attention to you, then in the end of it you think, 'Oh, I suppose it was not so bad. Never mind, it doesn't matter. I was getting too het up about it. I was taking things too seriously.' A person can be incredibly valuable in their own right, just by giving attention to you or by being a good example.

This aspect of giving is certainly to be encouraged. When we gather together in a monastery, as we are doing now, then in some way we're all giving something to each other. We're saying, 'This is an occasion I feel is worth coming to. I've driven fifteen miles to come here – or I've walked downstairs; that was a major effort but I did it.' That means there is a certain kind of uplift and brightness in the air. We've done that. That's a generous thing to do. The important thing with all acts of *dāna* is to actually notice them. In Buddhist countries, any act of *dāna* is very firmly underlined. It's not to make people feel proud but it's to say, 'Look, watch that, you've just done something good. Don't get lost in who you think you are, what you didn't do and what you don't have enough of. Look, you did that! That's good. Stay with that, focus on that.'

The giving of attention is the basis of all other goodness, and sometimes it's the only act of goodness you need to do. Sometimes it's actually all you can do. The more you highlight the quality of, 'I've been there, I was present, I was open, I gave myself to it,' the more you recognize the feeling of uplift that arises with it. When you think, 'I can't do that ... I always do that ... My mind's like this,' and dwell on that perception, it doesn't do much good. It makes you feel depressed and dull; you close down and you get lost in yourself: 'What can I do? I'm always ...'. Rather than beating your breast and lamenting, come out and tell yourself, 'Look, just attend to *this*.'

When I was in India, I met a Canadian man who had been a monk. He was talking about his experience with Ajahn Chah. He was out of place being in Thailand and he was having a lot of problems, doubting about whether he should practise *samatha* or *vipassanā*, whether he should practise as a layman or as a monk, whether he should practise in America or Thailand. So he thought, 'I'm going to sort this out!' He went over to see Ajahn Chah who was in another monastery about five or six miles away, expecting him to give an answer to his questions. When he arrived, Ajahn Chah was sweeping the dead leaves around his kuti. The Canadian monk came up to him. Ajahn Chah looked at him and said, 'Working is better than talking' and gave him a broom. So the monk said, 'OK,' and they both swept and swept and swept ... It was getting quite dusty and the sun was going down. He thought, 'Well, it's time to go back to the monastery. I suppose Ajahn Chah doesn't want to talk to me.' He put his broom away and went to take leave of Ajahn Chah. Ajahn Chah turned round, caught hold of him by his shoulders and held him. He looked straight into his eyes and said, 'Whatever you're doing, be with that. That's all.' 'Oh!' That was his way of giving total attention, and you could see that at that particular moment. The timing of his gift gave it even more value.

If that person came along with his questions, I expect many of us would have replied something like: 'Well, let's sit down and talk about this. Some people say you need to practise *samatha* first but others say practise *vipassanā*. In the Aṅguttara Nikāya it says you practise them equally, but someone who practises *vipassanā* should practise more *samatha* and someone who practises *samatha* should practise more *vipassanā* ... Well, of course you could practise in America or Thailand ...'. The person would just come back with a mind full of thoughts, still thinking, 'Yeah, but then I could ... or maybe ...'. You have given them quite a bit of time, but you haven't actually given them very much.

What Ajahn Chah was doing was trying to bring that person's mind into the present moment, because when the mind is in the present moment, that's where you can most directly give. Then the mind is open. When it's dealing with this and that, it's not present; you're not there. To give, we have to be present. What is given is present, and the person who receives it has to be present. When these come together then we have the highest kind of giving, which is the giving of insight, the giving of Dhamma. These are things we can consider in terms of the act of generosity.

Moreover, once you begin to see the pattern of it, it becomes of some significance in relating to yourself. Mostly, our experience of self-consciousness is one where we have an impression of ourselves; we have a perception of ourselves. We think about ourselves: 'I think about me ... I watch me ... I wonder about me ... I didn't do that right ... I have these kinds of problems ... I'm this and that ...'. In a way, it's the same model, but now the other person is the 'me' that 'I' am watching. Very often, our relationship between the 'I' and the 'me' can be one that's not very generous. It can be one that's quite demanding, judging, tight-fisted and forceful: 'I don't trust me. I don't even like me very much. I like me on the good days, but I don't like me when I'm out of it altogether, when I have these horrible moods going on or when I blow it.' Then the 'I' and the 'me' can be at loggerheads. So often the actual activity across that relationship is one that's very tense and taut, and even frightened: 'I don't really want to know me, so if I can just put the lid on me and shut me up, then I'll be all right!'

We can try to do this in a number of ways: by sensory stimulation, by suppression, or by putting the 'me' out to somebody else: 'You made me like this! I was all right until you made me like this. You made me do this!' If we're stuck into this, it sours everything, really, because the 'I/me' relationship becomes a model of the 'I/you' relationship. The 'me' keeps on changing and 'you' keeps on changing, but very often

the same kinds of activities are recurring: 'I want something from you. I have an opinion about you. I judge you. I fend you off. I pull you in.' These kinds of things can be happening. This is a tendency. I'm not saying this is the total picture, but these things definitely do occur among people. Then you find you're doing the same thing to yourself (to 'me'): 'I shut things down, I bully me, I shut me up or I don't listen.'

The idea and the cultivation of generosity are of great value. We can see generosity as being of enormous value to other people in the world, and when we give to other people, it's of enormous value to us; it uplifts us. It doesn't really matter what we give specifically so much as the appropriateness and timing of the gift, and the purity of the giving. And this applies also in giving to yourself. In a way you have even fewer things to give to yourself, but the timing and the appropriateness are crucial. I suppose the obvious thing to say is that so much of the time we just need to give a bit of love: a simple word, a bit of attention. We attend to this experience and we note what's really happening. We note the wounding, the disparaging, the belittling, the blustering, the bluffing, the puffing-up or the distracting. We recognize that we can't give attention if we keep doing these things. It's like a moving target, isn't it? If we keep clouding it, shrouding it and pushing it away, we can't really give anything to it. We are missing that opportunity. If we were able to fully give to ourselves, there would be a possibility of healing, a togetherness and a unification of this experience.

The experience of meditation gets stuck when we are watching our mind or trying to deal with it and it's going all over the place. What that means to us is: 'I can't concentrate. I can't meditate. I have all these defilements. I'm impure. My mind goes bonkers. I was doing quite well yesterday, now it's gone off.' We think that the real problem is that 'I can't concentrate, I can't do it, I have this and that,' but the real problem is the 'me': 'I have this opinion about me, and the "me" is not good enough.'

When you begin to understand the experience of generosity, you realize that the real problem is the relationship between the two ('I' and 'me'); that's the vital point – and the point we miss. So often there's that statement of, 'Well, I'm not very good at this. How do I get rid of that? How can I become like this?' If somebody says, 'What do you feel about yourself?', the experience we feel is often one of sadness, loss, distaste, and sometimes probably fury and even rage at ourselves.

The Buddha's insight in this process of experience was that there are certain things that seem like fixed realities, such as 'me' and 'the world'. As long as we are operating on that level, it's always confusing. 'Who am I? What happens to me when I die? How can I relate to the world? How big is it? Where did it come from? Where does it stop?' The Buddha said that if you keep thinking in that way, you just go round and round; you just get caught up in a jungle.²² What you should really look at is the arising condition that bonds the two – this is 'dependent arising'. The relationship between 'me' and 'the world' is the thing you should be aware of. This is really the living point of where you are. And from that relationship, the self and the world are born. From that relationship of fear, worry, narrowness, stinginess, brightness or joy, the world and the self are born. They are dependently arisen. They are dependent upon these crucial psychological movements that can be experienced in our own *citta*.

External realities are certainly affected by external conditions, but one movement of forgiveness in the mind actually changes the whole realm of our experience. One movement of love or acceptance in the mind changes the world and the self: 'I' no longer judge, 'I' no longer complain, 'I' no longer demand, 'I' no longer control, 'I' no longer bully, 'I' no longer tyrannize, 'I' no longer run away. And 'me' is no longer some kind of nasty, snide demon 'I' keep pushing away. It's not

22. Majjhima Nikāya 2.

some scruffy little herbert that I have to try and tidy up. It's not some whimpering, snivelling thing that I have to try to shut up. When we reach into that, then we have a transformative experience.

In relative terms, you can say that this is the highest kind of giving, because if we could do this internally, then it would lead to liberation from our negative, corrupting tendencies. The way we create an internal world is the way we relate to the external world, because this is the only way our mind can work. It works in terms of dependent arising of a subject and an object and the relationship between the two. An untrained person would tend to either see the subject or the object, but miss the vital point of the response. This response is the supreme thing to give our attention to. If we notice that and scan it in meditation, we see that it's actually something supple and variable. At first, it's chaotic. Chaos is a negative expression: it's disordered and strange; we're alarmed and frightened. This is because of neglect, and the more we keep attending to that living-edge of chaos, then, instead of trying to tame it or prune it, we actually begin to be made wise by it.

Life is madness, but it doesn't have to be upsetting. It's random, chaotic, variable, spontaneous, unpredictable, uncertain, bizarre, unfair, unknowable and uncontrollable. It is that way, and the problem is that we have never learned to operate in that world. In that world of chaos you can't operate from the position of principles, of 'self', control, holding on or of perceptions of 'mine'. You just have to flow, give and trust that purity. These are the things we become more capable of doing when we have cultivated the qualities of knowing the right time, the right way and the right point to get to. All skilful actions will lead towards finding the time and the place for the fullest act of giving ourselves.

The giving in this sense is something that seems obscure or perhaps the most risky thing to give to. We're giving ourselves to the insecurity,

to chaos, and not expecting anything back, because insecurity is the thing that most fully opens us, reveals us, makes us awake and gives us the greatest freedom. It doesn't have to be a negative experience at all. It can become suffused with the quality of our own love, aspiration and faith, and then it becomes a refuge. It's a refuge that is not shakeable, because worlds may come and go, people are born and die, things arise and cease, but what goes on forever is uncertainty and insecurity. You can bank on it! It has never let us down. Things have always been this way and always will be, so this is the edge to aim for.

When you get stuck on an opinion of yourself, notice that it's something that's becoming permanent. It's hardening up and therefore suspect. When you start to make a designation of yourself, it's suspect. It may give you something to look at. For example, if you think, 'I am a jealous person,' you say, 'OK, let's focus on that.' Then what really needs to be done is to come out of those views and to start to examine what's really going on: how it arises, what it's caused by and what the processes that keep putting you in those positions are. Perhaps you're not giving enough space to your resentment; you're trying to shut it up. So you have to learn to relate to your resentment and take it in. If we're generous towards our resentments and fears, then they can cease. That's all they need. When they're fed, they're satisfied, so they cease and turn into other forms. This practice of meditation is the most powerful kamma; it can transform demons into angels. But you have to get to know and trust yourself with these things.

Standing on the Sphere of the Brahmavihāras

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In our practice, we are developing the foundation of mindfulness. We are referring the mind to awareness; we are aware of the mind. That very reference enables us to recognize that there is an awareness of mind. What do we normally consider mind to be? What is awareness? What is mind? What is attention? What is consciousness? What do these different words mean? How can the mind look at the mind? The Buddha refers to the *citta* affected by greed as ‘the *citta* affected by greed’²³ and the same goes with the *citta* affected by doubt, the *citta* when it’s contracted, when it’s bright and expansive, when it’s defiled, when it’s not defiled and so on. We can be aware of the boundary, of the defining characteristic that conditions the mental process. When we’re looking at the mind, we are looking at the pattern of how it has been affected, noticing the ripples in awareness. We can discern the rippling, the contracting, the expansiveness, the shaking, the afflictions and the positive factors – the various forms of mental patterns. The conditions of mind can be known as such; we can be aware of them and contemplate them. In a way, when the mind is released from conditions there isn’t any mind in the same way: it’s pure awareness.

The mind is the result of an activity, the result of being activated, being stimulated in some way. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, we are encouraged to be aware of the arising of an activity and the effects of an activity. Effect is our reference point. Due to conditions, we experience something like

23. *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, Majjhima Nikāya 10.34.

a dull mind or a happy mind and it seems to be ‘a thing’. That activity conditions a certain sense of substantiality and permanence. We experience the mind as being irritated or happy and then it becomes ‘*I am irritated*’ or ‘*I am happy*’. We can see how this conditioning process first of all makes a mark, a ripple, an affect, an activity, then that mark is attended to and becomes a reference to a substance, an essence, an entity.

The first skill is to recognize that ‘This is an affect – this is the ripple of fear, joy, brightness, energy or dullness.’ The quality of noticing, which comes with the factor of *sati* (mindfulness), brings its effect. *Sati* is not an unconditioned thing; it’s a conditioned thing, so it also has an effect on the *citta*. Our practice is a matter of making that mindfulness strong so that it acquires the strength of *samādhi* (collectedness). Mindfulness is the intelligence of a reference point, and the quality of *samādhi* gives it weight, power, strength and sustainability. Mindfulness and *samādhi* work together. We need to have a quality of *samādhi* to hold the presence of mindfulness in the mind and then we let it bear fruit. The practice of purifying the mind is being aware, holding to that awareness and letting mindfulness have its effect on the trembling or any other movements of the mind. This gives a sense of calm, equanimity and balance.

Mindfulness is the basic medicine that keeps referring, pointing and bearing a particular area or topic in mind, but there are other medicines. We can recognize what particular medicines or topics are useful for us. One topic that is often mentioned by the Buddha is the *brahmavihāras*: the ‘boundless’ – that which has no boundaries, which moves out of boundaries. The boundaries are ‘me’ and ‘you’, and ‘this’ and ‘that’. The *brahmavihāras* take down those dualities. The boundless mind doesn’t hesitate; it doesn’t resist, tremble, fight, react or divert. It’s steady, abundant, exalted, lofty and pure.

The *brahmavihāras* give the mind a serene and bright steadiness, free from aversion and ill-will. Aversion is that which directly averts, moves away and contracts. Ill-will is that which adds a particular flavour, a kind of sourness. From these two we get such things as fear, despair, cynicism, hatred, bitterness, resentment, jealousy, guilt and so forth. All these are encompassed under ‘aversion and ill-will’. They are the ‘illnesses of the will’. The *brahmavihāras* are qualities that blow those things away. Essentially, the *brahmavihāras* are about establishing a particular sphere of awareness for the *citta* to rest in so that it doesn’t react to its own contractions. Just like when we place something into a bath of warm water, the water washes away and absorbs the afflictions; it takes the heat away, warms out the coldness, softens the rigidity and brings ease.

The *brahmavihāras* are very often dealt with under four headings: *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (empathetic joy) and *upekkhā* (equanimity). The Buddha instructs us to cultivate them with a mind that is abundant, exalted, unbounded, not contracted, free from aversion and ill-will.²⁴ The *brahmavihāras* have these qualities in common. It’s useful to consider these qualities: we’re making the mind that way rather than just recognizing the quality of kindness towards a particular person or being, or the quality of compassion for a particular person or a mind-state. If we haven’t dealt directly with the experience of the *citta* – its nervousness, its restlessness, its anxiety – our experience or practice of *karuṇā* might in fact be anxiety, but we don’t really know that. We haven’t made the mind abundant, we haven’t made it free from ill-will. We still feel hurt in *this* way and *that* way.

Let’s consider the five *indriya* (spiritual faculties). First we have *saddhā* (faith), which is a quality of the mind that extends it beyond its norms.

24. For example, as at Majjhima Nikāya 7.13, 21.11, 40.9, 50.14 and 55.6.

Then we have *virīya* (energy): the ability to sustain. *Sati* is the ability to register and bear something in mind. With these first three faculties we can extend, we can sustain, we can supervise and bear something in mind. Then we have *samādhi*, which is a general strengthening factor. When we bring more strength into our practice, then *paññā* (discernment or wisdom) arises. It's good to consider *samādhi* as a mental faculty to bring to mind, rather than something that only occurs through focusing on a meditation object and developing the *jhāna* factors. We can develop *samādhi* as strength of mind, as amplitude of mind: we bring our mind's vigour, sustaining calm and strength into our *sati*. We back our mind up into the *brahmavihāras* and give it power so that it can stand against its fluctuations and tremblings. It has the power to hold these fluctuations, to calm down, steady and extend beyond its boundaries, its fear, its opinions and intolerances.

As we practise in this way, we may recognize that the *brahmavihāras* express themselves in terms of well-being or goodwill: 'May this being be well. May I be well.' We are bringing that tone, that quality of *mettā*, into play: 'May there be well-being.' We are recognizing the love all creatures have of happiness. Every creature seeks its well-being. We recognize this common feature and how much we cherish it, how much every being enjoys its well-being. We need to find ways that help the mind relate to that and express it to itself – when in contact with people, with creatures, with things and with ourselves. How deeply we cherish and want our own well-being and happiness! Then, when our mind is complaining or agitated, we wish it well, knowing this is what it really wants. We are using that voice to express the quality of abundance and blessing. We are using the breath to expand the contractions of the mind, to blow out the creases and the dents.

Karuṇā is that which recognizes the helplessness of creatures. All creatures are vulnerable to sickness and death. All creatures detest pain. Ugly, vicious, nasty creatures detest pain and die. Sweet, lovely

creatures detest pain and die. By thinking in this way we overcome the boundaries of our tastes and preferences. We look at the common bond: the seeking of well-being and fearing pain, rather than the black or the white, the short or the tall, the fat or the thin, the here or the there, this kind or that kind. We start to wipe out those discriminations and instead go to these universal qualities. This is what makes the mind abundant and exalted. The discriminative mode is highly complex; it can refine the particular, exact qualities of the things that we like best. We can discriminate between objects and people with extreme detail, and yet we can recognize our common bond.

The *brahmavihāras*, which include the spirit of non-harming, non-blaming, non-punishing and non-righteousness, are always described as being directed 'to others as to myself'. The cruelty of the mind, which can simply be dismissiveness, labelling or pigeonholing people, is often vindictive, righteous, punishing and blaming in a legalistic kind of way – and we can do that to ourselves and to others. In working with our mind, we notice how it's been affected, that is, the sense of feeling wounded, an inclination towards revenge, the holding of a grudge or an attitude of looking down upon others. Instead of following any impulses that these affects may provoke, we breathe out with the wish, 'May they not suffer.' May the mind check that weapon of violence and may our power of *samādhi* and the sphere of *karuṇā* stop it whenever it comes. Whenever we find blame and accusation coming up in the mind, we use this quality of *karuṇā* to check it and stop it.

It's as if you were extending a force field around your body and mind, making it large and very thorough so that there isn't a crack in it. Even if it's small, it's complete. Even if it's only around your own heart, it's complete and continual, so that whenever you fail, get it wrong or lose your temper, still, you have that complete boundary of non-harming, non-violence around your mind. You don't violate yourself, you acknowledge faults and weaknesses and you see that this is the time

to correct it, to set it straight, to make amends, rather than going into blaming. When you are meditating you can feel defiled or inadequate, you can feel yourself falling away, failing, blowing it or dithering, then this vicious mind affected by its frustrated pride and conceit starts to attack. Practising *karuṇā* gives you a standing place, a *vihāra*, a place of abiding. You establish that *vihāra* and you stay in it. Whenever you leave that *vihāra*, you come back to it. This is the *vihāra* of brahma and it's in line with practising the *brahmacariya*, the brahma conduct, which is serene, extensive, not caught up with sensual delight and aversion, and which should take us to the *brahmavihāras*.

Muditā is the ability to express appreciation. We can consider this in the immediate sphere around the mind: the appreciation of every skilful mind-moment, the embellishing, lifting up, acknowledging and enjoying of it. *Muditā* is the faculty of appreciative joy, empathetic joy, the ability to appreciate. This is very important to recognize as a whole theme of practising; the uplifting of what is good rather than continual fault-finding. This is not to be naïve but to be actually practical, because you can only clean out the faults if you have a good place to stand. If you're standing in the muck with a murky, discontented mind, there is no way you can really clean it out. Our agency is defective, so we need a place to stand, a *vihāra*. We appreciate whatever is good. We appreciate even just our willingness to do the work – the grubby work, the boring work, the work we aren't very good at, the work that doesn't make us look great. We are doing the work that has to be done and appreciating that, whether it's just physical work or it's the work of the mind.

Sometimes it can be easier to appreciate others, but we also need to appreciate ourselves. We develop that skill by learning to appreciate things such as people's harmlessness. Sometimes we notice particular actions, but we don't notice the refraining from actions. Much of our practice is about refraining from actions, and we tend to not notice the non-losing of temper. You may lose your temper once a week but that

means that six days a week – most of the time – you don't. So, attend to that. The Buddha gave the example of a bloody-handed murderer, saying that he spends most of his time not murdering.²⁵ You can think, 'Well, that man has murdered only ten people this week. There's some good in him.' But most of us are a lot loftier than that!

We learn to appreciate the joys of life. There are trials and struggles but we can appreciate the joys of Sangha life – the simplicity, the steadiness, the virtue – and the joys of our mind, however distorted it may be. We can appreciate the fact that we have this miracle of awareness, that we can reflect and start again. It's a very forgiving practice if you go with it. These *brahmavihāras* are standing places and, as you stand upon them, you find you don't have to stand on a view, a conceit, a success, a failure, a status, a position or an activity. You can stand on the *brahmavihāras*. They are steadier, more supportive and more suitable dwelling places for *samaṇas*.

Upekkhā is evenness of mind. We recognize that what we often take mind to be is simply cause and effect (*kamma* and *vipāka*). The effects give rise to causes; causes give rise to effects. If there is a cause, there will be an effect. What we see in ourselves and others is just this law. You are experiencing *kamma* formations or *kammic* processes, and there can be a sense of detachment and equanimity in the realization that the *kammic* processes refer to and stimulate themselves. We don't have to pick them up. When we take a person in this way, we see that it's the way they are and that they have to experience the effects. You can start judging them for being like that, but this is wrong view. You can just say there is an effect happening, but you don't know what the cause is. Those causes can be all kinds of things that you can't see or don't know. So we are standing back from snap judgements. We realize that however much we may be affected by a person's behaviour, that

25. Saṃyutta Nikāya 42.8.

affect is in our own sphere and we have to work with that, and that person has to work with their thing.

We can't avoid being affected. The mind has to receive affects; it's a sensitive experience. What we can do is to not regenerate kamma. As in the case of Awakened Ones: they are aware of suffering, but they don't get affected by it and add to it with mental and emotional pain. They don't grab hold of it and make pain, problems, indignation, defence and judgement out of it. They see: this is where we are, this is *saṃsāra*, this is the plane of grief. We experience it, but we don't have to be grieving over it any more.

Equanimity is certainly not a jubilant experience. We're not saying everything is wonderful and great, because yes, there is suffering, but we don't make a problem out of it. There's the suffering of *saṃsāra*, but we don't have to suffer over it. There's a sense of 'not happy, not sad'. We recognize sadness but we don't psychologically engage with it. We recognize happiness but realize that happiness comes and goes, so there's equanimity. We're not engaging with the happiness, we're not grasping it, and that applies to ourselves and to others.

Sometimes people confuse equanimity with indifference or insensitivity. When you are indifferent or insensitive you don't even notice things any more; you are tuned out. Equanimity is noticing, sensitizing, being fully aware, being interested in being aware, being receptive. In that way, our awareness is extended with *upekkhā*. *Upekkhā* actually extends our awareness to its farthest extent because it overcomes any sense of doing anything; it goes beyond that. It's a pure presence of being. We are not doing anything – not praising, atoning, forgiving or making something – so the mind is fully extended. And we are backing that up with *samādhi*: holding it, staying in it, enriching it, and finding out where the cracks are, where we get affected or startled. We examine: 'What's that? What haven't I seen

here?’ This is the way that *sati* picks and refers. We examine that and recognize, ‘This too will change.’ This happy state will change, this sad state will change, this sense of everything being OK will change, neutrality will change, and recognizing that gives rise to *upekkhā*. But that’s not dullness, blindness or indifference, is it? It’s full and strong, and we stand and abide in that.

These *brahmavihāras* are very helpful cultivations for strengthening *samādhi*. Rather than strengthening it by focusing on an object per se, we focus more on the sphere within which an object persists in our mind. Objects here can be thoughts or feelings, and particularly mind-states, perceptions, scenarios and memories. We assess: ‘Are these held in a sphere of ill-will? Is the mind prickling and contracting under that particular object or can we make the mind stand in a *brahmavihāra* to receive it, to work with it?’ You use the *samādhi* factor to work on the relationship rather than the object, and that is very helpful in its own right – in dealing with the mind but also in the cultivation of *samādhi*. When the qualities of calm, suffusiveness and *pīti* begin to have their effects, instead of there being a sense of the mind watching an object, there is a more holistic experience. Then it becomes very important to be able to relate to a field of awareness rather than a point or an object appearing within it. We need to learn how to sustain attention through a field of awareness, and to make that field of awareness great, strong, bright, abundant and free from trembling. Then, of course, our *samādhi* in itself is strengthened, and both of these cultivations of *jhāna* and *brahmavihāras* arrive at the place of *upekkhā*. That’s their arrival point: a boundless mind that doesn’t waver, has wisdom and understands the nature of things.

As we practise today, we are going to the mind-door and acknowledging the shape of the mind. We know when it bends, when it buckles, when it wavers, when it trembles, and we relate to that. In cultivating the *brahmavihāras*, you may bring to mind an object in order to produce a

particular mood or attitude. For example, you dwell upon the image, memory or recollection of a trusted guide or of someone you admire or love, in order to give rise to a sense of feeling cared for. First, that particular mood is suggested to the mind by the object, then the mind opens, relaxes and accesses that mood. You use an object that supports *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* or *upekkhā* and you contemplate that sphere of the mind. Then you can let the object go and see if you can sustain that sphere. If the sphere wavers then you bring the object back until eventually that sphere can stand on its own.

Then you can introduce objects that are more neutral or even conflicting, such as someone you dislike or are frightened of. You bring them into that sphere of *brahmavihāras* and see if your power of *sati* and *samādhi* can transform the way your heart is affected by them. And you cultivate that towards yourself in the same way. You first acknowledge your good features and facets, then you remember a painful incident or a flaw in your character. You drop that in and see if you can relate to it from a standing place of brahma. When we look from the brahma realms, we can see everything as ‘causes and effects’. It’s not ‘a person’, it’s a cause, and that cause can be stopped; we can put that aside. This is the way to cultivate. There are mind-states, people, physical feelings, scenarios, difficulties with work, difficulties in the community, and we just go back to how the mind is contracting, trembling or reaching out. We practise with that.

Refuge

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I'd like to mention the significance of the sense of connection as being the foundation for *samādhi* and also for *paññā*. When you have something you feel you can be with, you have that sense of connection. You're not simply conceiving that 'thing' or having a blurred contact with it, but you're able to bond onto it – to bond onto the body, mood, mind and feeling. You fully connect to it and sustain that connection. It's easy to connect to the unwholesome states – somehow we get snagged on them – but the experience of *pīti* or rapture occurs when we connect to a wholesome state. There is a particular tonality that occurs in the *citta*: it's bright, and not flustered or agitated. That brightness has a certain steadiness. It may not be a rock-solid calm, but it has an ease of rhythm to it. It's not panicky or clouded. That quality of brightness gives us a sense of confidence. With that confidence, there's a quality of being able to stay relaxed or settled back (*viveka*), a quality of being able to stay in our space and be with the feeling of the tactile sensations of the body, the walking, the standing, the breathing – and that makes it a meditation practice.

Connectedness needs to be established as a general way of life. It's more than just being able to revert your attention onto a meditation object – that application comes out of a much larger sense of connection. It's not a desperate hanging on, but a feeling of being able to contact, to be with, to feel settled in your own space, into where you are. You really know where you are. You sit and are able to acknowledge a particularity of where you are and how you're feeling right now, without being too refined: sensing the ground beneath

you, the room or the space around you, the medium around your body. It may seem slightly mysterious because there isn't anything in the space around you, but by connecting to it, your attention is taken away from the mental afflictions to which you are prone (internally mulling things over, remembering things from the past) and brought to the present moment. You ask, 'What's an inch in front of my chest right now?' Then you feel, 'It's all right. There's nothing harmful there. There's nothing painful there. There's nothing desperate there. I don't have to reach out for that space: it's right here.' You're making it conscious, something that the body begins to feel. You are settled into your space. Space doesn't require you to be a good, bright or brilliant person; it's just there.

We would all be in a terrible state without space – squashed! We don't need that much room – just a few inches – but without that vital bit of space, where would we be? Of course this seems puerile because it's so simple. You are able to come back to something immediate, obvious and palpable, and you don't have to develop an extraordinary refinement of it. It's always here for you: your own little space around you. To me, that's what refuge is about, really. It's there whether you notice it or not, whether you're in a bad mood or a good mood; whatever happens, it's still there for you. You keep breathing it, you can move around in it: it allows all. We can build up a lot of skilful *saññā* (perception) around such a simple thing as space.

Connecting to simple things helps to take us out of the mental states that are desperately seeking connection – for example, when we're thinking of 'something I want and I've got to have', 'something I'm going to get' or 'something I don't have'. We're like a hungry ghost, with a pin-mouth and a big belly: 'I want to find ... have ... get ... become ... be!' We feel we ought to attain something and get somewhere, and with that comes the terrible hungry ghost experience: 'I haven't got ... I can't ... I'll never get enough ... I'll never get

what I want ... I can't be ...'. But when we develop a sense of connection to simple things, we strengthen our sense of refuge – a good place to be.

The Buddha said to Ānanda, 'Ānanda, anyone you have compassion for – your friends and relatives – you should establish them in the Triple Gem. Because for someone who is established in the Triple Gem, it's impossible that they would be reborn in the hell realm, the hungry ghost realm or the animal realm.'²⁶ Therefore we establish anyone we have compassion for in the Triple Gem, so that they will not be reborn in terrible, afflicted, demented, fearful, hungry states. And of course, as we have compassion for ourselves, we also establish ourselves in the Triple Gem. This is more than just a brief Pali formula or a one-off initiation; it's a continual sense of knowing that you're in something that is protecting you. You're in something good and bright, that offers you the opportunity to bring forth and mature your own goodness and brightness. It also offers you an opportunity to clean out this gorge, to 'throw up' these afflictions: it acts as the most efficient lavatory ever built that can and will flush them all away. The refuge in the Triple Gem is really priceless: sometimes it's a source of food, and sometimes it's something to 'throw up' in. I think we need both.

Most of the time, we are not able to establish ourselves in the refuge. We are either in the animal realm (experiencing sense desires, fear or restlessness), in the hungry ghost realm (endlessly needy, orphaned, a refugee of *samsāra* desperately trying to get something) or in the hell realms (experiencing resentment and bitterness), which arise when we are not connected. To strengthen our sense of refuge, we can consider the Precepts and sense-restraint, and dwell within that. We can consider the foundations of mindfulness and dwell within that. As monastics, we consider our requisites and develop a sense of contentment to be in this form. We establish our refuge by what we do and hold, but also by recognizing what holds us – the two go together.

26. Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.75.

As monastics, we can consider the fact that we're living with people who keep precepts, who have the inclination and the intention to do so. I've been in some of the most troubled countries and yet I always seem to be with these kinds of people. When I go to different countries in the world, it's as though somebody were changing the wallpaper and putting different masks on, because there is a very similar perception of being with the good. Maybe people aren't good all the time, but at that specific time when we get together, it's coming around in that particular realm. We bond around generosity, harmlessness, respect, listening and caring for each other.

Of course, we may also have negative and critical perceptions of those around us. We can get lost in the fine details of a person's behaviour, mannerisms or speech, of what they didn't say and should have said. At these times, we can go back to the perception: 'Nobody is here to harm me. Nobody is here to deceive me. I may get these impressions, but nobody is here to do that.' That's something I feel absolutely clear about. Without thinking about it that much, it seems obvious. We easily recognize that it isn't the case everywhere: some people actually do want to harm others, lie, deceive, cheat, steal, mutilate and maim, so it's nice to be able to recognize what we are part of – a group of people who keep precepts and have no harmful intentions. From that position, we can see the frenzy, the desperateness, the neediness or the grumbliness of the mind fading out.

Let's consider the four requisites. We who live in this particular monastery may not think about them very much, because we have all the food, robes, shelter and medicines that we need. We even give things away to shelters and old people's homes when we have more than we need. If we didn't have any clothes and shelter we would be out naked on a cold night like this, with howling rain and wind. It would be pretty miserable, wouldn't it? As alms-mendicants we consider not only the requisites themselves but also how they came around: they

were all *given*, and we didn't have to go out and hassle people to get them. People gave them because they wanted to. They liked it; they thought we were somehow worthy of respect, worthy of alms. These requisites are actually saturated in lovely things. They are not about *me* – 'Because I deserved it.' They are about everybody, what the whole thing means for people who offer them. People don't say, 'This is just for so-and-so.' No, it's for the whole sangha.

I think we all have a room of our own now, but in the old days, there would be two, three or four of us in a room. The house was leaky, so there were buckets catching the water as it splashed all over from the roof. Yet it was better than being outside! These mantled sheep out there can grow their own wool, munch the grass and stagger around, but we can't do that as human beings. We can't grow our own hide or our own wool and munch grass like a yak or sheep. And as monastics, we have to be given these things. Sometimes you may want to be like these mantled sheep: 'I'm all right on my own, thank you! I don't need very much. I munch my bit of grass and grow my wool. Don't bother me!' Although we may conceive that idea, it's untrue really. No matter how much we like the idea of being self-reliant and independent, we still need food, robes and some kind of shelter, even if it's just a big umbrella. These requisites don't grow on trees; they are brought forth by people.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, there is that connection to a wider sphere. That connection doesn't come through pressure, but through people's love, respect and wish to support. We build our refuge by taking the time to carefully consider and reflect in this way. We call this *anussati* (recollection), which is bringing our mindfulness to consider the presence of something that's actual. The Sangha refuge is something you can build up by considering the people visiting here, the people living here and everything that's around you. They are all physical, tangible. But I'm sure all of us can become disconnected from

that. Perhaps you think it's not very important, or maybe you feel obligated to be grateful for everything – for example, when eating your porridge, you may think, 'I've got to be grateful for this!' – but that is not how it is.

We need to realize that, unless the mind is able to find a refuge, we are going to go into the hell realms, hungry ghost realms or animal realms. The disconnected mind spins into these afflictive states. We all have that kammic propensity, that past kamma of affliction, which intensifies the self-view: this sense of 'me and mine, separate from everything else'. We tend to intensify the experiences that create a stronger sense of separation, whether they feel good or bad. If we are very good at something we may think, 'I'm different, I'm special,' but at other times, a sense of separateness from others brings awkwardness and pain – and the introversion that might result from that. Often we live in the realm of thoughts. All that activity in our head is trying to connect to something that will give us a sense of stability. We may want to find an answer or a particular state of knowledge. We may want to find a particular place of calm. We want to find something to connect to, a place where we feel settled. It's very basic. This restlessness is something that only arahants don't have; they are *totally* connected. This restless energy has been consummated by connecting to the Deathless, by abiding in nibbāna. We need to find the goodness in the present and bond with that. The mind needs this kind of nourishment, support and holding, to enable it to develop in a more refined way.

Thought plays a significant role in cultivating the mind, the *citta*. It's extremely potent and powerful for us. The advice of the Buddha is to refrain from clinging to either the major signs or the minor characteristics of thought.²⁷ A 'major sign' could be the greed, confusion or aversion by which a thought is powered. The 'minor characteristics'

27. Dīgha Nikāya 2.64 and Saṃyutta Nikāya 35.120.

are the particular parentheses or twists of interesting new concoctions we have created out of these basic patterns – that kind of restless urging of the thinking mind. As a practising bodhisattva, the Buddha divided thought into two classes.²⁸ On one hand there are thoughts of aversion, cruelty and greed, and on the other hand there are thoughts of loving-kindness, compassion and letting go or relinquishment. We can divide thought in this particular way. When the mind is caught up with unskilful thought, is it possible to turn it towards a wish of well-being for ourselves or for another being, and get that modality of experience going?

Cruelty can be hard-heartedness, callousness, indifference or dismissiveness. It's the sense of not taking in another, not opening up, not receiving or meeting another, either through direct ill-will or with the attitude of, 'You don't count. I don't care what you think!' When cruelty is present in our minds, we need to go to something more open, receptive, compassionate, sharing, empathetic – from their grosser to their subtler forms. This is very important. Cruelty is not necessarily thinking of pulling people's eyes out or other nasty, unkind deeds. Quite a lot of the time we might be dismissive or caricature people: 'Oh, he's a basket case!' or 'She's kind of dumb!' These sort of remarks can be quite flippant and come out easily. We can make general comments such as: 'Well, all Italians are like that!', and 57 million people are disparaged on the basis of one! Or we can say something like, 'Typical woman!', and 3 billion people are dismissed in one shot.

This dismissiveness arises because we don't want to open up to something different or strange. We have to come out of our own thinking or our own mode of being. To my mind, this is really what compassion is: the ability to come out of 'my bit of it'. It doesn't mean that I have to cling to 'your bit of it' (or even agree with it), but at least I can receive

28. Majjhima Nikāya 19.2.

it, feel it and be willing to hold it. We can do this through speech or by simply acknowledging other people's presence. When we live together in a house, we acknowledge that somebody is living next door, so maybe we have to be a bit quieter. If you see somebody struggling with their chore, perhaps you can help them, rather than walking around in your own little space: 'Get out of my way! I'm busy. I'm meditating!' Actually, there's another human here, with sense organs and feelings. It's not that we have to do a whole number on them, but we need to open our consciousness to include them. It's something very important to bear in mind, otherwise we might cling to the idea of 'concentrating the mind' and get absorbed in a not particularly wholesome way.

This is not to say that we have to be terrifically sociable. However, when we live with other people, when there are people moving around, we need to develop a sense of openness. We don't necessarily need to engage with each other, but we are open and give people space. When you do this in silence, it's really lovely. Certainly, in a monastic community, we can feel the sense of mutual support that can occur without a lot of conversation or request; people just attune. It's one of the beautiful things that happen in a community where people have been practising together for some time. It's really nice to feel that you are in an intelligent sphere of connectedness, rather than living in a bus station or a place where everybody is moving about ignoring each other. When we are in a sphere of knowing or attentiveness, the emotive mind feels more settled. Our physical actions and ways of thinking can help to bring us into that state of feeling centred or settled – which happens as a felt sense in the *citta* rather than as a thought. Thought is a part of what happens in the mind, but it's only one part of it. There is also a whole receptive, emotive, feeling aspect to mind.

Relinquishment comes from feeling the sense of, 'Well, I have this, but I don't need it,' which can occur when we have a sense of connection: being with what we are with, feeling welcome, feeling here, feeling the

richness of the life. The sense of ‘I don’t need this’ arises because we recognize nothing is worth hanging on to. We can let things go, and that actually feels nice. We need to develop the ability to not cling to the things we have, including our requisites, because by clinging, the mind moves out of a sense of shared connection into a modality that is much more prone to criticism and complaint. For example, somebody wanted to renovate the kuti I live in, but because I didn’t want it or hanker after it, there’s a nice feeling about it. I can live in it and I can move out of it. I like to have people live there when I am away. I share it. And I can go to other places and feel happy there. When I am in this kuti, I feel it’s a very lovely place to live – the roof doesn’t leak! But if I started to think of it as *mine*, I would probably find all kinds of things I would want to do there: painting, jazzing that up, fixing this, changing that ... and then trying to make it always be this way. But being able to live in the generosity and goodness from which these things arose, and trust in it, is much more satisfying than holding the requisites too tightly.

We might consider all the things that are here, or even the very space of the meditation retreat. We have this opportunity; it’s a supported opportunity. But if we think, ‘Oh, I’ve got these three months of retreat; it’s *mine* and *my* space!’, then the mind starts to get a bit nasty and tight, because it changes from the feeling of abundance to a feeling of, ‘I want to get something, make something, have something, be something with it.’ Then it’s easy for the mind to get on to a particular track, and anything that doesn’t fit with it is seen as disruptive. We become agitated and grumble: ‘Oh, no, group *pūjā* ... breakfast together ... people coming giving *dāna* on Sundays ... people wanting chanting for their dead relatives ... Why do you have to die and get in the way of *my* retreat! Please, stop dying! How inconsiderate!’ Instead, we can use the whole thing as something to hold with dispassion: this is the space, and this is what’s happening – nothing in particular: just this body ... chanting ... this ... that ... and it can all flow together. We

can reflect on whatever is happening now and what it's doing to the *citta*: irritation, joy or whatever mental state is triggered. We have a container to receive it all: that basic sense of 'this is all the offering; this is all the refuge'. Everything is happening within that refuge, and we are connected to it.

We can more broadly develop that way of considering things and apply it with the standards we keep, the whole monastic form and the ethos of the life. That's very helpful; that enables us to take these things internally. The mind is emotive; it can be stirred, aroused, joyful, elated, depressed, irritated or sad. This is the activation of the mind; it's called *citta-saṅkhāra*. The mind bumbles along in particular modalities. Then that basic upheaval, that welling-up of *citta-saṅkhāra*, throws up thought. The thought process comes and spins. What activates the speech function is called *vacī-saṅkhāra* – of course, speech is also internal. The *citta-saṅkhāra* is the emotive welling-up, and the *vacī-saṅkhāra* is the welling-up of speech, the thinking, the inner chatter. The two are obviously connected: what we think about tends to stir up our emotive faculties; when our emotive faculties are stirred up, thought gets activated.

Thoughts introduce new material to the mind. That material isn't physically in front of us, but it can be extremely potent. When you think about something that is not how you would like it to be, it induces this extremely potent stuff that gets the *citta* moving again: where it should be, where I ought to be, what so-and-so is, what so-and-so isn't, what so-and-so thinks I am, what so-and-so doesn't think I am, why I think that so-and-so thinks that I think they think I am, what so-and-so used to think I was ... and so on. This is the awful, heartbreaking truth of the here and now: we're usually living in a place that's actually quite *sabai*, quite OK in many ways, but we get caught up in these reels of disconnected thought, which make life miserable for us.

The pain in the knee is just the prologue. When it stops, the curtains are drawn and the big stuff comes downstage: all the stored-up tangles of these unresolved emotive currents well up, bringing particular thoughts with them. Thoughts are the results of these emotive currents, but they also stir the mind. We get this kind of wrestling team of thought and emotion: when one tires out, the other one takes over and boosts it up again in a kind of spin or oscillation. The whole thing disconnects us very seriously from the Triple Gem, from the present moment, from that sense of belonging, of being here. This is something that occurs for all of us.

We can only let go of a particular thought process when we understand it fully or when we can see it arise and pass. And we can only do that when we have something to hold on to, or something that holds us. It's difficult to really perceive or experience the rising and passing, and selflessness of phenomena, because we get dragged into them. Even though a particular thought may arise and cease, the emotive current carrying that thought wells up and keeps welling up, stirring up new aspects of it. We're not actually cutting out the stream of it.

You need a firm ground to stand on so that you don't get caught in a riptide; then letting go is possible. Letting go is not possible until there's something holding you. We may think that this 'holding' occurs through having strong concentration, and yes that can be the case. The truth is that when you lack strong concentration, at first you are in a riptide. Then you think, 'I need strong concentration to get out of this!' Yes, but you don't have it, otherwise you wouldn't be there! In this case you need to come back to something more accessible. For example, you bring to mind the thought, 'Nobody is here to harm me' or 'All the requisites are offered.' You're not just thinking these thoughts but also taking in the feeling behind them. You can also bring to mind the goodness of people, timelessness, or the sense of being received. You take and hold the thought, distilling it until you come to the meaning

of it. More than *holding*, we are *held in* something: the good kamma of our lives.

I find this principle very beautiful because there are times when the mind seems to be unable to focus or hold. The hindrances, the pain or the past kamma just wear the mind down and we become wearied. At other times, we genuinely recognize the refuge. Often, it's at the time of death, or when you're really helpless, that you realize that you're carried in the goodness around you. But sometimes the energy of our thinking mind resists that helplessness: we can desperately try not to feel helpless, not to be frightened of helplessness or not to experience it as painful. To my mind, helplessness is one of the doors to compassion – when we feel a sense of 'I can't do it ... I can't make this work ... I can't control this ... I can't stop this.' When we really receive that helplessness, something in us can give up, let go. Then we realize we are actually held in something.

Although we talk about 'being held in something' as if it's some external medium, we are actually describing the process of *citta* itself. The *citta* gets activated and stirred and then it streams: the thought process runs ahead, pulling and throwing the mind around. That activity of the *citta* eventually stops, either because we manage to stop it, or because it gets to the point where it can't find a way out, it can't go on any further. For a moment, the activity stops. Then the *citta-saṅkhāra* subsides and we find ourselves in a mental openness or sensitivity. This is the internal aspect of the refuge. It's our own innate mind. It's the open ground. The mental activity subsides back to reveal this space, and for this moment we perhaps feel strangely quiet, free, larger or stopped. Before we were spinning, we were in a quite tight space; there was a whole flurry and flutter to it. We've been pushed, driven, dragged, and now it has stopped; it's just an open, quiet space. Without anything having been resolved, everything feels OK.

It is tremendously enriching to recognize that we don't have to think our way out of a problem and find a solution. We just need to find a way in which the *citta-saṅkhāra* subsides again. It has been pulled out by the magnetic power of perception, thoughts and feelings, and we need to take it out of this charged state. It actually seeks discharge. Often, in our ways of thinking we seek discharge by finding an 'answer'. For example, if we're filled with desire, we try to get what we want so that desire will be discharged. Or when there's aversion, we try to get away from whatever it is that we don't like. We seek the discharge of *citta-saṅkhāra* in some particular object, state or scenario, and it can momentarily occur. That's why we follow desire, to get a momentary 'Ah!' But the quality of desire is such that it very quickly picks up again, and we are pulled in, because we haven't actually cut the stream.

When the stream of the *citta-saṅkhāra* subsides – when the desire or fear or aversion stops – we find ourselves in this open, quiet state, with no particular aim, no particular drive, no particular activation. The volitional element ceases. That can be done deliberately, but sometimes it happens by itself, when we come into a cul-de-sac, when we have to give up. None of us gives up easily – or rather, the *citta-saṅkhāra* doesn't give up easily. It struggles, it fights, it kind of holds on to itself. Even if it's not saying anything, it's still pushing.

We can calm down our thinking but the *citta-saṅkhāra* still remains hunched in a particular state of tension: fear or hankering of some kind. For the discharge to occur, often you have to fully experience the anger or the greed or whatever it is, without acting upon it. When you go to the energy itself of that particular thing, it rises up, and it's only when it rises up that it can subside again. This whole process has to be held within the crucible of refuge. We can be angry within refuge or greedy within refuge. The *citta-saṅkhāra* is not out of the refuge if you stay connected to it. The only thing that takes you out of refuge is disconnecting from the *citta-saṅkhāra*, denying it or thinking that you can manipulate it.

If you take the Precept level of refuge *internally*, then any unkind thought will take you away from refuge: shame and guilt will arise. However, the Precepts only involve deliberate, intended activity: that which we refrain from doing. Of course our inclination is to put an end to the greed, hatred and delusion of our internal process, but we can't do that from a moral perspective. You might get the moral tone: 'This is not good,' but that alone is not enough to bring you to cessation. You need to hold unwholesome impulses within a sphere of not acting upon them. Feel them as *citta-saṅkhāra*. What is the energy of this surge? How does it affect the body? If you can, disengage or put aside the story or the thought, which will tend to keep disconnecting you from the energy of *citta-saṅkhāra*, and take you out into *then* and *there*. Connect to the energy of *citta-saṅkhāra* and feel it. Having arisen, it can subside; it discharges.

Because thinking is so associated with the *citta-saṅkhāra*, in order to get to the energy, we often have to deliberately play with the thought. We could stop thinking, but it isn't always possible. To counteract the thinking, we can think on another theme, such as: 'Even though he's a completely arrogant, selfish pig, he means well.' This doesn't always work. Alternatively, you can try to slow it down: 'Arrogant ... selfish ... pig ...' and maybe visualize pigs. When the thought is allowed its own energy and its own speed, it captures the energy of the *citta-saṅkhāra*, but if we change the rhythm of the thought, it can't hold the same energetic pattern. What conveys the mood is the particular energy of the *citta-saṅkhāra* behind the thought, not the thought itself. If your thinking process is getting manic and fast, that's the energy of the *citta-saṅkhāra*.

If you change the energy of the thought – its speed, rhythm or tonality – it can become neutral. Play with the tonality of thought. Doing so breaks the bond between the thought and the emotive basis or the affects of the mind. There are a number of ways we can do this,

but the important thing is to be able to curb the runaway drive of thought – which will tend to take us into what’s going to happen next year or for the rest of our life. We are all very good at rapidly constructing scenarios out of a few initial thoughts. A thought is suggested and we’re pulled in by it. We are quick-minded and very easily deduce and jump to conclusions, so it’s good to be able to take the initial thought and slow it right down. Play with it. Change the energy of it. The *citta-saṅkhāra* can’t be kept going if we have affected the energy of the thought.

The subsiding of our affliction, the ending of suffering, is just for one moment. ‘At this moment, my mind is not worried; I’m liberated from worry.’ You take it like that. We hear the words: ‘End of suffering ... complete end ... liberation ... total freedom,’ and we see how our thinking turns to big pictures, big patterns, perfections and absolutes. But the practice is learning how, in the present moment, to note the absence of cruelty and enjoy it. Note the presence of the mood of gratitude and enjoy that. Note the absence of fear and really enjoy that. Liberation is something you *develop* through fully appreciating and dwelling in the wholesome.

Liberation is built up through slowing down the energy of the mind, changing its compulsive runs. When we can do this tinkering on that level of meditation, we realize that one of the most powerful reasons why the mind runs is because it’s looking for something to connect to. It’s looking for birth, and if we do not get born in the human realm or in the *devaloka*, we get born in the animal, hungry ghost or hell realm. It’s going to connect to something – it’s a heat-seeking missile – so you have to develop the cultivation of connection, this sense of being held in something. This is called ‘the heap of the wholesome’.

When an affliction falters, stops, slows down or subsides, be aware of that. When it isn’t here, know the absence of it. When you are

not suffering from a particular affliction, appreciate that: here is the absence of doubt or the absence of depression. Note and dwell in that. What does it feel like? Make your absences things that are present for you. The volitional quality, the driven quality of *citta-saṅkhāra* can be allayed, and by that process we find our refuge. The completion of allaying is a complete dropping, plunging into, merging into the Deathless, *nibbāna*, rather than a reaching out for it. So it's important to develop this mode of mental behaviour: dropping into the present, feeling held by it and building up our perceptions of this refuge.

Contemplating Internally and Externally

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Tonight I'd like to talk about cultivation in a broad sense, particularly in reference to the conditional nature of meditation: the factors that support it, internally and externally. We integrate what we consider meditation practice to be into our lives. We cultivate the path that we're generating and caring for, and we support the particular conditions that make the heart of meditation – or the focusing aspects of meditation – a lot more straightforward. But sometimes we can set up unhelpful conditions. Meditation shouldn't just be a matter of willpower, plugging away at a meditation object, although at times it can of course be helpful to use will in our meditation. We apply ourselves to look at particular things that are difficult. We notice the supportive factors that aren't present in the meditation and we try to find ways to bring them around. Some of them are internal, but many of them are external. In the standard text on the cultivation of mindfulness, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*,²⁹ the phrase 'cultivating internally ... cultivating externally' is one of the continual refrains, and it refers to the body, feelings, mind and *dhammas*.

I would like to read a couple of pieces from Venerable Analayo's book on *Satipaṭṭhāna*. In it, he gives references to the Commentary on overcoming or inhibiting the hindrances. When you feel you can't meditate or your meditation isn't going well, there may be a whole range of hindrances, but which one is the leading one? What is the enlightenment factor

29. Majjhima Nikāya 10; also *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta*, Dīgha Nikāya 22.

that is not there? In the fourth foundation of mindfulness, these are the two real axes: you look at the negative factors and how you can inhibit, obstruct or remove them; and then you look at the positive factors and how you can generate or bring those to bear. You stand back from the meditation and look at it objectively. What is really happening? Maybe there is no calm, no joy, no energy or no investigation, or the quality of restlessness is very strong, or perhaps there's a sense of dullness or ill-will. So you give an external, objective review rather than struggle with all this.

If we take meditation as just an internal quality then very often we're actually *in* the hindrance; we're almost reconditioning it. We're in its spin because we're being affected by it. Then it gets recycled. For example, when you're in a state of restlessness you then feel agitated and unhappy; when you feel unhappy you then experience ill-will or sense desire and so forth. Sometimes you have to come out to a neutral ground: 'Actually this is what ill-will is like. It feels like this in my body and it encourages my mind to move through these topics.' You are reviewing it objectively rather than solely feeling the rancour or the distress of it. When you come out of the grip of a hindrance to a neutral place you can investigate: 'What particular factors would allay this?' The agility required to move to an objective perspective is really crucial in *sati* and *sampajañña* (mindfulness and clear comprehension).

Now I will read the factors for overcoming or inhibiting the hindrances from Venerable Analayo's book.³⁰

30. Reference from the Commentary: Papañcasūdanī I 281-6.

Sensual desire:

General acquaintance with and formal meditation on the body's unattractiveness,
Guarding the senses,
Moderation in food,
Good friends and suitable conversation.

Aversion:

General acquaintance with and formal meditation on loving-kindness,
Reflecting on the kammic consequences of one's deeds,
Repeated wise consideration,
Good friends and suitable conversation.

Sloth and torpor:

Lessening food intake,
Changing meditation postures,
Mental clarity/cognition of light [or looking at light],
Staying outdoors,
Good friends and suitable conversation.

Restlessness and worry:

Good knowledge of the discourses,
Clarification of the discourses through questioning,
Being well versed in ethical conduct,
Visiting experienced Elders,
Good friends and suitable conversation.

Doubt:

Good knowledge of the discourses,
Clarification of the discourses through questioning,
Being well versed in ethical conduct,
Strong commitment,
Good friends and suitable conversation.

So there's one very clear theme running through, isn't there? Apart from anything else, there is *kalyāṇamitta* (good friend) and *dhammakathā* (suitable conversation). These are undoubtedly external references, things you can go to; they are not internal things. They are the most obvious and paramount external factors in overcoming or inhibiting the hindrances.

Now, let's look at the supportive conditions for developing the *bojjhaṅgas*, the enlightenment faculties.³¹

Mindfulness (*sati*):

Mindfulness and clear knowledge,
Avoiding unmindful people and associating with mindful people,
Inclining the mind accordingly [towards the development of *sati*].

Investigation of *dhammas* (*dhammavicaya*):

Theoretical enquiry,
Bodily cleanliness,
Balance of the five [spiritual] faculties,³²
Avoiding unwise people and associating with wise people,
Reflecting on the deeper aspects of the Dhamma,
Inclining the mind accordingly.

Energy (*virīya*):

Reflecting on the fearfulness of the planes of misery [your hell realms and unfortunate states],
Seeing the benefits of effort,
Reflecting on the path to be practised,
Honouring the offerings one has received,
Reflecting on the inspiring qualities of the tradition that one is following, of one's teacher, of one's status as a follower of the

31. Reference from the Commentary: *Papañcasūdanī* I 290-9.

32. The five spiritual faculties are: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom.

Buddha, and of companions in the holy life,
Avoiding lazy people and associating with energetic people,
Inclining the mind accordingly.

Joy (*pīti*):

Recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, one's virtue, one's acts
of generosity, heavenly beings and the peace of realization,
Avoiding rough people and associating with refined people,
Reflecting on inspiring discourses,
Inclining the mind accordingly.

Tranquillity (*passaddhi*):

Good food,
Agreeable weather,
Comfortable posture,
Balanced behaviour,
Avoiding restless people and associating with calm people,
Inclining the mind accordingly.

Concentration (*samādhi*):

Bodily cleanliness,
Balancing the five [spiritual] faculties,
Skill in taking up the sign of concentration,
Skill in inciting, restraining, gladdening and not interfering with
the mind at the right time,
Avoiding distracted people and associating with attentive people,
Reflecting on the attainment of absorption,
Inclining the mind accordingly.

Equanimity (*upekkhā*):

Detachment towards people and things,
Avoiding prejudiced people and associating with impartial people,
Inclining the mind accordingly.

Again, there are two very strong themes that run through this list. One of them is an internal feature: inclining the mind accordingly. It means that first we deliberately have a sense of ‘I need to develop this particular enlightenment faculty,’ then we have the inclination to do something about it, and finally we look and consider what will actually enable that development. I can’t say, ‘Be happy, be joyful!’ but I can find out what will bring joy, ease or tranquillity around. The other theme that runs through this list is an external reference, and again, it has to do with the quality of the people we associate with. It’s a continual theme in that way. So you can see that these two internal and external references are simple ones, standard ones.

In meditation I can say to myself, ‘I wish I’d incline the mind towards calm – or towards mindfulness.’ Most of the time I forget to do that, so then when I incline the mind towards the breath I’m inclining it in a dutiful, hasty or hurried way: ‘Oh, I suppose I’ve got to do this!’ I don’t do it in a very bright, joyful, relaxed or calm way; I don’t do it in a way that brings a sense of ease. We can miss the right tonal quality that is necessary, such as a sense of comfort or reassurance, which gives us a feeling of contentment. We are encouraged to deliberately incline, not by saying the words, ‘Be happy, be joyful,’ but by bringing up the tones, the memories, the reflections and the attitudes that are in tune with that. Very often, when the mind is in the grip of a hindrance, the first thing you need to do is to step out of it. You don’t suppress it, but you move to the sense of an external, objective reference – for example, ‘This is restlessness.’

One of the main difficulties is the quality of delusion, which is one of the three root poisons – the other two being greed and hatred. Delusion is the most difficult one – because you’re deluded, you don’t know it. The mind is distracted, foggy, cloudy, and it often misses the point. Delusion produces wrong, deluded views, opinions and conceits, so we’re not really getting to the point of the irritation, the grief or whatever it is.

Instead, the mind is conjuring things up that are directly distracting, justifying the mood or blaming someone for it. We recognize that we are missing the point because, when we do that, it just goes on and on and on forever. The deluding quality of the mind says, 'You really have to think this through!' You may absorb into how you're going to do this or why they didn't do that or how you never have enough of this ... The mind will produce ample evidence to support these moods, and there's generally a good grain of truth in it; it's not completely fabricated. You can assemble enough evidence for it, but the point is: we are looking for liberation, not justice.

You need to come back to: 'Wait a minute. I'm missing the point of how angry and upset I feel. What is happening in my body right now?' Maybe the heart is pounding or the body feels tense. 'Why don't I walk up and down?' To come through delusion you have to step out of the spin of topics, stand outside it and then start to objectively review: 'What is the real core quality of this hindrance as an experience?' There may be several hindrances – for example, ill-will, restlessness and doubt – but just take one. Let's choose restlessness. What combats that? Something that's steadying. If you're not able to find that in the mind or in the breathing, you can stand or walk without putting a lot of agitation into it. You may find that's something simple and steadying. Or you can seek a trustworthy person or a situation where you feel there's friendliness, warmth, serenity or stillness. It doesn't even mean you have to engage with it; you simply pick up the tone. For example, if I've been very busy with a business meeting where we discussed our concerns about the heating, the finances and so forth, and I feel agitated, I'd go to the Dhamma hall. 'Oh, yeah, that's what it is all about: the empty space, the Buddha, coolness, calmness, a sense of stability.' When I pick up the tone of that, the mind comes out of the agitation.

The quality of delusion gives rise to the sense that you have to really get in there, think it through, figure it out and sort it out. Recognize it

for what it is. Again, we go back to an objective reference. You might notice: 'I've gone into the house, got halfway upstairs, remembered that I was supposed to be downstairs, got downstairs, remembered that I had forgotten something upstairs, went upstairs ... I forgot where I put my keys, I forgot where I put my shoes ... I bumped into somebody and I was very abrupt ... Wait a minute! I think something is not quite right here! Mindfulness is not present. I haven't been able to bear anything in mind.' You're contemplating your behaviour and reflecting; you're looking externally without judging. Look at what that person is doing. What would you say about that? Is that a sign of calm or mindfulness? No, it's a sign of agitation and restlessness. You're not blaming, because there were certain causes and conditions that brought it around, but your awareness stops you continuing in that mode; you're taking responsibility for it.

As we saw earlier, the quality of *kalyāṇamittatā* as an external reference is also very helpful. When you talk to somebody, suddenly you hear yourself speaking and you think, 'Oh dear! I'm agitated. I didn't realize that. There is actually quite a lot of ill-will when I'm verbalizing what happened.' *Kalyāṇamittatā* is a specific sense of relationship that is not really involved. We tend to think that relationship is about getting involved with somebody on a personal level whereby we're seeking or are interested in generating particular emotional affects. A *kalyāṇamitta* is for the purpose of Dhamma reflection, so it's someone who is a good listener, a sounding board, one who can be objective and whom you trust. A *kalyāṇamitta* gives you either the presence of someone who is calm and attentive, where you hear yourself, or someone who may simply listen and say, 'Ah ... Hmmm ... Oh ... What do you think is happening right now?' – just like a mirror. Of course, in our lives we're probably a bit of both for each other. There's some degree in which we can meet with objectivity, but I imagine most of us also have some sense of enjoying, being uplifted or getting involved.

I think we should recognize that whatever warmth there may be in involvement, there are also the pangs and the sorrows of it. The more deliberate and perhaps rarer thing to develop within relationships is that sense of steady objectivity, which is not a cold objectivity but a caring objectivity of a good listener. We use a *kalyāṇamitta* as an external reference because somehow we don't really see ourselves. They could say, 'Well, you say you experience a lot of drowsiness in your meditation, but do you realize ... you actually look really ill to me.' 'Oh yeah, I suppose I am.' We don't want to take into account that perhaps the body is diseased or stressed or we've done a lot of hard work or we've been in very testing circumstances. A good friend is someone who says, 'Well, there was this and that, wasn't there?' rather than, 'Well, you should be mindful!'

It's amazing that we don't see ourselves very well. We don't take these causal conditions into account because of the abiding delusion of self. There is no real full awareness that in fact, there isn't an *I* who does things; there are just the particular conditions arising in the present moment. So as soon as you start saying, 'I can meditate' or 'I can't meditate,' already you are missing the point. Nobody meditates, essentially; it's just causes and conditions that are there or not there. We use the full scope of *sati-sampajañña*, internally and externally, a sense of reviewing: 'What's needed? What's present? What's absent?' That's why learning or reviewing these lists of basic stuff is useful as an external reference.

I would say that, because there's quite often a feeling of stress, suffering, worry or agitation, or a feeling that you can't do it, the most important reflections are going to be those that bring around joy, contentment and tranquillity. These are things that people seem to lack, by and large. We're often quite good investigators, but the sense of contentment, well-being and joy is lacking, so we need to incline the mind that way. Here again the obvious external references are the

Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, the good friends, the people we've been with and our good deeds. If you're inclining in terms of cultivating the path, then that itself is something to bear in mind. There are all your less inspiring moods and thoughts, but there's this inclination towards truth, towards purity, towards being real to yourself; you're actually owning up to what's going on. When you pick up the tone of that, there's a sense of dignity, truthfulness and honesty. To me this is steadying and stabilizing.

Some of us have the good fortune to cultivate the path in a community. There can be a lot of difficulties with that on the affective level – the disagreements and irritations that occur – but if we look at them and cultivate objectively, we get a lot of contentment. In the many years I've spent as a monk, there was quite a lot of disharmony, disagreements and things going wrong, because it's the place where the stuff comes up, where the suffering, the confusion and the pains get revealed, and a lot of that gets projected and sloshes around; it's quite stressful. But I can also recognize that, despite the great confusion, there's always been good intent. I can't say that anybody has come here in order to create problems, to be a pain and to be irritating. Everybody had good intent. The *samaṇa* training cultivates the qualities of duty, attendance and mutuality. It stipulates that whether you like people or not, whatever your mood is, you join in, you serve and help. I've found that very helpful. At first I thought it seemed a bit insincere, but now I'm very pleased I've spent years serving people. Whether they liked me or didn't like me, whether they were confused or intimidated by me, whether I felt perplexed or whatever, still, I've supported people.

If I reflect on it that way I might consider my teacher, Ajahn Sumedho. I gave him support without stint for fourteen years, and still I like to do that. During fourteen years, if he asked me something, I would do it. If he asked me to go somewhere I'd do it, and I would look towards ways of attending. For about eight years, at Amaravati, most days I would

go around to his kuti and massage his feet – he has a bad foot as you may know. I may have been working from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m., and then at 5.30 p.m. I'd go around and massage the Ajahn's feet. It wasn't like, 'Wow, this is a great, fun thing to do!', but just, 'This is the thing we do.' And that's what I wanted to do.

In terms of living with this person, at first I certainly didn't always feel easy and relaxed with him. Emotionally I'm quite awkward, a bit shy and withdrawn by nature, but it's not as bad as it used to be. At the time I was very withdrawn, awkward and a bit tongue-tied, but I thought, 'You actually don't have to be that chummy, just go around and do it!' So I'd go around and clean his kuti, wash his cups or just sit there and do something, and let the relationship come from there rather than having to get all warmed up and nice before being able to do these things. Actually, it was very good like that. I realized that, even if I wasn't objecting to company, it was more the steady, calm presence that I was looking for: I could do good with it. It wasn't complicated or esoteric; it was simple, basic stuff: clean the kuti, fix the toilet, write a letter ... And doing it with a sense of 'This is an offering.' I feel very good about that.

I don't congratulate myself, but when I reflect on it, a warm, joyful thing happens in the heart. I can pick that up and feel the quality of joyfulness. When the mind receives that it settles, shrugs off the worries and discontent and feels joyful and contented: 'I've done good in my life.' Whatever the mind can come up with around the self-view, such as: 'I didn't quite get enough of this ... I wasn't very good at that ... I let somebody down here ... I never got there on time ... I didn't quite make it as a monk ... I wasn't the greatest ...' there is the recognition that 'I've done good.' There has been the intent to offer support without asking for anything back.

I'm sure you've all done this. Sometimes, there's something you don't want to do. Maybe it's not the most wonderful thing, or not the thing

you're really here for, or your mood is not great, but you still do it. And having done so, you remember it, recollect it, and through that you feel the sense that you've been honourable. There are people who are serving on this retreat. It's probably not that quiet and even a bit agitating because you're thinking and worrying about things you need to do, but you are doing good. You said you'd serve and you're serving. You made that commitment and you've kept it. You can just take a simple thing like that. Step outside and look at the unskilful things you could have been doing, and be pleased, take the time to appreciate the merit of your life, incline the mind accordingly. Rather than picking up the meditation theme or the technique, check in with yourself. What do you need to incline your mind towards? What will bring it there?

We live in the simplicity of the requisites. There are plenty of other things we could want, but we have what's necessary. We have the food, clothes, shelter and medicines that we need. That brings an ample quality of contentment. You can see how the mind is not trained to be content with the things we have, but always inclines towards better, newer, cleaner, finer, brighter and so on – particularly in a commercial, materialistic society. Maybe it's a topic we don't think about that much. Isn't it nice to be out of the game? Isn't it peaceful to be out of the game of attracting people, trying to look good, trying to impress people, trying to be a winner, trying to be a star or trying to be pretty or handsome, fast-talking and witty? Isn't it nice to be out of all that rigmarole? Incline the mind accordingly.

We can also develop the external reference much more immediately, intimately. When we're sitting in meditation, if we get embroiled internally, we can come out and reflect on how the body sits. Is the body sitting comfortably? Is it appropriate to be sitting? Is it straining the body? Is it something that supports the enlightenment factors? Or is it something that's creating a lot of disturbance and agitation? There are other postures we can use: walking, standing or reclining.

In the reclining posture, we can notice that the body feels different: the energies are different, the perceived texture, shape and density of the body shifts and changes. When we're sitting there can be a subtle attitude of 'I need to hold the body still – or to hold it up.' When we're reclining, the mind changes and the sense of the body shifts.

Consider the room you're living in and this aspect of the external realm: the cleanliness or that which gives rise to clarity. When you go into your room, who do you think lives there? You look around ... it looks like an agitated person is living here: socks over the bedside lamp, two books half-read turned face down, an unwashed cup with a tea bag in the corner ... Is it the space of someone who has a quality of composure and clarity? In this way, we can begin to have some perspective on ourselves and determine what we need to develop.

We can also contemplate the body externally, how it is in its environment. A few days ago I was walking up and down in the courtyard and I didn't have my woolly hat on. It was quite cold, but I continued, feeling the movements and internal qualities of the body and noticing: 'It's funny, there's this kind of shaking occurring ... but it doesn't matter, I can just keep going.' The body was shaking with cold, and I just kept going. But then I actually started to think, 'I know I can do this, but this body is shaking with cold. It's probably good to put some more clothes on.' It has taken me quite a few years to get around to that, because I easily get very internal in my practice. I tend to bash my body because I don't fully recognize its external features. Going internally is a strong feature in my mind. It goes in all the time; it's a withdrawing kind of mind. It doesn't go out to the world. It doesn't take much interest in the external realm, including this physical form. For me walking outside is just a way of contemplating inwardly, but I then realized, 'Maybe that's why there's a sense of stress or strain. You're pushing it too hard, then the body gets sick or you break bits of it.'

To contemplate the body externally, you notice what it's like in particular environments. How does the body feel when it's sunny and warm? How does it feel when it's cold and windy? How does it feel when you're on your own? How does it feel when you're with a group of people? There can be subtler, somatic affects in these circumstances. Perhaps you're slightly withdrawn in a group of people; you're somehow slightly self-conscious. Notice this. My disposition is to be quite self-conscious. I noticed this in London so I made the effort to come out of it and talk to people on trains. We need to come out of this slightly cowed state that being in the public domain can generate, because in it our minds can be defensive. We contemplate it: 'Where is the tension now? Where is the stress now? Where is the brightness now? Where is the ease now?'

We contemplate the body externally – one's own body and the body of others. You can consider these physical forms and also the aspects that bring around their sense of calm or steadiness. You can pick up these aspects. Of course, the mind can go to: 'Funny hairdo she's got!' or 'I don't like his socks!', but try to pick up the aspects that are supportive rather than follow the ways that the hindrances evolve around what you feel or think about people, or what you think they're thinking. Attune and incline the mind towards supportive perceptions.

We also contemplate feelings, internally and externally. When you're in a feeling – it can be mental or physical – its internal quality is characterized by the roll, the throw, the surge or the pressure of it. It's very often where we tend to go. We're being affected and moved around, so we need to come out: 'This is feeling. This is how this particular feeling affects the body. This is how this feeling affects the mind.' We notice that an unpleasant feeling causes the mind to move fast, shatter, scatter or tighten up. You're looking at things in that sense, objectively. And it helps to take you away from the turmoil of the purely affective level of experience: 'This is what happiness does. Unhappiness is like this.'

We contemplate the mind – or the mental states – internally and externally: ‘This is the heat of passion, the rigidity, the pressures or the flurry of mental states.’ You can feel the sense of being driven, heated up or pressed back and you can step outside: ‘This is what the mind is doing: running around, hiding, holding on.’ You can draw a picture of what it’s like. In *The Dawn of the Dhamma*,³³ there is a drawing representing my mind that I did in 1976 after three or four months of meditation in a monastery: ‘the mad monkey’ – this kind of crazed ape with eyes going in different directions, the tongue hanging out, clawing at empty space. It was great. I really enjoyed that drawing and it was exactly what my mind was like: a kind of freaked-out ape!

It is helpful to be objective about the mind, so drawing a picture of it, describing what it’s doing and what it’s like can be a good support. Sometimes the mind is like a slug, isn’t it? Sometimes it’s like a shivering, little, wet mouse cowering in a corner. Sometimes it’s like a blazing dragon. Sometimes it’s like the sun and moon. Sometimes it’s like mist and rain. Sometimes it’s sweet, sometimes it’s sour. But rather than being in those affects, you’re stepping out: ‘It’s like that.’ You picture the mind, draw it. What would it look like? That’s helpful, because at that moment we step outside of the edge of the affective. Your intention is then no longer in the affect; your intention is just to know, to describe and to witness that affect. That external movement supports the quality of shifting your intent away from this edge where it gets captured by the mental state.

Of course, we can also see the mind of others externally: ‘This is somebody else getting angry. This is someone else feeling joy. This is someone else expressing gratitude. This is somebody else having sorrow. It looks like this. I know that; that’s what happens to me.’ But

33. *The Dawn of the Dhamma* is a book by Ajahn Sucitto that includes an illustrated calligraphic version of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. Ajahn Sucitto offered the original drawings to Luang Por Sumedho.

perhaps more accurately, it's our own mind we can see externally. We contemplate the hindrances and the enlightenment factors internally and externally: 'This is what doubt does. This is what joy feels like. These are the conditions that support it.'

When you contemplate the body internally you notice the warmth, the pressures, the heat and the tingling. When you contemplate it externally, it's a form, a shape moving around in the environment. These are two very different experiences, so which one is 'right'? You begin to see that it all has to do with cognition, affect and intent. What you intend is what you'll cognize. You don't often recognize it but your intent could be captured by delusion, fascination or ill-will so then you'll cognize particular features that support that intent. The body can either be something that's exciting and delightful, or repulsive and repugnant, a source of sorrow or a source of vanity, because the intent gets captured towards making it a source of pleasure or a source of displeasure. The cognitive affects supporting that are then brought up. What about if the intent is just to *know* it internally and externally: 'Well, there it is!'

You begin to free the intent from these cognitive and affective patterns. Then the body is nothing, really. It's something and it's nothing; it's just a reference. There's not much you can say about it – it's just *this*. You could say it's male or female, but that's not really what it is, or relevant. You could say it's big or small, but that's not always relevant. So eventually it's just: 'There is this body.' You're clearing the cycle of affects and hunger for affects and distaste over affects. You're dropping the affects, so the intent becomes very clear. The intent is simply to be present, to know. And that very quality of intent, that quality of knowing, becomes your meditation theme; that's the core of the meditation. You abide in uprightness, clarity and dispassion, in the cessation of kamma, the relinquishment of affects. You don't want to bother with them; you're not messing around with them. If you incline

the mind that way, then the intent of knowing stands free and the mind can settle, steady and stabilize within that development of *samādhi*. You can rejoice in it, feel contented with it. You can feel how simple it is, really. It's a matter of using the will and the intent with wisdom and discernment, which are supported by the understanding of conditions, of kamma and of the good that we inherit: the opportunities that we have in our practice.

So when you have that sense of getting stuck into a state or a place – stuck in helplessness, for example – it means it's time to shift, move around, come out and reflect. This is the supportive environment for meditation. Actually, the Buddha didn't use the word 'meditation' but 'cultivation' of mind (*bhāvanā*), which included calming, gladdening and insight. So when we talk about meditation, it isn't purely an 'on my own, inside' experience that we are talking about. In fact, that experience will always be limited and tricky.

Tonight is Māgha Pūjā so you can bear in mind that we're still in a traditional teaching laid down by an enlightened being and carried out through thousands of disciples. It's important to feel what we're in, the goodness that we're in. You can think of all the difficult things you're in, the difficult kamma you've had and the difficult scenarios in your life, but also use the Māgha Pūjā to reflect on the goodness that you're in, that you inherit, that you're in touch with. We can now cultivate through the night.

Presence

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED ON 10 NOVEMBER 2008,
DURING A TEN-DAY RETREAT AT AMARAVATI MONASTERY.

The qualities of great heart are warm-heartedness, compassion, joyfulness, love and warmth for other people. *Anukampati* means ‘to resonate with’. It’s often translated as compassion but it also means that you share the happiness of others. You feel gladdened by other people’s good fortune. You see the good in others and that lifts you. You see the good deeds and the lovable qualities of other people and you feel cheered. You have compassion when you see other people’s vulnerability. You have equanimity: the ability to bear with, stay with other people and yourself through the ups and downs. These qualities apply ‘to others as to myself’; it’s holistic. You see your own lovable qualities, appreciate and value your own good fortune, and have a sense of care, conscience and concern over your vulnerability. You look after yourself, you are compassionate towards yourself. You don’t put unnecessary pressures on yourself out of some sense of duty or thinking you ought to. With equanimity, you realize that sometimes you just go through stuff and it’s important to not lose faith, to not give up on yourself or on others. These are the tremendous resources of great heart.

In social situations, often there’s a kind of pressure to attend to others and not to oneself. If you’re in a caring profession for example, you may get what’s called ‘compassion fatigue’. Of course, there are many people who need help or support – the list is endless. Then compassion becomes worry and it gradually drains you of the necessary qualities of good heart. Compassion is not just an intention, an aspiration or being sensitive; you also need to have a resource and this is what presence

gives you. Presence is the root and that's what replenishes the life force. If you don't have presence, you're just running on principles and ideals, but you've run out of the basic juice. This is dangerous because if you're running on that, then even when your tank is empty, you still think, 'I'm not doing well enough; I should try harder! They need me!' You get these fixed programs in your mind that take you into auto-destruction.

That's the kind of scenario we see in society. Society is collective but not intimate. There are hundreds of people but they don't really know you and you don't really know them. This is risky, because society is not connected to your real, true presence. It is connected to you via a function or a name or a role, but not connected to you in your presence. For example, your job is your function, your role and your position, but it does not connect to you in your presence. If you're feeling sick or you don't feel up to it today, you're still supposed to be there, it won't work without you, so you override your feelings. We can do this to a certain extent – that's the way it goes – but you don't want to be stuck in override as a program and feel guilty that you're not doing enough. If this sense of guilt and shame is there you will continue to override your limitations, so it's very important to understand some of these compulsions that get programmed into us.

On a retreat, we're in a collective situation. Be conscious of the good aspects of a group: the sense of solidarity and companionship. We're all in this together and helping each other, that's part of it. There are also the bad aspects of a group: 'I have to keep up, I have to make sure I'm there on time. I have to do my bit for everyone else no matter what. I have to drag myself to another sitting.' I'd really like that you do not feel under obligation. Obviously, sometimes you can work a bit harder – yes, go for it! You'll find your way. But watch the particular pattern that means you lose your presence in some feeling of obligation to a collective thing, because the point of this retreat is to gain your

presence, not to use the retreat to lose your presence in order to be ‘a good meditator’ or ‘as good as the next person’ and so forth. Really trust that, even if you can’t do it as well as you think you should. Keep lowering the bar until you get to a place where you can feel some joy and courage in your practice. You feel you’re rising up to your practice rather than dragging yourself up. If you put the right qualities around it, if you feel the whole situation is on your side and reaching out for you, then your practice is going to grow, that presence is going to grow.

It’s very important to understand that when the needle flicks into red it’s time to say, ‘Wait a minute, what’s the cost of this?’ We need to trust and come back into ourselves. We notice: ‘This is where I am. This is what I can do’ and we feel confident in that. A lot of people run on override for years, even decades, and this loss of presence means the heart is not safely held. It’s like it has no skin around it, it has no ground. We run on good intentions or sometimes on sustained, moderate panic, a sort of scramble, and it’s not good for anyone.

The four qualities of great heart are called the *brahmavihāras*: seeing the lovable, that which is good and beautiful in ourselves and others, and appreciating that (*mettā*); understanding the limitations, the vulnerability of ourselves and others, and offering care and protection to that (*karuṇā*); celebrating, rejoicing in the good of ourselves and others (*muditā*); and sustaining presence, not giving up on ourselves and others through the ups and downs (*upekkhā*). We are holding an umbrella over whatever happens, saying, ‘OK, I’ll bear with this,’ rather than getting worried or upset about it. A lot of life is like that. It’s going up with a bit of down, down with some up; we don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. Equanimity is the big one – it covers everything. Eventually you become more serene about it all. All these qualities allow you to sustain presence. With them, you don’t lose your presence – this groundedness, this sense of confidence, of assurance. Presence is the first thing that goes, then we panic or get overwhelmed,

frightened, shocked or bereaved and we lose our ground. There are strong emotional currents. You don't necessarily lose your emotional side but you lose the steady, nourishing and loving quality. You get hysterical, panicky, short-tempered or you go numb. Then all that's left is thinking. In our practice, in meditation, often we can find ourselves coming to places where some of these senses of loss open up: you get feelings of loss of affirmation or loss of certainty.

Fear is one of the fundamental ways in which we lose presence. As you know, you get fear in your guts and that's where presence is. When you have a good strong presence, you have a nice belly feeling to it. The gut is often underrated as an organ of perception. It doesn't get the kind of headlines that the heart and the brain get – poor old gut! But if you look into the Far Eastern spirituality, everyone has guts: they have haras and Buddhas with big bellies. Zen people roar from the hara. The gut is king there, because it's about the sense of presence. When you lose it, you feel this kind of uneasy tension in the guts – this is fear. You feel queasy, uncertain.

The Buddha said there are five fears, five categories of experience that cause us fear:³⁴

The first one is fear of death. We know we're going to die, but we may wonder, 'When will that happen? How am I going to die?' When you hear a big bang or a crash or you get a shock, fear of death usually kicks in. Nowadays there's a lot around: terrorism, violence, robbery, car crashes and things like that. Sometimes nothing much is happening but there's a sense that it *could* be. For example, when you are in a big crowd of people or a situation where people are getting upset, you feel nervous in that domain. Even when the situation has passed away, some of that nervousness is still lingering as a kind of potential.

34. Aṅguttara Nikāya 9.5.

The second one is fear of pain: fear of being physically hurt and of course emotionally hurt. There's a huge amount of possibility for being emotionally bashed, abused, scarred, betrayed, dumped, belittled and talked about behind your back – these kinds of situations where you're losing your sense of self-respect. So there's this kind of fear: 'Will I be hurt by other people?'

The third one is fear of loss of resources: the loss of your wealth, money, house and so forth. You fear the economic crash: 'Is the pound going to crash completely? Are they going to come and snatch my house from me? Is the oil going to run out? Are we all going to be running around in skins?' It can be very worrying. Often the thing that keeps you going in work situations is the need to get your wages and the fear of losing your job: 'Who is going to look after me if I lose my job?'

The fourth one is the fear of disgrace, of being ostracized by the group. We're a flock, herd creatures and one of the traditional punishments for human beings is to ostracize, imprison or send to Coventry. You think it could be quite nice being left alone. Being left alone in a benevolent, trusting way is very pleasant, but being dumped isn't so nice at all. We're wired in our genes to experience that rejection by the family, by the mother, the father, the husband, the wife, the friends, the group, by society. It's a very hurtful experience, so there is the fear of that.

The last one is fear of losing moral balance, being overwhelmed by unskilful impulses, the fear of violent passions. It doesn't just mean fear of going clinically insane but also fear of losing your balance, being pushed over the edge into committing gross misdeeds with the consequences of that. It's good to be aware, and wary, of that!

To summarize, there's the fear involved with the social realm: fear of being rejected by the group or by the other, fear of people losing their respect or love for you. There is the fear of losing your own centre, your own inner poise, your own balance, your own control. And there is the

fear of physical things: death, violence, pain, loss and so forth. All these fears make us tight. When you feel fear, you get this kind of uneasy sense in your guts and one of the reactions is to tighten up, to try and hold it. People have strong control systems, locks, padlocks, security devices, insurance policies, pills to keep them steady, to make sure they don't lose it one way or another. They vote for politicians who say they'll blast the hell out of anybody who comes near our blessed land. This is very prevalent, isn't it?

A country like the United States is really frightened of being invaded by Iraq, which is about as likely as us being taken over by the Faroe Islands! They justified the invasion of Grenada in 1983 as Grenada representing a threat to the United States! Grenada's population was about 90,000 at the time. This little speck of rock in the Caribbean had to be invaded because it represented a threat! It doesn't matter how ridiculous it is because all you have to say is, 'Threat! The others are going to come!' for people to tighten up and lose their reason. When you lose your guts, you lose your reason and you lose your heart. You lose the sense of, 'Oh, they're just like me. They're the same as me. They get upset like I do, they get worried like I do, they want happiness, they want to look after their kids, they want to have enough food to eat like I do.' It becomes *them*: 'Lock them up! Beat them up!' When people push the fear button, this kind of unreasonable behaviour happens. There are racial prejudices, fear of foreigners, fear of being picked upon by others and so forth. This is a problem we can all experience.

These are definite things that are triggers for human beings, whatever our character is. The latent tendencies are still there. They may not be happening right now, but you just need to push a few buttons and they will come. Remember how, in the 1930s, the Jewish population of Germany was very happily integrated, completely integrated. Nobody thought of them as Jews, they were just Germans. Then this political shift happened that suddenly turned them into outsiders.

It can happen like that. Now you can do it to Muslims. They weren't Muslims before, they were just Pakistanis or interesting people who had different customs and suddenly you can flip that and they become potential terrorists!

What's going to happen to me, a guy in robes? When I go to America, I go through the customs, and because I have robes on that immediately makes me suspicious. So I have to go into some cubicle and hold my arms up and they blast me with air guns to check if I have some sort of bomb or something underneath, because I look a bit weird. Everybody's weird if you look at it!

One of the great *mudrās* of the Buddha is called the *abhaya*, the fearlessness protection. It's the *mudrā* with the Buddha holding one hand up, with the hand open. It's a blessing, but it's also what the Buddha represents: great heart, which means deep-rooted, unshakable presence, vast compassion and vast kindness. With that, the great heart is our protection from fear because for a start, when you don't lose your presence, you're not going to go insane or get overwhelmed. You're not going to get pushed into crazy behaviour, so you keep your own dignity, you keep your own sanity. That's the bottom line, that's the one that you could guarantee. Loss of wealth could happen, death will definitely happen, as well as pain. But if we have this great heart then we don't lose presence with these experiences.

The Buddha, even in his sickness and passing away, did not lose presence. There was that sense of unshakable deliverance of the heart. This is what the Buddhist practices are there to generate in us. We already have the seed, the *bodhi* seed. We just need to keep going to it time and time again, caring for it, nourishing it, encouraging it, gladdening it, enjoying it, appreciating it and making sure we don't overstrain it. Then it becomes strong. This is what the Buddha is promising us. He says that if you do this then your passing will not

be in fear, will not be in loss. Your passing will be serene.³⁵ One of the qualities of the arahant is that although they experience physical pain, they don't experience mental pain. There's no feeling of being pinned or oppressed by sensations, or by praise, blame, gain, loss, disgrace and so forth. Their sense of heart is not based upon the worldly *dhammas*, it's based upon their own ability to be present.

If you develop and sustain that ability to stay present, then you will find that the loveliness of the heart becomes more apparent. The joyfulness, warmth and ability to be grand, generous, forgiving and compassionate come from this presence. This is how the flower unfolds and blooms. We need to remind ourselves of our possibilities, to not hold back, to see and encourage the signs that will help to bring forth these qualities in us. We don't have to be held in, fearful, nervous and embarrassed. The seed or the root of all this is presence.

As we practise together, try to find out if you have triggers of compulsion that stop you from being present. Where do you find yourself losing it? Where do you lose confidence and self-respect? Is it in performance? Do you think you're not doing as well as you think you should do? Do you think everybody else is serene, steady and you're all wobbly? It always looks like that, doesn't it? There should be somebody in every retreat who looks like a complete disaster, who drivels, falls on the floor and trembles all the time, so everybody else can think, 'Phew, at least I'm not as bad as him! I'm OK, I'm one up from that!' You need to put that sense of apprehension aside. One of the nice things about a retreat is that you recognize that everybody is rocking around a bit. You're pretty much in the same field. You don't have to lose yourself in that kind of social pressure.

35. Saṃyutta Nikāya 55.27.

When you're experiencing your own emotional unsteadiness, painful memories or uneven mind-states, there might be the fear of losing balance. Our basic practice is generally to find a meditation, or a way of stabilizing, that's accessible. For example, you can do standing meditation – the only pass mark is not to pitch over and fall on your face, so you can do that – breathing in, breathing out, walking and just keeping within the format of a retreat, staying in the site. You're finding yourself sort of stabilized within that. You're holding it and you can allow the other things to blow through. It really is just a matter of allowing stuff to blow out. You keep in mind your meditation theme (the body, breathing in, breathing out) and keep coming back to that when you can. Gradually it will stabilize so you get a sense of being able to find yourself.

There are these times when you are on the edge, when a strong feeling comes up and it's deeply unsettling. It may relate to your household, your social circumstances or people around you that you feel some mistrust or dis-ease with. This is the time to see if you can hold that in mind and just keep breathing through it. If you go into it too much you're going to spin out, but you don't want to seize up and tighten up to try and control it. So we need to find out how to be with that which is potentially unsettling, alarming, concerning and just breathe in and breathe out through that, let the energy move through that. All of us are in situations where there's something unresolved, something inconclusive, something that could go wrong, something that isn't finished, somebody who's not having a good time, somebody who's sick, uncertainty about the future, about other people and about ourselves. We bring that to mind and accept the presence of that disturbance, that uncertainty, that sense of risk and loss, and breathe in and out with it.

You're turning the energy back where it can spin out. It's in this particular fringe area where you can develop the great heart, because you have the ability to embrace the contradictions, the unresolved,

the awkward and the wounded in your life. As you do that from a place of great compassion and equanimity, you don't lose presence in the world of suffering, stress and uncertainty. This is really a major theme in Dhamma practice. It's called the experience of *aniccatā* (impermanence), which sounds nice and clinical, but it actually means that things are uncertain, inconstant, unreliable, unsteady, unknown, not definite; they could go wrong. We don't really know whether it's going to work out or not. That's the bit that really gives it some bite. Do you really think things could be certain? Do you think tomorrow is certain? Do you believe in that?

Look at the world. In the monastery, every day I get a little note in the bowl, for instance: 'Please chant for so-and-so who was eighteen and died yesterday' or 'For so-and-so who died of meningitis at nine years of age.' You could think, 'Nine? My goodness! He should have lived to be eighty-five! Nobody dies until then, do they?' The other day a woman came and said that her twenty-eight-year-old boyfriend just killed himself. Twenty-eight! Why did he do that? She didn't know, he never said anything and the next day he was dead. Twenty-eight and given up already! What was going on? He suddenly lost it. One day it's solid, three-dimensional, here we are, and the next day, poof! There was a Sri Lankan woman who came to the monastery the other day. She had some scars on her face. She had been in a bus in Colombo and a bomb went off. A hundred people were killed and her face was full of glass. She was getting a little bit of eyesight back. One day you're sitting in the bus thinking about going shopping or going to see your niece or something or the other, planning a little fantasy and then suddenly, boom! Where did that go? Where did that future go?

These are obviously violent possible extremes, but for all of us a lot of things are uncertain. New things can arise that we'd never thought of. How do we live with this? We acknowledge it, accept it and breathe through it. OK, who knows tomorrow, but today, now, we're breathing

in and breathing out; we see the real value in that. It's one of our recollections, isn't it? Every night you think, 'Maybe I'll die tonight.' So breathe in and breathe out, do it really well now! The Buddha was talking to a group of monks and asked them, 'Do you develop mindfulness of death?' One monk said, 'I do it every day.' Another one said, 'I do it every time I eat.' The last one said, 'I do it every time I breathe in and every time I breathe out. I think this might be the last breath.' The Buddha replied that the first two monks are heedless and sluggish in their practice, but the one who contemplates death at every breath is heedful and keen in his practice.³⁶ When you breathe in like it's your last, you certainly breathe in!

The idea is not to cause you a sense of continual anxiety but to realize you just do not know, so make this breath count, make it full, don't lose presence now. Presence is all you have, really. But you do have it and it is *all you can have*. The rest of it you can't have. It can pass through you for a while, possibly – all kinds of stuff could. The only thing you certainly can have is the most valuable thing, the thing that will get you past death. That's the only thing you can have and you have it right now. Why don't we invest in presence as a priority and see what other bits we can build up around that: some friendships, some comforts, some happiness. When we get the priorities right we will live freely, confidently and without regret.

36. This passage refers to *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 6.19.

Resolved to Let Go

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED ON 10 JULY 2010 AT CITTAVIVEKA MONASTERY, A COUPLE OF WEEKS BEFORE ENTERING THE VASSA.

This morning I was talking to the community about making resolutions and commitments. It's a big part of our practice, but we need to learn how to cultivate them in the right way; there's some subtlety in it. You can make an intention or a resolution to look at where you're stuck or where you're getting habitual, stale or compulsive: 'OK, let's determine to do that – or to *not* do that.' You get a feeling for where you're blind, compulsive, swept away or resistant to things and you think, 'Let's check that out!' You're making some kind of resolution to stop or to look at it more clearly and then you're looking at the results. It gives you a sense of establishing a foundation, a sense of direction and depth, because you start to go through the surface currents of the mind: its thoughts, feelings and opinions. You put a block on the basic inclinations of the mind, like the inclination towards sense pleasures, and say, 'Let's see what happens when I don't do that.' For example, you decide to give up music or smoking, or limit your food intake. Here in the monastery it's standard of course – we don't have music and don't eat after noon – and you get so used to it that it's hardly a commitment any more, it's just ordinary. So, sometimes you decide to only eat once a day and see what that does.

You can check these things and also start to look into the attitudes you have. Sometimes you might get compulsive about how little you need or get attitudes of what is called *vibhava-taṇhā*, which is not wanting to be with things, not wanting to be moved or touched, or experience anything – or the opposite: getting caught up in things. You look at your attitudes. You might not want to do this, not want to be part of

that, not want to get involved with this; you just want to be left alone and quiet. Or you really want to get involved with everything; you want to have an opinion or get yourself into something. You see these kinds of tendencies and you look at what they're about. You want to get involved with everything because you feel that otherwise you'll be left out, sidelined or dismissed. Somehow you feel you've been made small or insignificant. Or you want to get out of it all because, 'I want to be small and insignificant. I want to be left alone.' These underlying currents in our lives are fundamental, because to a certain extent we are steered by them. They're not necessarily unskilful but they can become compulsive. There's a skilful sense of wanting to get involved with something because it brings up skilful mind-states. There's a skilful sense of wanting to get out of something or not be involved with something because it brings up unskilful mind-states.

The Buddha said there are three points to check before we do something: 'This is for my welfare', 'This for the welfare of others' and 'It leads to nibbāna,'³⁷ which means it leads to letting go, to release, to non-compulsiveness; it leads to the mind's becoming less feverish or gripped and finally towards peace, towards ceasing of this inner compulsiveness – however you want to define nibbāna. When something is for my welfare, it brings up skilful states in me, I feel respect for myself, I feel a sense of kindness, strength or calm in myself. If all these three checkpoints are present then you can recognize that's as good as you can get it. But if it's for your welfare and nobody else's, you want to check that one out. Alternatively, when this is for everyone else's welfare but not for your own, you want to check that one out too. And if it doesn't lead to nibbāna, if it leads to becoming more and more involved, and you keep on wanting more and more of it, if it doesn't lead to the ceasing, the quietening of the mind and it leads to the mind's ongoing compulsiveness or fixations, then you don't want

37. Majjhima Nikāya 19.

to follow it. So there is this checklist: ‘my welfare’, ‘others’ welfare’ and ‘leads to nibbāna’.

You need to make any kind of resolution with that theme in mind so it’s not a blind doggedness: ‘I’ll do this no matter what!’ This is where it’s skilful, because in religious life – and I guess in any walk of life – people take up these incredible resolutions like standing on one leg for fourteen years or beating themselves with whips. Yeah ... but does this do you any good? Does it do anybody else any good? Does it lead to any release? Well, maybe it does for some people but you have to keep checking it out, because often you get this sense of fixation upon a practice. It’s one of the forms of things we get fixated on.

The Buddha talked about four areas in which we fundamentally get fixated.³⁸ The first one is the sense world, the pleasure in seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching (*kāma*). We are obsessed with it, always wanting more of it. Then we also get fixated upon what’s called ‘becoming’ (*bhava*): wanting to be in on everything, building up our identity, becoming more of a person, more and more involved – or the *vibhava*: get less and less involved. The third area in which we get fixated is structural systems, standards, techniques, customs and views (*ditṭhi*) – the ways we have of doing things. The fourth one is ignorance (*avijjā*) or the sense of self – that’s subtle. When you’re making resolutions, you recognize that these four basic areas are the kinds of things that can come up. You want to work with them.

I was not particularly resolve-minded, because to me it always meant being tied down to something meaningless. I looked around and wondered what people found themselves committed to: a nine-to-five job in Vauxhall Motors! I lived in Dunstable, so Vauxhall Motors was considered great. If that’s what you were doing with your life, wow! But

38. Saṃyutta Nikāya 45.171, 45.172 and 45.173.

that kind of commitment seemed a bit pointless to me. It didn't seem to go very far.

When I was at school, we used to have to wear a school uniform. We had a jacket with a school badge on it, a little tie and a little cap. We had to wear these all the time. Even when we were outside the school walking, we had to wear this school uniform and if we saw a teacher coming along the road we had to take our cap off to salute the teacher. That was the thing! That was what schools were like in those days. So naturally I wondered, 'What's the point in doing this?' The teacher wasn't interested, we weren't interested, but we had to do it. There probably was a point but I didn't see it at the time. With this sort of thing we try to wriggle out of it as best we can. We couldn't really completely flaunt it, but maybe we'd have our jacket on sort of scruffy, with the buttons undone, or we'd have our tie all crooked, or we'd put our cap on backwards. So we could be kind of complying with the letter of it. This is what commitments and resolutions meant to me then: getting tied down to something pointless, which is just boring.

Spirituality is always about freedom, space, release, openness and spontaneity, which is a nice idea. I kind of followed that for a few years, until one day I woke up with a hangover and realized my life was just following sensuality, desires and impulses, so I thought, 'I'd better get my act together!' I'd read all these wonderful spiritual classics – *Tao Te Ching*, *Bhagavad Gita* and *The Way of Zen* – when I was living on a beach in Morocco; I was a hippie then. It's all about no constraints, formlessness and the true way; any way that can be named is not the true way. Krishnamurti said, 'Any kind of system is tyranny.' That sounded really great, but I didn't know what to do. I had these wonderful ideas that rushed through my head, I would feel some tantalizing vision, but I didn't actually have a practice to get there.

I went travelling and eventually I ended up in Thailand and started meditation. Here was a system of meditation: sit down there, stop moving around, and focus on your breathing. I couldn't focus on my breathing at all – well maybe for a few seconds before my mind spun off – but I noticed that, within that alone, there was an intention to witness something. Even if I wasn't doing it very well, at least there was an intention to get there. I started to notice: 'There's a sense of witnessing or watching' and 'This is what you watch.' There is a sense of mindful witnessing, and there's this stuff that can be looked at, which is all crazy: my mind. Establishing that kind of resolve, even when you're not very good at it, means there's something here to be worked with: 'My mind is chaotic. I get a feeling I need to get it calmer or steadier.' You get some sense of direction, even just by checking in with yourself in a clear and focused way.

Then I went to a monastery and was ordained as a monk, so it was clear what I did or didn't do. I sat in a hut for three years on my own, with very little contact with anybody, no routines, no work – just sitting there, walking up and down, sitting there, walking up and down ... The mind was bouncing off the walls all the time, clawing, going crazy, and I kept on pegging away at it and keeping that sense of resolve. Sometimes it worked: my mind did steady and stabilize for a while and that was gratifying. I realized I could do it. First of all, I'd sit still for fifteen minutes – that was like, 'Big day, I could do that!' – then I'd do walking meditation for fifteen minutes, then sit still for another fifteen minutes and then walk for fifteen minutes ... that was an hour! Wow, that was a big breakthrough. I'd never sat down for fifteen minutes focusing on one thing before. There was something in there.

Then I started to develop things like sitting still for an hour, and even when the mind was crazy, there was some feeling of peacefulness in knowing it was just *that*. I had a resolve and the resolve became the centrepiece: 'Right, this is what I'm doing. This is where I'm standing,

and this is the weather. This is where I'm at, and this is just stuff visiting.' There was a quality of discernment arising. But I then started to try to get rid of all the stuff, eliminate it all – the *vibhava*. I would sit there and try to stop thinking, stop fantasizing, stop remembering things; so there was always a fight, a struggle going on. I thought, 'This can't be right.' It didn't feel very good.

It was useful for me to live in a community because in that context, sometimes you're trying to stop thinking and be quiet, but at other times you're actually trying to think. If you have to act, work, serve and help other people in the monastery, stopping thinking is obviously not a good idea! People ask you questions and you're responding, so you can't take either 'thinking' or 'not thinking' to be the ultimate position, but you can rely on the ability to witness and to work with it. The point is not so much whether you are thinking or not, but whether or not you are embedded in the thinking. You step back and let thought move through without contending or getting fascinated by it. With this approach, I had a subtler sense of resolve and felt, 'This is for my welfare: I'm getting a healthier relationship to the thinking mind. That affects how I speak and how much I put into things, so it leads to a more harmonious situation. I'm also starting to work with these compulsions and fixations of the mind.'

However, the technique itself became a kind of compulsion. There would be a real reflex of agitation if I couldn't do my meditation. In this three-year session, I was doing ten to twelve hours of meditation a day and if anything happened in the monastery to disturb that, I'd start to get nervous and feel I wasn't doing enough of it. I didn't feel stable. I didn't feel secure. It indicated one of the ways in which resolve goes wrong. We have a fundamental inclination for security or stability – at least I did. There was the need to know where I was and what was happening, the need to feel steady, and that was starting to affect the meditation. I wanted the meditation as something to hold on to. I was

all right because I was doing it. Even if I wasn't doing it very well, I was doing it, so that was 'good'. But if something was preventing me from doing it, I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing, so that was 'bad'. I began to see this sense of what the Buddha called the fetter of attachment to systems and structures – the structure of the meditation system itself.

Occasionally during these three years, someone would invite us out of the monastery for a meal. I would feel quite lost, because I was not able to do things super slowly out there. I wanted to keep focusing on the breathing, but at the same time, I had to put up with taste, touch, sound and people coming and going. I felt quite lost. It wasn't that the meditation was wrong or bad, but it started to reveal this search for something to hold on to. Normally, we hold on in order to be able to do things the way we like to do them or in order to give us a sense of being approved of, of being independent or of being our true self. But when these things get disturbed, when you can't run your act, when you can't do your 'thing' – whatever your 'thing' is – you start to feel rocky. At that time, my 'thing' was doing this meditation technique.

In the early days here at Chithurst, one time I was sitting out on the lawn in the afternoon. It was summertime and it was a nice, peaceful day. There was nothing much going on for a change, so I thought, 'I'll just sit and meditate.' Once I got the idea of sitting and meditating I noticed these wood pigeons flapping their wings: 'Oh dear, the wood pigeons are flapping their wings and I'm trying to meditate!' Then occasionally I would see people going past and hear something like, 'Oh, I saw Simon the other day ...'. People were talking and I became agitated. I wasn't agitated before I was meditating: I was sitting quite peacefully. But when I started to get the idea, 'I have to meditate,' this agitation came in. That was quite revealing.

Is this really the way to peace of mind? Yes, we can set up a structure that we can operate sometimes, but at other times it doesn't quite work. So we begin to consider: 'Well, what actually is this process of meditation about?' Meditation is not just a technique, it's the whole inclination towards having a clear intention and being centred, towards finding a quality of calm. We're not deliberately going out listening to wood pigeons or running around. We're gaining a sense of being able to let go of sounds, sights and of the agitation of the mind – and also to let go of the silence as well.

Essentially, with the practice, you're establishing a sense of clear intention first of all. You know what you're doing. You have a reference point and you can stay with it. You can practise resolution and determination with that; you focus your intentions on that. Then at some point the turbulence builds up: the turbulence of wanting to do something else or the turbulence of things that start to distract you. Are you responding to it in a way that is going to lead to your welfare and peace, or are you starting to find yourself hostile to anyone who's moving around talking? 'I'm going to shoot the wood pigeons because they're bothering me!' No, that doesn't seem right! Where is the nibbāna element? You get a feeling for what the nibbāna element must be like: the mind is not fixated on anything; it's not impassioned, not clinging.

I went to Amaravati when it first started in 1984. It was really crazy and pretty formless! It was a big place and we were trying to figure out how to make it work. We'd have meditation retreats there for the sangha. There were many people at Amaravati, so these retreats were a time when we'd finally settle down and stabilize. These retreats were happening in what was the shrine room in those days – now it's the Retreat Centre shrine room. On each retreat, there'd always be what we called 'the window wars'. Some people liked the windows open for fresh air. Other people didn't like the windows open because it was draughty.

So you'd be sitting in the shrine room and somebody would come in and open the window. You'd hear this kind of 'Crrock!' Then somebody else would come and close the window: 'Claac!' You'd sit there for a while and somebody would come in and reopen the window: 'Crrock!' So you'd hear these 'Crrock, claac, crrock, claac ...' of the windows. Every time there was a change of sitting, somebody would open the window; somebody else would close the window. Somebody would come in and think, 'It's too hot!' Then somebody else would come in and think, 'It's too cold!' I could feel this build-up of irritation.

Some people's view was, 'It's too draughty!' Some other people's view was, 'It's too stale!' My view was, 'Leave it alone! Just let it be the way it is!' And even that was just another view I was attached to. So I thought, 'What's the way out of this one?' You just hear the sound, feel a slight change in temperature, hear another sound, feel the temperature change again. We have the tendency to get seized by these phenomena, such as sounds, and interpret them as 'people' – 'stupid people in fact, unlike me!' After a while I wanted to machine-gun people because, 'I'm being disturbed!' It didn't seem quite right somehow!

I took up a practice in the main courtyard of Amaravati where people used to drive in. I thought, 'Instead of going off into the field, I'll do my walking meditation right in the main courtyard where people drive in.' I'd walk up and down and a car would drive in and somebody would say, 'Excuse me? Where is such-and-such?' 'It's right over there.' Then I'd go back to my walking. Then somebody would say, 'Hello Ajahn! How are you doing?' I would reply, 'I'm fine' and walk up and down a bit ... Then I would hear, 'Excuse me *bhante*, where do we put the food?' 'It's over there.' A builder would come along, 'Where do we put the bricks, mate?' 'Over there.' Just walking up and down, walking up and down ... I would do that for an hour with that sense that I wasn't 'doing walking meditation'. At the moment when I would get interrupted, I would just let it dissolve, let it go – not in despair, but with the attitude:

‘The last moment was *that* and now it’s *this*. Just let it go.’ And when that person would move away, I would pick up the walking meditation again. That practice taught me to be more flexible around the focus, so that I could maintain a focus without this sense of, ‘I have to get this so that I can hold myself together, so that I can feel my mind steady.’ I didn’t like that attitude.

There are all kinds of ways in which this happens for us, aren’t there? When you live as a monastic in a community, depending on where you are, there could be all kinds of protocols around things. Each particular monastery has its own system about the way they receive the food or the way they do the chanting or the way they wear their robes. You might think, ‘This is it, this is right, we’re all clear. This is the Vinaya, this is the standard. This is good and impeccable.’ Then you go to another monastery and realize they’re doing it slightly differently, and they think, ‘This is right, this is clear.’ They may have some protocols that you don’t have in your monastery, so you may wonder, ‘What do they bother doing this for?!’ There are some places where they won’t boil water. You can have hot water but you can’t boil water. ‘What’s the point of that? Crazy! What are you trying to prove?’ In some places, they won’t have mirrors because you might look in the mirror and get infatuated with yourself. ‘Yeah, maybe it could happen ... but come on, infatuated with this! You must be joking!’

You might get very particular about making sure people offer things in the right way. Is it right? Is it wrong? Who’s right? Who’s wrong? You realize there’s a lot of stuff that goes on around ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Ask yourself: ‘Is this actually doing me any good?’ To what extent does it do me good? It does me good because I’m attentive, I’m focused, I’m clear, I’m trying to do something that the community does so that I’m living in harmony with people and I’m letting go of my opinions and views. When is it bad? When I fixate upon it, take it out of context, expect it somewhere else or if I find it is a source of contention, then it’s bad.

You start to see the usefulness of views, systems and structures. You see them as a means of purifying your own mind, but you're not picking them up in order to find fault with other people. These are things we have to work through, and it isn't just for monks and nuns, it's for everyone. It's not just about particular points of monastic training, it's a universal problem.

Sometimes in religious contexts it becomes most apparent. People often disagree over certain things, but if you are outside of their particular religion you can't see any point in them. When Ajahn Amaro went to Egypt, he went to a Coptic Christian monastery. The monks there were very clear to say, 'We are not Monophysites, we are Miaphysites!' It's a bit of theology. Jesus has two natures: divine and human. The Monophysites say those are united. The Miaphysites say, 'No, they are just unified, but not united.' I imagine some strong words have been said on that topic!

You can also look at the kind of things people get stuck in around there: 'What are you going to do at five o'clock? What are you going to do on Friday night? What are you going to do at Christmas?' 'I hate Christmas because I have to do all this goodwill stuff!' 'You've got to do it though. Not here for fun!' Or you can look at the systems and structures that you set up: your nine-to-five day or the regular day. We wake up and go through the day until whatever the approved time is – ten, eleven, midnight – and then we get our six, seven, eight hours of sleep and we're up again. People operate like that, but it isn't actually the way a body operates. This just works in industrial countries where they want people to get out to work.

In non-industrial countries, people have a nap when they feel tired and they keep going when they're not. They might lie down for two or three hours and then get up – it could be day or night. They go and do something and go on until they're tired. Then they have a nap. When

I was walking in India in 1990-1991, occasionally people would invite me into their house to stay for the night and I'd accept this invitation. There'd be a hall for the men, and women would be in another hall. There'd be five or six guys in a room and you'd get a bit of board on which to lie down. The light would never go off and people would be wandering in and out all night long, listening to the radio, doing things. Somebody would lie down and have a nap for a while and then he would get up. There would be no sense of 'everybody is going to sleep'. They don't do things like 'lights out'. If you're sleepy, you fall asleep, lights on or not. If you're not, then keep going! When you're tired in the day just take a rest somewhere. You would see people crashed out under a tree or under a truck any time – day or night. It doesn't matter what's going on. This is very destabilizing!

When you go to other countries and see the way people are operating, it can be very confusing. They're not operating on the same parameters. You see this and you can think they're stupid or primitive, or they haven't got it together. You can see these reactions and fixations on things coming up in your mind and you realize, 'This isn't doing me any good. I'm not being very pleasant to other people and it's making me more fixated. Why don't I just let go of it?' Then you start to see the boundlessness of possibilities instead of making your life narrower and narrower with fixed ideas such as: 'We can only do this, and we can only do that. It's six o'clock so I've got to do this. And I can't ever do that. I can only do it this way and that way. I have to have these supports so that I can survive, otherwise I won't.' When you learn to be more open and flexible you realize you can manage a lot.

When I was at the monastery in Thailand, I was doing intensive meditation: it was a 'system' that I adopted. I was doing intensive noting, breathing in, breathing out, but the monastery itself wasn't especially quiet. Every now and then they'd have a Dhamma talk blasting over a loudspeaker. I'd get annoyed with the sounds interrupting 'me

trying to meditate'. It's a bit arrogant, really! It's their country, their monastery and they put me up for free, and there I am, getting angry at how they're living their lives the way they want! You don't even notice how arrogant the mind can be over claiming territory. It's an unconscious reflex of believing, 'Things have to be my way!'

One time they had an eleven-day festival in the monastery. They were creating a *sīmā*, an ordination area in the monastery, so in order to celebrate that, they decided to ordain ninety-nine monks – nine being a very nice number in Thailand, the highest number. So they got ninety-nine men to become monks. It didn't matter if they were a monk for a day or a week, just the idea of getting some robes for these ninety-nine guys would be extremely good fun. In Thailand, things have to have a certain fun to them, so to make it even more fun they also had a couple of movie theatres brought in. All night, movies were playing and people were selling food and stuff in the monastery. Of course, we had to go to the ordination ceremonies. They can only ordain three monks at a time, so that meant there were thirty-three ordination ceremonies in eleven days! At some point, you end up dragging yourself on the floor! One of the monks was the chanter for every single ordination – thirty-three of them! He was continuously taking things to keep his throat going. These ordinations went around the clock. You'd have a break for the meal and it would go on day and night. You'd go back to your kuti, lie down and hear this continual raucous of Western cowboy movies and music playing. Then somebody would knock on the door and off you go to the next ordination! So the idea of 'me' and 'my peace and quiet' and 'focusing on the breathing in, breathing out' ...!

After a day or so of this I started to realize, 'This thing is bigger than me! Why is this a problem? How do I find the middle point between the meditation (the internal world) and the external world, without being fixated on either of them?' It doesn't mean being vague, it means being really attentive to how the mind wants to rush out, pull in, or create

ideas, opinions or complain: 'Oh, there it goes! See if I can soften and release that.' It's very peaceful. It's actually more peaceful doing that than having a tight focus. It's subtler and it deals more thoroughly and radically with the places we are holding on: the need for stability, the need to have 'my thing' going or to get into some other thing instead, for example, 'I'll give up meditating, I'll start reading instead.' No, that's not it.

We begin to see this incredible reflex to have something to hold on to. It's not a conscious decision at all, but a real reflex. The idea of having nothing to hold on to sounds like, 'What's that?' In some way, everything we hold on to begins to be a prop for our mind. We find ourselves defined by it. We're good at it or not so good at it, we believe in it, we reject it, we support it, we have opinions about it, we convince other people of it or we apologize for it. Everything that supports us becomes an obstruction in a way. It's not that we don't need a support, but after a while, everything that supports us starts to be something we have to keep going, holding on to, approving of, tidying up, convincing somebody else of and holding against something that isn't the same way.

You can't have two opinions at the same time, can you? So, whatever you take a stand on is going to be in conflict with something of another opinion. If you want quiet, then noise is going to be a problem. If you want noise and chat, silence is going to be a problem. Whatever you take a stand on, whatever you find yourself supported by, eventually it becomes an obstruction, because it creates agitation, it creates the sense of, 'I have to have this!' or 'Is this as good as yours? Which is the best religion? Which is the best meditation? Which is the best place? Which is the best system? Which is the best person? Is this better than that? Is this good enough? I don't feel mine is as good as yours' - this kind of fretting.

Sometimes we find ourselves looking at what we're holding on to or what we find ourselves supported by and think, 'I have to give that up! I shouldn't have that. I'll try this one instead.' But then we can ask ourselves: 'Who is it that needs support? What is it that needs support?' Uncertainty needs support; it needs something. Fear needs something. Desire needs something. The need for stimulation needs something. These things are what need the support. Is it possible to release them?

Our apparent self becomes coloured with these tendencies. Our needs, our resistances, our fears and our worries shape and form 'me'. Then 'I' want something 'there' to support them, something to get worked up about, something to get excited about, something to feel annoyed about, something to feel certain about. Everything of that nature is fragile, dependent, passes, breaks up and becomes a problem. So how do we find the stability we need? It is in that cultivation, in going through this rather uncomfortable but revealing process of sensing the unsupported at a subtler and subtler level. That may sound like falling down, but it is through this process that we reveal that which doesn't need support. This is what the Buddha was pointing to in one of his rather cryptic poems:

'When I came to a standstill, friend, then I sank.

But when I struggled, then I got swept away.

It is in this way, friend, that by not halting and by not straining I crossed the flood.'³⁹

Of course, it's no small thing. There is a process in which we try to find supports. We ask ourselves, 'What feels good right now? What is the best for me right now?' and then, 'How can I make that fit with other people so that it's for my welfare and for their welfare?' Let's look at morality for a start. It's obvious: 'Yes, that's good for me and good for others.' Let's look at generosity, kindness, tolerance and sharing: 'Yeah,

39. Saṃyutta Nikāya 1.1.

that makes me feel good and it's good for others as well.' You start to establish something like that and within it you can see your opinions about people. Start to develop a little more compassion, forgiveness and rejoicing. See the different sides of things.

As you come into resolve you begin to see that there's some sense of stability and there's some remaining source of agitation. You start with the things you can trust and you see if that brings you some stability, some sense of, 'I'm OK with this. I'm OK with you.' If there's something left that's still agitated or tense, then you start to work with that. 'Let's meditate. Yeah, this is good, this is stable ... but then I have a conflict when I can't meditate ... Ah, *there* is the agitation! *There* is the compulsion, *there* is the affliction. So can I have something that can embrace meditation and non-meditation as such?' You need to go beyond 'meditation'. Have a technique, but also move beyond that. Then there's a sense of gradually widening and becoming more subtle.

You can consider one of the most chilling lines in the Buddha's teaching: 'Whatever is mine [whatever I'm supported by, whatever I hold on to], beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.'⁴⁰ Your health, your vigour, your friends, places, intellectual clarity – whatever you take a stand on is fragile. Therefore, we need to look at these places where there is still fixation, where we are still in conflict with others, and ask ourselves: 'Why do I need this? Why do I need to hold on here? What is it that needs to hold on here? Do I really want to be that? Do I need to be that – the fearfulness, insecurity, righteousness, whatever it is?' So we are 'emptying' our definition of who we are and moving on to the unsupported, towards the supreme peace and stability that the Buddha pointed to – nibbāna.

40. Aṅguttara Nikāya 5.57 and 10.48.

Stepping Back into Wisdom

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED ON 6 JUNE 2012,
DURING A RETREAT AT GAIA HOUSE, IN DEVON.

Today we will look at the question: ‘How can we develop wisdom in and through meditation practice and in our lives?’ Wisdom is a very broad term. We can certainly have a sense of admiration and devotion for many teachers, but the Buddha is exceptionally articulate in being able to define things from many angles. The Buddha wisdom is the ability to describe, define and differentiate, ‘This is this, that is that. This fits with that, that works with this. When this arises, that arises. When this doesn’t happen, that doesn’t happen.’ Wisdom is the ability to analyze or witness the whole hologram of our experience and to recognize how the dynamics work – and dynamics are what most of us are struggling with.

How much embodiment is necessary? When you emphasize the body, sometimes you miss the analytical consciousness. When there is too much analysis, you can miss the heart. When there is too much heart, you miss the body. When you get almost skinless in terms of your emotional processes, then what is needed is a simple body lump, a structure, something solid that you can hold. We recognize our whole experience as being holistic. Practice is a matter of finding balance and trying to bring things together, whereas our tendency is to go into one particular place. Often the irony or the sadness of it is that we tend to go into afflicted places. That’s the bit that is calling, ‘Help! Help!’ and pulling us in. Whether it’s physical pain, emotional pain, psychological pain or life pain, it’s pulling you into it because it really wants to be cured, it wants to be helped, and the wise and difficult thing to do is: don’t go into it! It’s not a matter of denying, but if you purely go into

the pain, then you lose touch with the big picture, you lose touch with the wholeness. You go into the fragment, the split, the wound and you lose touch with the healthy flesh. Your attention goes into the pain, and the power and energy of attention reduplicates it.

Attention is a strengthening quality. Whatever you put your attention on will be heightened and energized, will bring more power into it. If you focus your attention on a pain, it's very likely that the attention by itself will heighten that pain, will make it more acute. This is why a lot of the wisdom is just learning how to flex the attention, how to maintain a broad focus rather than tunnelling in, which is what our minds tend to do. When you have a splinter in your finger, there's only one part of your body that's there: 'I am the splinter!' The rest of it – the feet, the ears and so forth – is gone. I'm exaggerating a little bit, but one part screams for attention and it really becomes heightened. Yes, you have to get that splinter out of your finger, but the answer doesn't come from the wound. The cry of help comes from the wound, but the answer doesn't come from the wound. That's why you go to a doctor: they are sympathetic, but they're not wounded; they're not feeling the pain, they're not drawn into it. They can see, 'OK, this is the problem. I think I can do that' and they pull the splinter out.

The wisdom faculty is that which differentiates and is able to say, 'That's *there*. The physical pain, sorrow, distress or whatever is *there*. It's not that I'm not sympathetic to it, but it's *there*,' rather than, '*I am* the pain. Help! What can I do about it?' When we become the pain, we also become all the energies that resist it, fight, struggle, feel overwhelmed or helpless in it. All that comes up in it, it's called *papañca*. It proliferates itself, it goes viral. This is something you want to really understand and be wise about. It sounds a bit hard, but it's not unsympathetic. You don't want to go into the pain, but it doesn't mean you ignore it or deny it; you objectify it. Sometimes it is actually wiser to say, 'This is too much; let's put it to one side for now.' Most likely you're capable

of doing that with your bodies. You can say, 'Now I'm going to stand up. I'm going to get a nice soft chair. I'm going to lie down.' There's so much you can take, then it's just stressing and reduplicating.

The real essence of the Buddha's teaching is the Four Noble Truths. We're talking about suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness, incompleteness, loss, aloneness and vulnerability. The suffering industry is booming; it's a big bag. Wisdom is the only faculty that really resolves that. It doesn't work on its own, but it's the primary factor that resolves suffering. There are different kinds of wisdom. The highest, most developed form of wisdom is called *vipassanā* (insight wisdom). It's the insight that becomes possible and available when we've built up resources to understand the nature of pain as a stuck vortex pattern rather than a self or something that 'I am'. We are then able to see the causes and conditions that are continually recreating that pain – which are also not self, me or mine – and the dissolving of those conditions. We can use the word 'insight' in a colloquial sense – anything that causes enquiry into conditionality is insight – but the perfection of insight and wisdom is in understanding the causal and conditional nature of suffering, and how causes and conditions can be released or no longer created.

What do you do with physical pain? Of course, you can move around, but as we begin to learn, we realize that the body is a pain body – that's its nature. There are only three kinds of feelings you can have: painful, pleasant and neutral, so if you look at that statistically, what does that break down to? At least 33.3% pain on average! The other side of it is that 66.6% isn't pain. But when that 33.3% hits, it seems to be 100%. When you feel physical pain, you can widen your focus beyond the area that is painful. You include the painful bit and the non-painful bit and you extend your attention as widely as possible. That's what I call 'widening your attention'. It doesn't mean you're losing awareness of the pain, but now you're widening attention to include the non-pain.

You rest your attention primarily on the non-pain, because you don't need to attend to the painful stuff: it will speak to you by itself as a way of making itself known. Then the quality of the pain doesn't capture and draw in your attention. It doesn't capture your psychology into, 'I am this. I am overwhelmed. I can't stand it,' which is what it tends to do when you focus in on it. You stand at the edges of the pain, holding it.

If you want to work with this, you need to develop two particular skills. The first one is to understand the mental or immaterial reactions, those pulls that make you feel, 'I can't stand this! It's not right. Why is this happening to me? What can I do about it?' You keep acknowledging all that agitated, mental stuff, widening it, acknowledging it, and you say, 'Yeah, but it's *this* now.' This is what equanimity is. Equanimity is primarily inclined to the feeling realm, including mental feeling. It's the ability to widen over a whole span of feeling, to hold it with sympathy, but without getting involved, contracting or being pulled into it: 'It's like this now. It can't be any other way. There's no other way it should be than this.' Now, does this cure pain? No, but it can cure suffering. Instead of agitation, the perturbation, contraction and feeling impacted by the pain, there can be a sense of, 'There's this phenomenon in the body.' You can use the pain to teach you something about equanimity, about widening attention and about acknowledging and releasing the psychological stuff. We can release the 'me' senses that occur around the pain: the wounded victim, the overwhelmed, the 'stuck with' and so forth, which is what tends to occur with residual pain.

I have had long-term pain, quite debilitating sometimes: I lay on my back for days on end with back pain. Over the years, as I have worked with the pain in my body, it has taught me humility. It has taught me that I can't push my body and have it my way. It has taught me that all those controlling attitudes, 'fix it', 'sort it out', 'this shouldn't happen to me' are just suffering. It doesn't sound like suffering, it sounds like the answer to suffering. It sounds like that which is going to help me out

of suffering, but it isn't. It's the craving and the wanting bringing their activities into play. With the release of that craving and wanting, there is the humility to say, 'There is pain'. The pain is global, it is universal. Every sentient creature is in pain – not a hundred per cent in pain, but certainly, that is a feature of our lives. And with that release, something else arises quite spontaneously, strangely and in an unbidden way: the relinquishment of self, of aloneness and of the sense of being stuck with this – and that is compassion.

As you have probably recognized, sometimes when you're having a struggle and somebody else is having a struggle, when you get together and say, 'Yeah, it's really tough! It's a struggle!' suddenly you feel better. It's a bit like that, but on a far fuller scale. When suffering increases, along with the sense of *me* and *mine* – 'It's just me. I'm terribly *this*. This is my problem. I'm the only one with a sore throat, bad knee, dodgy back, broken discs ...' – you look around and think that everyone else is all right, but they are not. They are sitting there thinking everyone else is all right! Put your hand up if you experience any kind of pain. Oh! It's everyone!

When you hold pain with equanimity – equanimity is not indifference – it brings the primal sympathy there, which is the ability to resonate with something. And in order to resonate with the pain, you have to have it *there*. It can't be 'you'. It has to be something that you can *resonate with* rather than *be*. It has to be some sense of receiving a sympathetic impression, but if you're totally welded in it, you can't get the sympathy. That's why it's sometimes difficult for us to feel the sympathy with ourselves. We can have *mettā* towards spiders, dogs, other people and if we stretch it a bit even towards nasty people, but we might not know how to have *mettā* towards ourselves. We come up with a few corny old phrases, but it doesn't really work until we're able to put our stuff out there on the table and realize, 'Gee! I suffer a lot!' We can also differentiate, objectify, 'I did that; that was pretty

good!' We generate *muditā* towards ourselves: 'Anumodanā!' We're able to differentiate something that we can get a reference to, that we can sympathize or resonate with. When it's all held as 'self' and 'mine', the primal sympathy can't resonate. This 'self' thing is the main problem, the source, not so much of pain, but of suffering.

The use of wisdom is essential because it differentiates: 'That's *that*'. And it does that by the process of *viveka* (lifting off or disengagement). Certainly, *viveka* is not a shutting down or a denial. It enables us to come a little bit off topic to get the overview. *Viveka* is one of the factors through which wisdom is developed, because with it we can see things much more clearly. The doctor can see the wound because they are not in it: they are *with* it. And the difference between being *in* something and *with* something is the crucial difference. When the pain comes up we are, most of the time, in it and we even somehow have the intuition that by going into it we'll find a way to solve it. We'll get in there to sort it out. We'll analyze, we'll get right down: 'Now what's the problem here?' And all the time we're actually ripping the wound open, making it flare up. If we could solve the pain by going into it, we would have solved it by now. We tend to go into our psychological or emotional pain again and again, hoping to find out what this is really all about, and the wound just keeps flaring up.

It might sound strange and paradoxical, but compassion involves a stepping back. As we step back, we step back into wisdom – not into indifference. Wisdom flourishes or is encouraged through that stepping-back process, both in meditation and in daily life. That's what wisdom does: it's the ability to distinguish *this* from *that*. Ordinarily you can develop wisdom in many ways. There's the study wisdom, which means you're able to look at and understand maps of Dhamma. They give you an overview and enable you to learn the ways to differentiate and to see different qualities and factors, so that next time you're challenged you can recognize, 'Oh, that's *that* one!' Even that conceptual

wisdom is an aspect that supports the differentiation process, but of course what we're looking at more fully in meditation is direct wisdom, which is non-conceptual. Listening to talks, remembering terms and concepts to use, meditation exercises and so on is like learning your scales on a piano before you can really play. You have to plunk away at it.

The other thing you can do with physical pain, in order to help the differentiation process, is to visualize it. Is it like rocks grinding you up? Is it like fire burning you up? Is it like knives slashing you to pieces? Is it like being twisted with a rope of some kind? Is it like somebody cutting your leg off? Is it a thumping pain, screwing pain, something winding itself into you, a slashing pain, needling pain, crushing pain or just slow increasing pressure? Which kind of pain would you like to have tonight? You have them all on offer! Now, this is not an exercise in masochism, but it can help us to step back. When you feel that 'Something is tearing my leg off,' then it's up to you to decide, 'Well, actually I think I'd better move my leg!' Of course, you don't want to rip your knees and your ligaments, but if you want to practise with pain, you can first choose a pain in your shoulders or something you can't relieve by moving your legs. You may say, 'Well, let's spend a few moments with it. I can always bail out when I want to,' and imagine what it would look like.

In a way, you're getting into it more fully, but you're not getting into it at the feeling level, because the visual consciousness doesn't feel things. The only consciousnesses that have feeling associated with them are the body-consciousness and the mental consciousness (the affective consciousness). The visual consciousness doesn't feel. The auditory consciousness doesn't feel. The olfactory and the gustatory consciousnesses do not have feelings associated with them. Visualizing something tends to take the pressure off the feeling because you transfer what was being felt into what is being seen and that tends to ameliorate the intensity of the pain. When the intensity of the pain

isn't grabbing you so much, you can see it and you also start to notice subtler qualities that are there, such as impatience or ill-will. Some pain is not caused by a pressure in your body; it's psychosomatic or tissue memory, you might say. Your system has been stacking hardness and uncomfortable things and when you visualize the pain, tissue memory comes up and it can say something quite profound to you.

For example, one of my pains showed me something about my unforgiving nature. I was not permanently unforgiving, but there was an unforgiving, unloving quality, a 'not really giving' quality and somehow this pain communicated that in some strange, intuitive way. As soon as that happened my heart opened and the pain disappeared. In some ways, that's a demonstration of how some of this pain can transmute into compassion and release. The important thing is that you don't go into it. You hold it carefully and if it keeps sucking you in, try to put it to one side, focus on other parts of your body or move your body around or find places in your body which feel comfortable.

If you're dealing with psychological or emotional pain – painful memories, painful senses of yourself – you can come out of its intensity by trying to bring your attention back to the world of sense contact: 'It's a nice day today. People are pretty nice and I'm getting through. I'm OK.' You come out of the wound and you also recognize your basic health. All of us have a basic health, otherwise we would certainly be psychotic. Our ability to recognize, to discriminate, to make ethical decisions, to discern skilful from unskilful, to do all the things that we are more or less taking for granted on a retreat: this is a sign of our fundamental health. But of course nobody is totally healthy: we all have little bits that have contracted. So we go to the health and if that involves coming to action, to thinking it through, to remembering, so be it. It's certainly a fallacy to feel that you have to stay in some kind of deep state or what seems to be a deep state: 'We're not thinking, just feeling pain as pain.' No. If you don't lift out of it, there's no wisdom

there. It's probably just re-traumatizing. The lifting out of it is almost like opening your eyes: 'There's nothing dangerous in front of me, it's OK. Behind me is OK. Breathing out is OK ...' and we come out of that. This is a function of *viveka* and supportive of wisdom.

Wisdom is one of the ten *pāramī*. On an everyday life level we can also develop wisdom as a faculty: digging-the-garden wisdom, going-shopping wisdom, cooking-the-food wisdom. It's mostly operated through another function called 'skilful attention', 'deep attention' or 'wise attention'. We recognize: 'What do I get myself into? What do I work with that causes skilful states to arise? Or at least that causes unskilful states to decline or doesn't feed unskilful states?' Wisely, we protect ourselves. Wisely, we guard ourselves. Wisely, we care for our well-being by refraining from unskilful actions and by developing good friends, generosity, resolution, patience and things that will give us a sense of dignity and self-respect. This is basic sanity, nothing esoteric: wisdom.

All these processes are *saṅkhāras*: they're dynamic, they're activities. The nature of activities is such that the more you repeat them, the more they build up a structure. We could, for the sake of explanation, differentiate between 'structure' and 'dynamic' as if they were two separate things, but in reality there's only dynamic. The body, which could be seen as a structure, is actually dynamically arisen through reproduction, cellular growth and so forth. There's nothing absolutely fixed and solid in the universe. Everything is dynamic, but some things are in a slow enough, stable enough dynamic to seem solid. What we do with skilful dynamics such as wisdom, patience and generosity is to repeat them. We run through them so many times in our daily activities that they begin to acquire a quality of structure. They begin to firm up, to crystallize. They become soft structures. They're not as rigid as dogmatic ideologies but they become innate, soft structuring for the mind.

It's very important to develop this sense of wholesome, supple structure, to intimately generate it in ourselves. We can of course be encouraged and inspired to be wise, patient, generous and so forth, but by itself that is not a generation of structure. That's borrowing somebody else's structure – it isn't *you* generating. You really have to generate it yourself, otherwise all structure becomes something that 'I've got to do', 'I've got to be', 'They want me to be patient', 'He says I've got to be wise', 'She keeps telling me to be kind.' When those dynamics feel like they're imposed rather than generated, they become alien structures; they're not intimate. This is certainly the case with ethics for example. It's a difficult thing to cultivate in some ways, because a lot of ethics is what we call 'top-down morality'. For example, you don't know why but if you don't shut up you're going to get a smack. You can't always explain, you can't figure it out. The idea is that through modelling and through remembering external structures you generate your own. But as we come into maturity, we often feel a lot of rebellion against structures.

Certainly, during my teenage years, I wanted to chuck structure away, throw it out of the window, because it was always something that somebody else told me to do. When I was at school we had to wear a school uniform and the thing we wanted to do most was to rip it to pieces! So we found ways of rebelling by doing the buttons up wrong or having our cap on backwards or doing a funny knot on our tie. We would do anything to somehow just about conform with the system but put our own twist on it and show, 'I'm doing mine!' There was a lot of rebellion against structure because structure was always seen as alien, as 'other', that which constrains me rather than that which I have grown in order to cultivate and protect my well-being.

The same thing applies with wisdom: all the ideas, all the books, all the self-help manuals, my giving you talks and so forth, all of it can be heard through that same place of, 'Somebody else is telling me what I should

be, what I should do, what I should think and how I should behave.’ Structure has eventually to be self-generated or intimately generated so it’s actually a living self-structure. This process of wisely attending means you ask yourself, you feel it out for yourself. For example, how does lying feel? You linger with it long enough to sense the cause, the impulse, which you perhaps didn’t really notice – it just rose up – the feeling of it and the result of it. If you lengthen your attention span (that’s another aspect of widening) to witness what the whole thing is about, that’s how you get wisdom. You see: ‘That came from some blurry, instinctual place; it jumped out and it landed there and that’s the result, that’s what it feels like.’ It’s important to stay long enough with something.

A retreat situation is protected enough that we can feel our own unwholesome attitudes and mental states in the freedom of our own minds. Nobody is going to read our mind – all our naughty thoughts, malevolent instincts, spitefulness, jealousy, greed, craving, lust and all that. So, let’s have a look at it all, or a bit of it: ‘Where does that go?’ We are widening the span with the paramount quality of equanimity. There doesn’t have to be a self, there doesn’t have to be some indictment of ‘me’. This is just a process: ‘This is what aversion or jealousy feels like. This is how it rises up, this is what it creates and this is where it goes. This is how it creates self and other people, and then it comes to this place.’ We’re running through some of these programs a little bit at a time. It’s the same thing with physical pain: you witness it, you’re not involved with it and then something in you sees: ‘It’s *that*.’

I’d like to mention another thing in terms of the development of wisdom, which may sound strange: if you want to be wise, be a little more stupid! Don’t have an answer. Linger a bit longer before you come up with the response. Most of us probably know how we should be. We can do the ‘I should be’ script quite clearly. When our wounded pieces come up, the old ‘should be’ darts right in there pretty quickly and

tells us what we should do about it. Mostly, it puts us into our head. We think, 'Oh, well, this is *this* particular thing happening and what is needed here is more of *that*. I should do *this*. I should be like *that*.' And the more you study the Dhamma, the better you get at doing that. You use all these long jargon terms. You analyze the problem and come up with the answer pretty pat. So, if you want to be wise, be a little more stupid. Stay with that 'beats me' a little bit longer. Pause from the clever, wise and astute response, because it's in the pausing that you can find the fine balance of meeting: staying *with*, not *in* – staying beside the problem but not in it, not fixing it, not answering it.

In the pausing, there's a quietening, a certain relinquishment of the activities to fix, change or understand, and with the quietening and releasing of these activities, something emerges. Pause, listen, stay with it. Wait and trust what emerges by itself. It can be that something in you shifts, something moves to a felt sense. The release of suffering is straight through the heart. You don't release it by going up into the head and understanding it. You have to be surprised by it. You have to not know it so it can touch you and move through you, straight through the heart. That's the release of suffering.

The understanding comes after the release. You may get the skills and the understanding of how to angle yourself into that holding space, the kind of qualities of attention that are needed. You may understand that and have cultivated that, but I would say that at the place of meeting you don't know what to do and you're not worried about it. You're equanimous and you're open to what will emerge by itself. That which emerges is truly not self. It's not so much what emerges that matters but where it comes from. Sometimes what emerges could be something very simple like, 'Let go.' Well, haven't we heard that one before? Sometimes something shifts, but it doesn't come from our conditioned understanding, it comes from somewhere quite fresh, quite new, quite ungenerated, unconditioned, uncreated, unformulated. The release

of suffering is through the Unconditioned. It's an unconditioning. It surprises us. This is how wisdom works: holding the space, knowing what not to do, pausing and letting whatever emerges from that careful holding space arise.

Isn't this where real inventiveness, real genius comes from? Somebody goes, 'Oh! That's it! Eureka!' – the 'eureka moment', the light bulb flashes. They didn't know, they were looking at a problem and suddenly the solution popped up. Friedrich August Kerulé understood the structure of benzene from some intuitive image he'd had in a dream of a snake with its tail in its mouth. Einstein got his understanding of relativity from hearing that somebody had fallen off a roof in Berlin and that fellow said that while he was falling through the air he didn't feel the pull of gravity. He didn't feel anything until he hit the ground, then he felt plenty! So somehow, something goes, 'Boing!' It's often out of left field. Something comes up – a face, an image, a phrase, a feeling, a mood, a tone, a colour, a vibration, a sound – seemingly out of nowhere. That is the door opener. You didn't do it, you didn't create it. It's the wisdom that is born by release, the herald of release. It's not something that is mine, that I can have or prepare.

It's very important to learn to let go of something. Now, actually, if you let go of something, that is all well and good but that isn't real letting go. It's a kind of relinquishment which is good and skilful but it isn't letting go in terms of the Third Noble Truth. In the Third Noble Truth, nobody lets go; it just happens. I might say, 'I have spent four days without a cup of coffee, so I'll just let go of that now!' ... or whatever it is. You feel that wanting it and then you put it down. That's good, but the letting go of objects is something we do. The letting go of options is something we can do, but the letting go of suffering isn't something we can do, otherwise we would have probably done it by now.

Letting go of suffering is something that happens. It happens when we have given up. The sequence of how wisdom is developed starts with *viveka* (disengagement), then *virāga* (dispassion), *nirodha* (resting or ceasing) and finally *vossagga*, which means complete giving up, complete relinquishment. That's the trajectory, the development of wisdom. It doesn't mean getting more intelligent or smart or having more ideas. The development of insight wisdom is on that line. None of these sound particularly wise, do they? But wisdom is not a concept; it's the ability to handle – concepts, bits of string, macaroni, babies, etc. You can handle concepts (that's conceptual wisdom) but the wisdom isn't *in* the concept, it's in the ability to handle. This trajectory gives us a sense of the quality of the handling.

At first we might not think we are suffering. We think it's something or somebody else's fault: 'The situation around me is unpleasant and people aren't being as nice to me as they should be, but I'm not suffering. These inconsiderate people I live with don't give me the treatment I need, but there's nothing wrong with me, I'm fine.' So, at first we see the problem as being the world out there, what happened to us or whatever. Then, as we come out of this 'blurred together' sense, we realize, 'Actually, I am suffering'. Then we may feel shame: 'I shouldn't be suffering after all these years. I don't want to be suffering! How do I stop suffering?' When you're a professional healer it's even discrediting to suffer. It's not just painful, it's also a sign of, 'You didn't really do it, did you? You're selling snake oil and it doesn't work!' It's not just painful, it's also ignominious.

The sense of handling starts with *viveka*: disengaging our involvement in the suffering and holding it in a wider perspective, getting the whole picture. We recognize that there is suffering; there is a sense of agitation, it's stressing. At that point, the storyline of why, who, what I should be and so forth has stepped back and there is an experience of grief, frustration, pain, hurt or whatever it is. We can just see it as 'It's *that*.'

Virāga means that we start to withdraw our emotional pressures, our excitement and agitation with it. We start to become less emotionally involved in it and with that we begin to see the impermanence, the flowing and changing quality of *vedanā* (feeling), of thought pattern and so forth. We are moving towards equanimity rather than towards the old, 'How long is this going to go on for? I can't stand this! Surely this shouldn't be happening to me! What did I ever do in my past life?' There's a calming and a cooling of the emotional energies through an increasing sense of the realization: 'This is a phenomenon; everybody gets this.' There is more acceptance of that suffering. You recognize that this process of feeling lonely, lost, betrayed or whatever has a kind of moving, flowing quality to it and you can witness, hear the cry of it without getting bogged down in it. You keep your sense of being the listener, being the witness, being the watcher of that. The more there is that sense of *virāga* and *viveka*, the more that quality of self and identification decrease. The development of wisdom is towards a diminution of identification (the 'in it', the 'being it').

Nirodha is ceasing or resting; it's when you have come to a complete pause. Then the whole experience starts to clarify because you're not putting any more volitional energy into it. As the trajectory of understanding a phenomenon as it actually is develops, the sense of self declines. The ceasing of identification is the key. It means that a piece of suffering can now move on. As long as we say, 'I was hurt by this and that, but so what? Everybody suffers. I'm bigger than that. It doesn't really matter. I've gone over it!' then suffering hasn't gone through the heart; it's been compensated for. Sometimes we might feel ashamed: 'I shouldn't be suffering. I shouldn't feel hurt. I'm a big boy now, that shouldn't bother me ... yeah, but it does!' As you practise, the sense of self in the suffering – and that 'shouldn't be suffering' – is relinquished. With that, there's a sense of openness to feel the feeling as a feeling. Then it can move. The ceasing of the sense of self is what

allows suffering to move and it moves straight through the heart. Sometimes there's a shift of some sort.

Relinquishment is the final development or the final ripening of wisdom. It's the understanding that there never was a self – you don't have to keep generating a self who is liberated. As soon as you've overcome a bout of suffering and think, 'Well, I have sorted that one out. That was easy!', then you set yourself up for the next bout of suffering. You know you're preparing the ground to do some more. Relinquishment is an openness to allow the process to continue. This is how that movement develops. With the cultivation of wisdom there's an increasing capacity to differentiate, to see some of the details in an objective way: *this causes that, this generates that, this supports that*. We see suffering in detail but no longer in the sense of self. We contemplate it as it actually is. That's the wisdom that supports the process of release. This is how you develop wisdom in daily life; this is how you develop wisdom in meditation. Wisdom actually only goes one way, and that's the way it goes.

AT AMARAVATI MONASTERY, IN 2014



2014-2017

AFTER RESIGNATION AS ABBOT

Amaravati Retreat

THE FOLLOWING SEVENTEEN REFLECTIONS, BASED ON THE SATIPAṬṬHĀNA
AND THE ĀNĀPĀNASATI SUTTAS, WERE OFFERED DURING A TEN-DAY
RETREAT AT AMARAVATI MONASTERY, FROM 21 TO 30 NOVEMBER 2014,
WHERE AJAHN SUCITTO WAS CO-TEACHING WITH AJAHN METTĀ. THIS
RETREAT HAPPENED ABOUT A MONTH AFTER AJAHN SUCITTO'S FORMAL
RESIGNATION AS ABBOT OF CITTAVIVEKA MONASTERY.

The Relational Sense

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED

ON THE EVENING OF 21 NOVEMBER 2014.

Determining the Eight Precepts and the whole context of this retreat involves recognizing our relational experience. You might usually live on your own or with only one or two other people, but now, on this retreat, you're living as part of a group of fifty-eight people. Hence, your relational experience has widened considerably. You may not think you'll enter into a relationship with everybody else – in some ways this is a very pared-down relational experience – but you'll certainly experience each other to some extent. You will be seen by one another, move around each other, share rooms and eat together. This is not a small thing, and for most people it can be rather strange and unsettling – not necessarily unpleasant, but very different from living on your own or with familiar people.

Let's consider the sense of the large group which we're going to be for the next ten days. If you took the walls of your home down, you'd realize that you actually live in a large group of thousands of people. We live in a connected way in terms of our government, infrastructure, the Internet; we are affected by decisions made in Geneva, Brussels, New York and Hong Kong; we work in corporations, institutions and so forth. We exist in a great ocean of human beings. So, in fact, a large group is a much more accurate description of where we live.

We have to keep challenging this 'I'm a separate entity' paradigm by which we tend to operate. If you were asked, 'Where are you really?', most of you would probably experience yourselves as living somewhere behind your eyes. This is the 'me' bit, somewhere up in the head, with all the rest underneath it. In other words, I don't regard my head as being on top of me; I regard my feet as being underneath me.

The separated being, the trapped or caged person, is the model that we recognize in these finite physical forms. We have all probably experienced ourselves as encased in our personal history, our psychology, all those things that make us seem separate from everybody else. If you follow that trajectory, that line of experience – which is more and more isolating – it takes you to self-obsession, loneliness or grandiosity: ‘I’m the centre of the universe,’ ‘I’m the worst person here,’ ‘I need to be in control of everything,’ ‘I’m the person who lives behind my eyes, with a lot of buttons and levers in front of me making things happen.’ You probably don’t consciously think like that, but our energies and assumptions operate very much in that way.

Now, not only is this quite unpleasant, but it also gives rise to all kinds of unwholesome comparisons with others, as well as to selfishness, hostility, loneliness and separation from others. It’s a painful experience and it’s also inaccurate. You can’t really separate your mind from all the ‘language’ that you’ve learned, which has come out of the field of human activity, the psychologies, the culture, your education, your upbringing, the things you inherit from your parents and your siblings – all the things that have affected you in your life. There’s no line dividing you from all that experience. It’s almost like a vortex in a stream: it looks separate and organizes itself in a separate way. You can’t really draw a line in your mind between what you call ‘me’ and what you call ‘other people’. How would that line be drawn? What is so ‘me’ about my mind? When you hold the view of ‘my mind’, is there anything blossoming and releasing from that? Clearly, there isn’t. But there definitely are views, attitudes, nervousness, pride, fear and anxiety. You didn’t create ‘your mind’ and you can’t consider it as being a separate thing. It’s all these forces and energies that generate every experience you’re having.

This is also the case with the body: even if our eyes perceive it as clearly defined, we always see it as being within a space; there’s always

something else around it. When you experience your body directly, you always experience it in relation to something: touching the floor, feeling affected by the temperature in the room, the pressure of your clothes, and you recognize that the body is always breathing air in and out. It's porous, it's connected. Your sense of the body always has to take in something that appears to be other than 'it'. Our body cannot be experienced as a wholly separate entity and yet we think of it as such; we operate it as if it is.

The sense of separateness is a fundamental perception and a launching pad for our lives. But when you begin to question it, you find that most thoughts and emotions to which it gives rise are not happy or skilful ones: 'What should I do?' 'What do people think of me?' 'She is better than me.' 'He's disturbing me!' These are not happy, easy experiences. Then you can ask yourself what really counts for you: perhaps being accepted, being happily settled in your space, feeling happy, comfortable and at ease with other people? These feelings are all about relationship.

Generosity is the first essence of the path and it brings happiness into our hearts. Obviously we can give material things, but we can also give in other ways, by supporting others, whether it's another person or an animal, and meeting their needs.

Sīla means holding other people in regard so that I'm concerned for their welfare: I respect them, I don't abuse them; I'm concerned that my speech does not hurt them, offend them or misrepresent them. When that *sīla* is there I feel secure in myself. By valuing others, I respect myself, I feel completely upright. Using manipulation or loose language with people doesn't feel good.

Relationship is a crucial experience for us because it's where our sense of well-being can be found. A lot of our suffering and stress comes from being in relationships where people have not fully realized this.

They're not following either the letter or the spirit of *sīla* – there's miscommunication, wrong speech, wrong attitudes, they are not valuing each other and so on. Again, during this retreat, you'll have to pay greater attention on a relational level in order to learn to flow along with fifty-seven other people.

The training in relationship goes further than behaviour: it's also about using the presence of fifty-seven other people to recognize your defensiveness, your judgement of yourself and others, your comparing mind, your attraction and aversion to others. You can learn to recognize when you're not taking others into account. Then you begin to relax that and come into harmony with yourself and with others. As we're sharing this space, we're like a cellular organism. Even on a subtle physical level, there's a training in relationship which is not about putting out a display in a shop window: 'Hey! This is me!' It's not a relationship involving just the person behind your eyes; it's a relationship in terms of the whole body and how we are with each other: sensing each other, giving each other space, opening the heart. Something very beautiful can happen as you experience the challenges that arise when somebody snores or puts their shoes in the wrong place, for example. There can be a feeling of dropping some of yourself, some of your boundaries. Having to put up with fifty-seven other people is considered an advantage rather than a difficulty in our practice on this retreat. It's a means of developing trust, self-respect and respect for others, of learning to cultivate an attitude of 'I'll give up some of my wants and go with the group.' This helps each of us to relax some of that self-definition that can be so poignant, so tender, so awkward, so spiky and unsatisfactory. According to the Dhamma, our individual self-experience will never be satisfactory. We learn the hard way. We can try to use meditation to induce an experience where we'd be crammed with wisdom and good, happy feelings but, as we will see during this retreat, this is not what the practice is about.

It's our sense organs that give us the impression we have of being separate beings. At the mind/heart level we're affecting each other all the time; we're like water sloshing around, merging and bubbling. But the external senses tell us, 'She's *there* and I'm *here*.' In our practice we learn to operate in a different way: not through the eyes (the visual sense), but through the heart.

This relational sense becomes very significant when we come into more inner experiences of Dhamma through meditation, because so often what arises in meditation is: 'Here I am and there are all these things happening to me. These thoughts and these difficult feelings are happening to me, but I'd like to have something more pleasant.' The relationship here is simple: want/don't want. When you cultivate renunciation by putting aside some of the external activities such as watching things, tasting things, reading, chatting and so on, you take away these external supports and forms of feeding the mind with distractions, so then when you go inwards it's not comfortable. When you experience that discomfort, you might think, 'I wish it wasn't like this. I'd like an experience other than the one I'm having now. I like it quieter, brighter, clearer, richer, fuller; more of this, less of that.' This is the besieged self, seemingly separate from its experiences, and its main way of relating is 'want/don't want.' This is not a very sophisticated or even adequate way of relating to experience, so one of the main things to cultivate in meditation is not 'want/don't want', but mindfulness.

Mindfulness spreads over the experience we're having in the present. What is this? Is it body? Feeling? Mind-state? Emotion? Is this an experience of hostility or a strong memory? The Buddha says you can look at experience through four portals or windows. They are often referred to as the four 'foundations of mindfulness' (*satipaṭṭhāna*), although that very translation is questioned these days. It seems more likely that they are the four places where the Buddha recommends establishing mindfulness: the experience of body, the experience

of feeling (pain and pleasure), the experience of mind-states (which may be emotions, but also refers to more sublime emotive states such as feeling unconstricted, radiant or spacious) and the experience of particular kinds of psycho-spiritual phenomena (such as joy, ill-will, sleepiness, restlessness or equanimity). You can look at your present experience in these four ways. Mindfulness doesn't really do anything about it apart from naming and placing it. It's neither wanting nor not wanting it and yet it's clearly relating to it. Through developing mindfulness, that friction, the tugging of wanting and not wanting can abate.

Marvellously, once that tugging of separateness abates, strange things start to happen; things begin to release, flow and shift. Mindfulness doesn't do it; it just happens through the releasing of the ways in which we tug, pull, clamp, resist or hold our experience. Instead of 'I am this experience. I don't want this experience. I want more of that experience,' it becomes: 'This is an experience.' This is a very significant shift, because it isn't based on the sense of a separate self who is having an experience. There is just the experience, with no one outside it who is having it. That's what we call a 'direct experience'. Of course, later on we can say, 'I had a great time yesterday,' but really that's just language, when the experience has become something we can remember, write down or talk about.

Whenever we think, 'I'm having an experience,' the present experience is actually 'thinking of having an experience'. It's an experience accompanied by interest, curiosity or whatever. If the mind absorbs strongly into the sense of 'I'm having a good experience,' sooner or later along will come the thought, 'I want more of this.' If the experience is difficult, the thought will be, 'What's going wrong? Whose fault is it? How can I change it?' There will be a tugging, a pulling, a holding. Mindfulness is not as easy as the word may seem, because the relational experience keeps slipping back into an 'I/it' sense. This happens all the

time; it's our normal condition, so it takes training to reach an honest, absolute sense of a direct experience.

The relational sense is the kernel of right view, which is expressed in various ways. One of its expressions is that there is a result of good and bad deeds. This means there's no separation from our actions; an action isn't finished once it's performed. We're continually formed and informed by the results of our actions, particularly mental actions: the results of our psychological activities, mental drives and impulses, mental habits and cycles of behaviour are forming us all the time. We're not separate from them. What I bring to mind now, what I focus my mind on now is going to form me in the future; I'm not separate from it. So the non-separateness is another way of looking at relationship. Although the words say, 'I'm heir to my kamma', it's actually much closer than that. It's not that 'I' as a separate being 'am heir to my kamma' but '*I am* the inheritance of the things that have happened to me, the things with which I've been involved.' If I look into my mind, there they all are, not just the obvious memories – the things I have done and said – but even attitudes, fears, anxieties, concerns, interests, passions. They have all formed me.

We have parents. That's a simple statement and we might reply, 'Yes, of course. So what?' We rarely contemplate where this body came from – its genes, its cells. Who formed you, not just physically, but also in a primary sense of belonging and being? We don't really notice that or know it clearly, because when we're very young we don't have any words to be able to do that. But we can notice that children who have lost a parent are often strongly affected by that loss. On the other hand, if you have a strong positive relationship with your parents, you're more likely to grow up feeling more confident and assured in the world. This is borne out through studies on people's behaviour. We don't develop on our own out of nowhere, physically or even mentally.

We have an inheritance; we are formed through it and we perpetuate it in our contact with everyone we know. We are all constantly moved and affected by each other. We are phenomenally relational.

Take something like the human face: many facial muscles have no purpose other than to create signals. When your eyebrows move, they're signalling. Your lips, your smile, your cheeks, your eyes, all give signals. Across cultures, down-turned lips are a sign of disapproval, while up-turned lips signify welcome. We're constantly receptive to these immediate signals, and this way of relating to one another is fundamental.

We can take it even further and look at our sense of 'being a body'. I think the standard model would be: I'm the person in my head, moving my body around – I'm not very aware of my back (unless it hurts); I'm mainly aware of my face with its sense organs, and all that is separate, in a way, from the rest of the body. This particular standard model causes huge amounts of damage to the physical body – back problems, disjointedness – because people don't fully inhabit their bodies energetically. Our consciousness is restricted. We haven't learned to relate fully to our physicality, and that's a big problem because by losing that sense, we lose where we are. Instead, we're in a virtual world of time, possibilities, potentials, appointments, destinations, opportunities and regrets, and these have no firm place in which to be. Not feeling fully integrated in the body is a major source of mental imbalance. We're speedy, we're running, we're not where we are. We're confused, we're not grounded, we're not settled in ourselves. When that integration in the body is absent, our emotional patterns easily capture us and throw us around. A person who is grounded and calm in the body has ballast, steadiness, the ability to feel an impact without reacting to it. This ability is developed through basic mindfulness training.

Of all the four *satipaṭṭhāna*, perhaps the one that needs the most emphasis is the body. Indeed, I'd suggest that everything can actually fit within that. And in relating to the body – not just as a person sitting up in the head with everything else operating underneath it, but feeling the senses, the sensations, the energies, the tensions, the nervousness, the relaxation in the body – you'll find a very helpful way of establishing mindfulness and begin to release the mind through the body. As we all recognize, when we're flooded with rage, our experience of the body definitely changes. When we're overwhelmed with sorrow, the body sinks, the shoulders sag. When we're flooded with fear, the body tightens up. When we feel warm and loving, the body relaxes and loosens. When we're sexually aroused, too, the body changes. These are very strong and simple emotional currents that we can recognize in terms of what happens in the body. The more mindful you are, the more you will be able to track a very wide range of these emotional affects. Through tracking them you begin to have a clearer perspective on the mind-state, and on how to release it through going into the body. You don't need to analyze why you're thinking this or that. This way of practice is pure, direct and simple.

When he gave his teaching on the four *satipaṭṭhāna*, the Buddha said, 'This is the direct way to nibbāna.' And at the end of this sutta he suggests you can realize nibbāna in only seven days! To be honest, I've never practised those seven days solidly: there have always been times when I wasn't mindful, when the sense of 'I am' took over. But if you were to hold this mindfulness steadily, I think you can take what the Buddha said literally: seven days are enough to rewire your attitudes, to let them change to something non-dual, non-separate, measureless.

So, forget 'I am' as a fundamental unit, but instead start to sense the relationship – for example: bored, interested, like it, don't like it, want more of this, want less of that – and ask yourself what would help that relationship to be more supportive. Try to shift gently from 'want/'

don't want' into a wiser and more compassionate response such as: 'Oh, a difficult experience: now is the time for patience and compassion.' Resisting difficult experiences is totally justifiable and understandable, but does it work? Does it do you any good? What about relating to them with patience, wisdom and compassion?

Experiencing the Whole Body

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We use mindfulness (*sati*) to create a boundary of attention, to establish a reference frame. We're pushing aside experiences like yesterday, tomorrow, meditation, what I want, expectation, stillness, transcendent awareness and whatever, and we refer to just this experience of the body in and of itself. And it's not the body as seen through the eyes or cognized as a thought or an idea – 'I'm short', 'I'm tall', 'I'm male', 'I'm female' – but just the direct physicality of experience. That's the boundary of attention, and within it you have this process called 'awareness' (*citta*), the consciousness that is aware. What are we aware of? We're aware of warmth, pressures and sensations. All this we call 'the body'. Although the sense of creating a boundary seems to limit, all the sensitivity of awareness, which would normally be thrown out to a wide range of sights, sounds, notions, thoughts and so forth, can now be turned to the bodily experience.

We're beginning to sense different kinds of warmth in the body: very warm here, less warm there; different kinds of solid: bony here, rather soft and fleshy here, rigid, tight, tense; different kinds of bodily impact: the pressure of the floor, the feeling of the back, the belt around the waist, the collar. Some impacts are quite strong, some less. There are sensations, energies, pressures, tingling in the fingers, movements of the belly swelling, breathing in and out – a whole range of experience in the body.

In this experience you could, and probably will, name some pieces as 'leg', 'finger' or 'head' but they're really all part of the same thing. There isn't a gap in that experience between head and hand, it just

flows together. Open your boundary around the whole bodily form, as much as you can experience. You're probably going to recognize that you need to encourage your awareness, not just to sit up in your head or in your fingers, but also to take into account that you have a chest, a back, legs and feet. See if you can encourage a fuller awareness of the entire experience of body: its span, location and its textures, its consistencies. Within that, how does the body feel most stable and settled? You're not asking it to freeze into rock or to be completely still, but how does it feel settled? There are different ways you could feel settled. It could be by feeling free, awake or grounded, by feeling not obstructed and not tense.

The Buddha's recommendation is that we take the spine as the leader in the organizing centre within the body. The spine is usually very much neglected, not noticed. Now can you sense it, starting at your tail bone, the base of the body on which you're sitting? Can you touch that? Then, can you slowly run a finger of awareness up your back, along the spine, into your neck and your head? Can you get a sense of balance within this body experience? Let your spine act as a kind of central point of attention within the whole field of the body. The combination of these two principles of both covering the entirety of the body in one perception and establishing a centre is enormously beneficial for *sati* and for finding balance. It results in the mind beginning to settle and clear.

As you become more familiar with this experience of the body and study it carefully, you can particularly notice the organizing experience of breathing in and breathing out that occurs within it. The body breathes involuntarily; there isn't a person making sure it's happening. How do you know the body is breathing? You feel the swelling, the distending, pressures, shifts, etc. There is that regular movement and it's the ideal movement for calm because it doesn't impose anything. It's not something we have to do, it happens by itself. It connects to and infuses

the entire body domain and runs along parallel to the spine: from the belly, diaphragm, chest, throat and head. So you track that, as if you were combing through the body to take out the tangles and the dull places. Spend some time just tuning into that.

At the end of this meditation exercise, notice the results: do you feel stirred or sleepy? These are not by any means negative; they're just often the consequences of shifting gears, going from a very much 'out there, do it' mode to an internal settling. The mind-states start to break loose and drift around, the energies shift. Nothing is going wrong, everything is normal. As we begin to open out from the normal mode, which we operate as a separate self, it's rather like everything gets stirred up and tends to become more mobile. It takes a while for it to clear. It's then very important to sustain awareness in the present: 'It's *this* now.' What's the response? Steadying, supporting, calming, maintaining; that's the most skilful response.

Releasing the Mind Through the Body

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Let's take a small section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*: the part where someone is sitting under a tree with an erect spine, establishing mindfulness and putting aside covetousness and grief with regard to the world. 'Covetousness and grief' means hankering, wanting, ambition, distress, despondency, despair, hopelessness – basically all the impacts of the world, whatever your world is in terms of people, jobs, scenarios and so on. This 'putting aside covetousness and grief' is already quite a step; it's not something you actually *do*, but shifts have to happen for that. Much of the rest of the sutta is taking us through this process by providing objects for attention and awareness.

'Attention' is that which detects an object that either comes to mind or is deliberately brought into the mind. 'Awareness' is that which receives the object and senses the impressions thus created. 'Intention' is a general motivation or inclination. These are different aspects of the mind. The intention of mindfulness is to establish clarity, pure knowing, deep understanding, freedom and release. When we are touched by powerful experiences of covetousness, grief, ambition or distress, they generate their own intentions and motivations, and we want to get rid of them, quell or satisfy them. So there is a field of these affects rippling in the mind, suddenly rising up and generating emotions. We want to find some way to make the suffering they cause cease. But the Buddha doesn't encourage us to go into the story of what is bothering us. Instead, he encourages us to establish and keep our attention steadily on this affective field through the mind and body.

I think of these four establishments of mindfulness as Russian dolls, with one sitting inside the other. The biggest, primary one is the body, which is a very suitable form of experience for attention. You can definitely put your attention there. It's sensitive and responsive, but unlike the mind, the body has certain boundaries. The mind has no natural boundary; it can encompass anything and everything. It can be a thousand miles away, it can be yesterday, it can be tomorrow, it can be in your toe; it has no natural basis. According to your intention and attention, that's where your mind will be. This is not a good thing, because what arises in the mind is often reactive, evocative and arousing – not leading to nibbāna but to further agitation. What arises in the mind may not necessarily be unskillful, but you can see that this process of following mind-objects can go on and on, giving no real sense of rest or release. So we're taking a hold of the process and trying to bring attention to the body, which has a finite quality and doesn't proliferate. Whatever object you put your mind on, the mind will create more and more around it: amplify, embellish, analyze; that's its function. The body doesn't do that; its function is to maintain a form.

Body and mind are related. When you experience profound mental or psychological shocks, you can feel them running through your body. The mind is affected by many things: sights, sounds, thoughts. It's like water: when you drop a leaf on it, there's a ripple. Often it's not leaves dropped on the water but rocks, which create big ripples. The mind can switch from experiencing the pleasant to the unpleasant in the flash of just one thought – from calm to agitation, excitement, happiness, disappointment, sometimes in response to just one word. It's extremely mobile and mutable. The mind can be extremely affected and then generate many ripples, such as: 'Why am I? What should I? Why does she? How is that? What about more of that, less of this?' That's its nature, its function, but as a result it has no real stability.

The body's function is to stabilize. When you receive a shock, your body holds it. You stay in that state until you receive a signal that everything is safe again, then it can unwind. Thus the body firms up and stabilizes how the mind has been affected. But you can notice when you have a profound mental affect such as fear, it stays in your body even when the cause itself has ceased. It takes some time for the body to shake itself out and hopefully release these affects.

The body holds our flowing and fluctuating mind-states. Whatever grabs our attention determines which particular mental signal we'll retain. For example, when you see an attractive advertisement, you feel aroused and the impression it makes remains. If it remains for long enough, you may start acting on it. If it just disappeared you wouldn't be able to act upon it. It's held, and it's held through a certain subtle bodily quality, an activation: arousal, pressure or panic.

On a stressful working day, the body receives a lot of tension. Your neck and your eyes may become extremely activated or your stomach tightens up. This affect in your body may stay with you all day long, and you can feel quite tired even if your body isn't exerting itself much, just because of the 'get it done' urgency signals that are occurring. The mind is embodied, so these mental signals have an effect on the entire body. This constant activation of stress is a major cause of physical ill health. When you return home in the evening, this tension is still there and you want to do something to discharge it. People will often switch on the TV or some other device, have a drink, eat something or talk to somebody to give another signal to the body: 'That's all right now; you can relax.' But often, in doing so, we just add another layer of impressions to the ones which are already there. Instead of 'cleaning out' we are just 're-painting'.

Intention, attention and contact create your mind-body experience. Intention selects signals and attention focuses on them. These signals become established in your nervous system; they are held in your

body. You may become so absorbed in a signal of urgency that you don't notice anything else. Attention limits your awareness; it puts a boundary round it. If we're absorbed in thinking about a particular topic, the rest of the world disappears, we're oblivious to it. We can be like the absent-minded professor who found a piece of toast in his pocket. He was so involved in a philosophical problem while having his breakfast that he shoved the toast into his pocket!

The most significant activation concerns defence, because the most important thing for a mortal, vulnerable being is to defend itself. If it doesn't defend itself when in danger, it won't be able to feed itself. For example, if a rabbit is placed in front of a fox and a carrot, it won't notice the carrot, will it? Because if it doesn't first notice the fox, it won't be able to eat the carrot! How often do our semi-conscious inclinations aim to protect ourselves from a disaster that will happen if we don't do 'this' – whatever 'this' is? How will the future be if you haven't earned enough money? You could lose your job if you don't get there on time. You could be seen in a negative light if you don't wear this or say that, or don't vote for this or buy that. We spend so much time defending ourselves from blame, criticism or rejection by other beings. How much of our motivations, almost semi-conscious, are about defending ourselves?

What happens when you defend yourself? There's a tightening, a speeding up, an armouring, probably activated in your chest, your throat and your face. What's the motivation? What do you notice? How does that affect you? What is programmed into your experience of mind and becomes 'myself'? The release from those affects is called 'calming', 'steadying' or 'clearing' – *samatha*. But the release from being prone to those affects is more profound and that occurs through insight. You may have quite a pleasant time on a retreat, but when you go back home your triggers activate the same old responses again. You've had a calm time, but have you seen how you get triggered? The major trigger

is defence, and often we're defending ourselves from other people. So our relational realm is really significant.

We need to leave behind our tendency to defend and perform. Particularly when we're in a group, we tend to strive to 'get somewhere' so we won't have the feeling that 'I didn't really make it' or 'I didn't have the optimal experience' or 'I have to keep up with other people so I don't feel I'm being left behind.' That's why it's really important to tune into our relational field. How do we sense ourselves in a group: better, the same, experienced, inexperienced, floundering? These affects won't do anything useful and they will make the mind proliferate. It will take a gesture, a facial expression, a movement by another person and generate something from it: comparisons, antipathy, judgements, even ecstatic romances. That's why it's so helpful to come back into the body, because it's in the body that you can feel and release the affects of all that triggering. You can begin to undermine them. Trying to release these seemingly psychological experiences psychologically is going the long way round. You may be able to arrive at a detailed understanding of the experiences, but direct release from them will take place within the body, and when that happens we suddenly can see the world in a very different way.

Our attention has to be carefully guided. Normally our attention goes out through the sense-doors: eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body, which create a world of separation, with something 'out there' and me 'inside here'. But in awareness itself there are no boundaries between 'me' and 'it'; there's just 'feeling affected'. There isn't somebody being affected but just the affective sense: stirring, moving, sinking, rising, shifting. The world is strange and fluid; it contains forms and images. Where is the separation between the 'inner' world and the 'outer' world? Which world really counts? The inner world, surely: it's the one that stays with you when you put your head on the pillow, and it's there when you get up in the morning. Your real basis is not sights and sounds,

but this internal sense, hence the emphasis on restraining the senses. Don't let your attention keep running out, being affected and triggered by every sight and sound going on around you; restrain it. This doesn't mean stifling it, but restraining it in order to understand more deeply and thoroughly what's happening, and to find the base of release.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the Buddha begins by expounding mindfulness centred in the body with breathing in and breathing out. The *Ānāpānasati Sutta* is entirely dedicated to this process. This is how we bring our attention to the breathing: knowing when one is breathing in long or breathing out long; knowing when one is breathing in short or breathing out short – the full flow of the breath. The Buddha continues with 'experiencing the whole body breathing'. We gradually go into the experience of breathing in and breathing out. The word is 'breathing', not 'breath'; it's a dynamic experience that shifts and changes. How does the body experience that? How is it affected by it? Can we sense the quality of release that can occur when we're really with the body breathing and not getting triggered by other things like sights and sounds?

Once you enter the process of breathing in and breathing out, you also experience all the embodied affects that have been created by where your attention, intention and contact have been. There you experience both the potential for liberation and also the nub of the problem. You may think, 'I feel tight and lost. I'm just swimming around, there's no centre. I was breathing all right until I started being mindful of it. Now I can't find it at all, it's slipping away. I feel restricted in my chest. What's happening?' You're entering into 'your damage', the car crash that happens every day: the various phenomena, the signalling that has occurred and switched these energies on. In a way, you have to touch them in order to release them, but you first have to build up a means of doing that, so you attend to the breathing. Where is it freest? Where is it most steady? Where is it simple? Where can you find it?

In both the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, the Buddha refers to ‘sitting under a tree’. You might imagine that in India a tree gives a sense of seclusion and shelter. We start the meditation by feeling safe because the first signal is defence. As we don’t have fifty-eight trees in this shrine room, you can simply look around and sense what’s in front of your body and what’s behind you. What’s touching the skin? There’s nothing harmful here, but has your ‘shield’ come off? You may think that everything is fine, but if you explore you might recognize that some of these signals can still be there. It would be rather unusual if you had put aside your shields completely. Feel the movement as you’re sitting, the slight expansion and contraction of the body as you breathe in and breathe out. Come into the fullness of the in-breathing, letting your body expand into the space around you.

Then the Buddha describes the sitting posture as being ‘with an erect spine’. We’re taking a seat: we’re not perched, not ready to jump up and go somewhere else. We’re not slumped but really sitting, drawing the spine up, giving it a firm basis through the tail, the upper thighs and the pelvis. The pelvis is a massive bony structure whose main function is to carry weight – carrying weight is not the function of the shoulders. So you’re sweeping your attention down your body, like water gradually draining energy from your face and your eyes down into the lower abdomen and the pelvis – grounding your attention in the body. What’s beneath you is firm and supportive; it isn’t going to go anywhere – it’s ‘your space’.

When you feel yourself breathing out, get to the end of the out-breath and then gently see whether it could go just a little more fully out and whether you can track that in your lower abdomen. No need to hurry. We have to change the way we relate to time, which, for most people, is always primed to go to the next moment, to the next experience. In our meditation there is no next moment. There’s nothing you have to go to, because everything is going to happen by itself. You have all the time in

the world to listen in, feel and tune into the muscles in the lower belly, right down to the pelvic floor – releasing, cleaning, emptying out.

The in-breath does not start at the nose; it starts by an involuntary pulling in the abdominal region, a kind of dragging, drawing in. Breathing is calming because it's involuntary; you don't have to make it happen. But you do have to tune into it, otherwise, your normal programs of 'hurry up!', 'get it done!', 'that's enough of this, now on to the next thing!' will begin to affect your breathing and you won't touch its full regenerative quality. So, give yourself the space and the time to breathe out and wait for the in-breathing. Trust it, it's going to happen. Can you let the in-breathing be done purely through the lower body, as if there were a force down there, drawing the thread of breath in through the nostrils and throat? Allow the nasal channels and the back of the throat to stay open and inactive. Let the diaphragm obey the breathing – and not your attitudes, which generally affect it profoundly. The diaphragm and the solar plexus area will tighten up, become rock-like, when we have reactions of power, defence or aggression. Can we release any lingering traces of these signals? The prompting to 'get it done' and 'be good at it' is not necessary. Acknowledge some of those signals and turn your attention further down your body so that the diaphragm is then looser and receptive.

Just as your mind generates signals that go into your body, your body can generate signals that go into the mind. Now we use the body to generate the powerful signal of, 'Let go, the breath is going to happen.' Tune in, listen, experience its fullness, let it express itself. Be interested, be curious. What happens in your chest as that breath-energy pushes? Can you allow it to keep your throat open? And what happens in your head when you receive the full sweep of the inhalation? When does it stop? What makes it stop? How does it know it's had enough? At the end of the in-breath there's a hovering, something tingling and suffusive,

and then a release – breathing out. You can pick up the affects, the energetic resonances of this with some practice.

The Buddha doesn't stipulate that you should keep your eyes closed in meditation. In fact, closing them might not be beneficial. You're certainly not using them to look around, but you can have them just slightly open. Closed eyes give signals and the primary one is 'go to sleep'. Often you close your eyes because you want to take a nap. Another reason why you would close your eyes is to think something through carefully. Both sleeping and thinking are things we often do when we set out to meditate! If you're tired, leave your eyes open. If you have a lot of problems, a lot of things bothering you, don't close your eyes yet, because if you do you'll become lost in thoughts of your problems. You want to address problems, but at the right time and in the right way. Just getting lost in them is not conducive to solving them, so keep your eyes slightly open; you will feel the difference.

The reason why we tend to close our eyes or gaze downwards in meditation is that the visual field is our most habitual way of organizing ourselves. We tend to *see* the world first. The mind picks up visual signals strongly, so there's a lot of energy and activity in the eyes. Rapid eye activity is associated with thinking and the eye then tends to contract and tighten up. This sends a signal to the mind: think, agitate. The other thing is that space and separation go along with seeing. What I see is separate from me: I'm *here*, what I see is *there*. Whether it's a centimetre, a metre or a mile away, there's space between us. And I can see things that don't see me. I can peek. I can separate myself from what I see. Emotional tones in seeing are limited to: 'Is the object threatening or attractive, familiar or unfamiliar?' In a way seeing is our first check on things: 'Is that thing going to kill me or is it safe?'

'Hearing' or 'listening' is another way of organizing ourselves. When listening, you're in the middle of things. There's no real distance, you

can't really separate yourself from the sound. Only through inference can you recognize a sound as an aeroplane, but it might also be a vacuum cleaner in the next room or maybe something wrong with your hearing. You can't exactly tell the distance of a sound. Hearing doesn't do that but it carries a much richer sense of emotional tonality than seeing: we feel moved, inspired, touched, loved, threatened or fascinated. There are many different tones and tonalities in hearing. That's why when people meditate, they often like to go to the hearing base, because it tends to open the heart. In personal relations, you want to talk to somebody, not just see them. You want them to listen to you and understand what you are saying – not just the contents of what you say, but the emotional tones. So, when we come close to something that seems safe, we can turn our mind like a listening organ to get the full feeling of it, to know it more thoroughly, to sense how it affects us, to sense what it triggers in us.

In people whose lifestyle is very much oriented towards the seeing faculty, such as soldiers or technicians, the heart can be switched off because it's not related to the visual sense. The seeing faculty leads to a 'technical exactitude' and that can be heartless. Would you want to meditate with that? Precision has its uses but if you want to go a bit deeper you can ask yourselves: 'Where are kindness and compassion going to come from? Where is the pleasant feeling going to come from?' It's not going to come through that visual channel. The place of exactitude is a fascinating place. It gives us a feeling of knowing it all and being in charge: adding all the numbers, linking the dots, doing the analysis, studying the books. But now, in the direct experience, you're starting to listen in.

If you examine more deeply, you come to 'body-sense'. Clearly, you're not *watching* your breath – I've never seen a single breath. Maybe on a cold morning you might see a little bit of steam, but that's about it. If you focus on technical precision as you observe your breathing,

meditation risks becoming a pretty dry experience about being precise and striving to become even more precise and refined. You can't really hear your breathing either, unless you have a cold or chest problem, but you can feel it through the body. The body-sense is the most immediate. There's no way you can touch something without it touching you. The tactile sense is extremely delicate and refined. Your fingertips can pick up tiny degrees of sensation. Just rub your fingertips together and you can feel every print on your fingers, every indentation; it's a very sensitive experience. Try to bring that faculty into your meditation. When you have your meditation object, not razor-sharp but there and clear enough, turn to it as if listening: 'What is this going to tell me? What is this about? How does this feel?' Then you can explore, 'What is really touching me?' because in touch the boundaries dissolve and it becomes just 'being touched'; it's very sensitive. Then you recognize that the only organ which knows how to let go is the hand. Your eyes can't do that; you can shut them, but they don't let go. The ears don't let go. But the hand is organized to hold on and let go.

That's why, in my understanding, it's so important to operate through all these organizing principles: getting the clarity, the empathy, but also seeing how I'm affected, how I loosen, soften, how I hold things clearly, precisely and delicately, and how I'm able to let go. This will happen when the mind operates like a hand, not like an eye, but because we're most basically organized around our visual sense, that takes a bit of learning. When we walk we feel our feet and sense how the body organizes itself around walking; we feel into it. Giving the body some exercise helps us to become more fully attuned to how the body-sense works.

Touching is obviously an external base, but the organizing of it occurs internally. For example, when you experience something you don't like, you can sense how the whole system is being affected: maybe there's a tightening or a shrinking. In mindfulness of breathing, this

touching base makes the experience very rich and precise in its own way – precise about what’s being affected. We can also transfer the beneficial effects of breathing in and breathing out into places where our bodily sense is negatively affected. We carry worry, grief, anxiety and frustration in our bodies, and we tighten up around them. The process of sending energy through the bodily system brings healing and dispels ‘covetousness and grief’.

Standing Meditation

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ON 22 NOVEMBER 2014.

Now, let's practise in the standing position. Conventionally speaking, most of us live in our faces, and maybe even just in a little patch behind the eyes and the forehead. Now, having a few extensions built on your house, see if you can extend your domain down to your feet. You may not get every detail but you can sense the feet on the floor; feel the nice sensation there. The legs are slightly flexed so they are more active and receptive. Be aware of your chest and the upright spine and keep your eyes open. You can move around a bit to wake your feet up, so your stance is grounded.

I'd like to encourage a unified body. Many people are like a head with little underneath it. The body is often segmented. There are places where the tissues lock, tighten up, so we get the sense of being bits and pieces. One segment goes around your jaw, chin and shoulder area, so the head and chest can be quite tight. Another place where this segmentation occurs is your belly, and that cuts off anything below the waist.

Now can you come into your forehead and soften it? Can you relax your jaw? Can you extend your awareness down from your head into your throat, neck and shoulders, and deliberately loosen and relax your upper shoulders? See if you can sense the energy widening its span. Then extend your awareness over the trunk of the body including not just the front but also the sides – so you get the parallels of the body – and the back. Then include the abdominal area and continue to sweep down, without losing any bit, through the legs into the floor, particularly into the soles of the feet.

There are two areas there. You have the areas touching the floor: the toes, the balls of the feet and the heels, but also the area that isn't

touching the floor, which is the under-sole. The foot is like a mirror of your hand. The palm of the hand is very sensitive; it's a receiver, whereas the fingers are active. Similarly with the toes and the soles of the feet. Once you feel settled and stable, see if you can give priority to the under-arch of the foot, as if you were listening to the ground through your feet.

Just as you swept downwards, you can then extend your awareness by climbing up from the soles of the feet, as if there's a line of awareness drawing up through the legs, gathering in the lower abdomen and rising up the trunk of the body into the throat and the back of the head. See if the skull can be like a ball resting on a fountain, rather than a screw tightened down.

Sense-restraint is about prioritizing the centre: we're centring our awareness rather than diversifying it into the sense-fields. It's not about anaesthetizing ourselves. You're sensing behind the eyes, around the eyebrows, organizing yourself much more around the bodily sense of these organs than around the visual sense. Then that centre becomes a little more felt. It's subtle, it's about balance and wholeness because it runs through the entire form; it's quiet. Now check how you can sense the breathing when you're focused internally.

While maintaining that inner centrality, you could then turn your body a little as you stand, feeling the sense of movement and also the freedom within your space: nothing is limiting or constricting. As you move, try to particularly sense what's happening in your chest and in front of your body. There's nothing here you have to defend against, so you're opening, staying centred. Then you can check internally: is it time to sit down? You can stand a little bit longer if you wish. When you feel ready, come back to your sitting position, while continuing to feel that centre.

Walking Meditation

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In a few minutes you will go outside to do walking meditation. Try to make your way from the shrine room to your walking path without losing the thread, the centrality.

Then, determine a walking path of between twenty and thirty paces, which is a suitable span for walking. First you're going to stand at one end of the path and there will be the intention to walk. What's going to happen then? The body is going to shift onto one leg, the hips are going to swing and the body will start moving. You're moving from the hips and abdomen, rather than just throwing the legs forward. The movement is then much more fluid and less driven forward.

Your conventional walking is generally to go places, but during walking meditation you're clearly not going anywhere. You have to overcome that forward drive which tends to ignore the fluidity of the body and prioritize 'getting there', so now you're prioritizing that fluid movement of the body, observing how the body organizes its walking. The whole body participates; it's not just a march. You might bring up the felt sense of 'going for a stroll, nowhere to go'.

Whenever you find yourself losing awareness, stop, pause, go back into your feet, give yourself a couple of breaths and then move along. Get to the end of your path, stop, go back into your feet, sense the breathing and turn around. Then sweep through the body as you walk, experiencing how the body organizes its movements and staying internal rather than going outwards into sights, sounds and plans.

Staying Present

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In practice, there needs to be balance between proactive applications and relaxation.

The proactive applications consist of creating something or placing the mind onto an object such as body or breathing. You can do that by lifting your attention with a thought: 'Where is the body now? ... Where is the breath now? ... What is breathing out like now?' You deliberately bring that thought up. That's why we say it's more active. When you're walking, thought can be useful too. You could say, 'Now I'm going to stand ... and now I'm going to walk ... which part of the foot touches the ground first?' You're lifting your attention onto an object so that it's not continually snagging and being dragged into unhelpful memories, thoughts and feelings.

The other main approach is relaxing, giving things space, not applying pressure, which gives a sense of clarification. As we feel ourselves tensing up or getting tangled, we consciously let things pass, let things fade, simply with an out-breath and the very attitude of relaxing, softening. For clarity, your primary means would probably be using the mind like an eye: you're 'watching' your body, thoughts and feelings. The watching sense provides a sense of space: you are standing beside what's going on, rather than being thrown around in it. That objectivity gives you clarity.

So you're using the body to lift your attention onto a supportive theme and also to relax the pressures and energies that come up when the mind is still swinging around looking for some ground, for something to feed on or settle in – when it's caught up in that chaotic movement.

You're lifting the mind when it gets dull, raising it onto something clear that it can focus on. Before walking, you can ask yourself, 'How does each leg move?' And if you find yourself losing ground or feeling unstable, you can stop in the middle of your walking path and take the time for stabilizing, letting things rest, before walking again.

In times when the mind swings into emotional turbulence, our relationship with it may be benefited more by just listening, widening the listening sense. Both qualities of watching and listening have the sense of non-reaction and non-proliferation. Mindfulness curtails the proliferation, the creation of more mental stuff. And if you keep practising in that way, things will calm down and those qualities of 'watching' and 'listening' will be your fundamental modes.

When you're on a retreat, you have alternating periods of sitting and walking, so look out for the sense of going into 'automatic', which is another way in which the mind starts to structure experience. You want to treat the beginning of every period as if it's the first time. When you have this feeling of, 'Here we go again, another one of these,' then you've gone into automatic mode because it's never another one: it's always just 'this one'. And that's where the touching sense is important because that's always very specific. The feeling of the body at this particular time is quite specific, and you're sensing it, feeling it. You can stand and feel what it's like to have a body, widening your attention over the whole bodily form. How is that? Is there someone separate from this? Who is that? Is it possible to relax that sense of separateness which is bound up with 'what I will be', 'what I could be', 'where I was', and just be a body standing in the coolness of the air? Let yourself feel it.

That helps us to undo these strong mental programs of time, identity, specific moods and feelings. We're using mindfulness in the body to come out of these mental habits, clearing them. And in those moments of clearing, when there's a greater clarity, settledness and spaciousness, when you don't feel the turbulence and entanglement, ask yourself,

‘What’s always here?’ As the ‘dream’ finishes, what’s always here? We call it ‘pure knowing’ or ‘direct knowing’: this sense of awareness with no specific object, strategy, destination or identity – it’s just ‘this’. Then perhaps the mind starts to cloud over again. Practice is rather like that; it’s a very personal and individual process. That’s why the emphasis is on relationship: learning how to relate, how to be with yourself.

Cultivation of Skilful Thought

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ON THE EVENING OF 22 NOVEMBER 2014.

You may think that as soon as you stop thinking, you'll just drop into the Deathless, but it's more likely that you'll drop into dullness! Actually, you don't really *stop* thinking: it's more accurate to say that there's a resting, a ceasing of thought. Part of our practice is to train the thought faculty and there are different ways of doing that. In terms of content, we may consider training through learning lots of information, but in general, training our thought faculty involves lessening the amount of information. Another aspect of this training is developing the agility to conceive thought, to bring it to mind and to steadily sustain attention. You could say it's our reading and writing capacity.

When we're four or five years old and we start learning how to write, at first our letters are all spidery but gradually they become stronger. By ten or eleven they become quite clear, then it's downhill all the way after that. By the time we're fifty, they're spidery again! Similarly with the way we speak: when we start to learn a language, our words sound faltering and clear. As we get better, they become more slurred and we may drop the endings. So as the information increases, its articulation degenerates.

Often in traditional Buddhist practice, a lot of emphasis is placed on simply saying the same things over and over again. The Buddha recommended that his disciples learn certain passages of his teachings by rote in order to get their thinking tackle behind them. When you speak a few words to yourself slowly, over and over again, you understand the meaning more deeply: there's a resonance of 'getting it', a feeling of being stirred, activated, inspired or calmed.

For example, you can recollect death: you keep bringing that theme to mind and thinking it through clearly. At first the mind may blur and say, ‘So what? That’s not going to happen!’ or it may become agitated, but eventually you really feel the resonance of that information, the sense of, ‘Oh! This experience, which seems so final to what I am, is actually just a bubble in the life stream.’

Along with the recollection of death, the Buddha recommended that we recollect the nature of Buddha: liberation, the Deathless. These particular topics, these signs, become like buttons you push to trigger an activation of inspiration, restraint, etc. Certainly, if you do it skilfully, recollecting mortality helps you realize, ‘What’s the point in getting lost in all this stuff? What’s really worthwhile? When I bear death in mind, what’s really important and valuable in my life so that it’s bright and can move without regret?’ Generosity, gratitude, honesty are really important. When you’re doing the best you can to bring these qualities into your life, the heart is lifted and you can acknowledge this activation of uplift.

We read in the suttas that through skilful recollection of death, the *citta* rises and gathers itself in the Deathless.⁴¹ That might not be something we can intellectually understand but it certainly has a nice sound to it. What’s the *citta*? What’s ‘rising’? What’s the Deathless? Even if we don’t know the meaning, it sounds rather good – better than ‘stuck in hopelessness’! You can feel the activation of inspiration. The heart is lifted and perhaps for that moment you think, ‘Liberation is possible. This practice leads towards it. So let’s cultivate.’ That inspiration then gives you the energy to focus and work through some of the places where you feel stuck.

It’s important to recognize that the heart can be moved. It can be moved consciously, deliberately, clearly, skilfully, with a thought. It might not

41. Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.20, 7.46, 8.73 and 8.74.

stay there for long, but you know you can lift it. Signals or signs are perceptions (*saññā*) and they trigger particular energies or activations (*saṅkhārā*). This activation can go up or down, round and round. When you get a negative signal, the heart activations (*citta-saṅkhārā*) can move you down into despair or overwhelm. Since it's all very mutable and there are all sorts of potentials, what are the signs you want to put your attention on? The sign you put your attention on will activate: it could drive your heart down or it could lift it. So we have a sense of urgency (*saṁvega*) to cultivate skilful thought.

This cultivation of skilful thought can be done not just through content, but through careful placing and listening. It is not about overloading your mind with words. We might associate thought primarily with particular words that pop up, but in the Dhamma we have a slightly wider and perhaps more penetrative understanding of thought. It's not just the language; it's the ability to form language. It's called *vacī-saṅkhāra*, the activation of language. Being able to articulate to oneself clearly is definitely considered an important skill. Take your time, think it through, think with a steady mind, slowly, purposefully and simply. Give articulation to thoughts that touch the heart in a purposeful, useful way. That's also *saṅkhāra*. It means we activate our thoughtful process.

There are two aspects of that thoughtful process: first, you pick up a thought or an idea, such as kindness, goodwill or virtue; then, you hold it and touch your heart with it until the heart 'gets it' and you listen to the resonances. The picking-up or the placing is called *vitakka* and it happens in a moment, like placing a thumbtack. *Vicāra* (evaluation) is the process of taking that in, recognizing how it feels. The thought is not just a voice, it's also an ear. We're actually listening to what we're thinking in an interested way. Listening to the verbalization gives clarity and a quality of steadiness and focus – it's not fuzzy. We can train ourselves in this way.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* there is a whole sheet of recollections. For example, we can contemplate corpses in nine stages of decomposition for the recollection of mortality. These recollections help us to challenge the sense of being somehow wrapped up within this physical form. We can contemplate the physical form as a physical form, as a part of nature, rather than something permanent that we can claim to have ownership of. Other forms of recollection are around kamma, which is the potency of any kind of deliberate intention – good or bad. The kamma of the mind is the primary form of kamma and the most significant one – verbal and physical kamma just follow on. The mind is where we direct our inclinations. What do we light up around? In the sea of the mind there can be various images and notions swimming around, and at any given moment one of those will suddenly come into focus and we'll pick it up and take it along. That decisive engagement – when we pick up a thought, an idea or an impulse and run with it – is the moment of kamma.

A lot of the time things are just bubbling in potential, but you're not following them: they're like static or white noise. This is called *vipāka*, the residues of where we're living. It's as if we were in a room with lots of people having conversations around us, and in which we're not really engaged, and then we hear something and think, 'Oh! What is he saying? I don't agree with that at all!' That's kamma! We activate, we get involved. We can't really stop the activations, but we can stop focusing on the negative signs which take us into nihilistic or fruitless pursuits, and instead begin to pick up the good ones, those which are based upon good intentions of clarity, simplicity, letting go, goodwill and so on.

The Precepts outline pathways for our intentionality. You can spend time thinking through the significance of being someone who doesn't harm any creature. But don't just consider what you refrain from, also recollect the effect of keeping that precept: nothing in the world need

fear your presence nor mistrust you. Feel the resonance of that. The recollection of the precepts that we keep helps to give the mind its foundation in the training. You recognize more deeply the result of keeping those precepts: you have a grounding of ethics and of right intention. That's an important ground to be able to stand on in a world where all kinds of potentials are reaching out and bustling in. Training in right thought is not an original or new idea, it's a very old one. We train by bringing to mind signs that switch on beneficial currents that help to lift the heart.

We have started by looking at the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, but in fact this is already a few steps on from the way the Buddha presented his training, which starts with generosity, morality, renunciation and seeing the dangers if one's sense-fields are not moderated: the mind then tends to proliferate and you can really get wrecked and dragged down. As you're gradually able to maintain awareness, vigilance, care and custodianship over the energy that operates through the sense-fields, you can notice the results. The practice of thoroughly developing careful thought doesn't end: it's not just for beginners. Constantly generating this kind of activation, this wholesome mental kamma, will make the *citta* firm and strong. It won't be as confused, blown out, falling apart or dissipated any more.

Tonight someone was asking if we could share blessings with their relative who is going through a difficult time with Alzheimer's: 'May she be free from all suffering. May her caring family be free from all suffering.' If we slow our mind down around this word *Alzheimer's*, how does that resonate? We know what those sounds mean, what they evoke in us. We may feel a sense of being sobered, because something in us can sympathize. In fact, if you think and articulate slowly and carefully you can't help but sympathize. But when the thought faculty is not cultivated, the sympathy is lost because the mind is then so overloaded with concepts and ideas that there isn't the space to actually listen to what they mean. So we can read this dedication very quickly and think, 'OK, be free from suffering! Good luck! That's it!' or even, 'So what? I

don't know this person. What is that to do with me?' But if the thought faculty is carefully trained, there will be a resonance: something will lift with goodwill. The nature of the mind is resonant and empathic when it's not overloaded.

Could that same focus be turned towards yourself? When you think about yourself, don't think about all the stories and the details of your life but think of yourself as a person, a human being who is born, subject to ageing, sickness and death, fearing pain, enjoying pleasure, experiencing a sense of aloneness, seeking friendship, seeking refuge. Bring to mind simple things that you can recognize about all human beings. So you're regarding yourself subjectively but not personally. You're really getting to know this person as one member of the human race. How is he/she? Keep it simple and just take a few salient details that are relevant for all of us: struggles, is tired, has concerns, grief, aspirations, values, seeks the welfare of others ...

This is skilful thought rather than the compulsive thought of, 'Oh, you idiot, you never really can get it together! Let's face it, you're not going to get anywhere. Don't tell me you try so hard, you just can't meditate!' When the articulation is careening in this way, that's the sign of a *saṅkhāra* that is taken over by these compulsive currents we call ignorance. Ignorance doesn't mean it's stupid, it means it's insensitive. It doesn't actually relate directly, intimately and sensitively to what is occurring. It's just a blind automatic tape recording that gets switched on and goes on and on. When we feel the qualities of negativity or disappointment, we can easily follow them. They are tracks which lead us down. If you've noticed, going down a slope is generally a lot easier than climbing up one, so we easily incline down.

The quality of what's called 'deep attention' or 'appropriate attention' is what precedes the four establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*). Mindfulness is never seen alone; it's always accompanied by other factors. It literally means 'to bear something in mind'. It's very important to have a sense of what is useful to bear in mind before you

place your mindfulness on it. Mindfulness is also supported by right view and right intention. Deep attention is an activity often associated with thinking: thinking something through, bearing something in mind and getting to a point that's worth settling on. We often use deliberate recollections such as our own welfare, the welfare of others, kamma, liberation, loving-kindness and compassion because they take us to points upon which the *citta* can establish itself. These points support the mind and make it firm. This is the value of right thinking.

When you sit and become aware of the stirring of thought, which is probably going on all the time, rather than going into the content, try to feel its flow, its energy. Can you go into soft focus on what the thought is saying and feel the energy underneath it? How is that energy? Is it racing, swirling, chattering, mumbling, jumping? Some thoughts can jump like sparks, sometimes they eddy, swirl around. Learn to feel the energy of thought formation.

Once you can touch into that, you begin to slow it down and steady it. This can be done by thinking deliberately. What you're thinking about is not so significant, but it's preferable to think about something that's either neutral or benevolent and think it through slowly, steadily, being careful to form the thought, listen to it, notice when it finishes, bring it back, do it again, slow it down. For example, you can slowly recite a mantra, a small phrase or a list. You use the articulation of the content to steady and access the energy of thought. That's a practice. Then that particular energy is something you are able to handle.

You can also apply that practice directly to your body. You're bringing to mind parts of the body by thinking, 'Left knee, right knee, left hand, right hand, left shoulder ...'. You're simply touching them with your attention and bringing the thought to mind, 'Is that it? Are you pointing to the right thing?' Then you can ask, 'How is my left knee right now? How do I know I have one? How does it feel? Soft? Bony?

Sharp? Hot? Cool? Now, how is the right hand? How is the left hand? Hands have a lot of sensations in them. How would you describe the quality, the sense, the direct experience of your left hand? And then the direct experience of your right hand? Then, what's the difference? It's like a slow puzzle.

Deliberate thinking is then the beginning of meditation: you're using the thought, steadying the thought energy, clarifying it and then directing it to the body. Then the thought is no longer dealing with abstractions or notions but with direct, tangible physicality. You can practise in this way to help the mind not just to bond to its own notions, ideas, aspirations, joys and sorrows, but also to touch into direct bodily experiences. This is the process that leads to collectedness because you begin to gather the body, thought and heart together.

As you're thinking into your body, turning the energy of articulation towards the body, the mind is beginning to learn to rest on an object and listen to it. The body is not just an idea, it will stay there and you can keep coming back to it, so you can put all your energy into placing your thought, your attentiveness there. This placing (*vitakka*) has to be backed up with the sampling, the handling or the evaluation (*vicāra*): 'How is that? Tell me about it. How does it feel?' You're listening in. In one way, it doesn't matter how it feels. The main point is to get that system going of 'bring up the thought, place it, listen in, get it, do it again.' Instead of letting the mind spin off to the next thought and leak out into further proliferations, you begin to seal it. It's now connecting to the body and you keep it in that particular loop.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* we can read, 'When he is walking along, he knows he is walking along.' Is that such an incredibly difficult thing to do? It probably is because generally when we're walking along we're thinking about where we're going, remembering things we have to do and so on. The mind leaks out. So we cultivate this process of restraining

the mind by bringing it back to a very simple thought around the present experience of walking. What is 'walking' anyway? What walks? What happens when we walk? You've been doing it for years, but do you know how it happens? Study it. Where does it begin? You're standing still: how does walking happen? First, there's an intention (*kamma*), a particular decisive moment saying, 'Now, it's time to walk,' and then something runs into the body, generally around the back of the hips. The body starts to shift its weight, pulls the leg up, turns the hip and places it forward. The foot comes down and touches the ground and when it feels stable enough, the body starts to lift the other leg. This process of 'action and listening in' is happening through the body and now we're connecting the thinking mind to it. The thinking mind is no longer spinning out: it's contained within the bodily movement. You begin to put a rein on the runaway horse by saying, 'OK, you can run, but stay within this particular field, which is the body.'

You can cultivate that further around breathing in and out. The Buddha said that of all the bodies you can experience, the 'breathing body' is the one that gives the greatest benefit.⁴² You may be surprised to find out that you have more than one body – one is already quite a lot to be getting on with! We have a 'visual body': the body that we can see. We have an 'impression body': what we imagine our body to be. We have a 'feeling body': all the sensations we may feel. And then we have the body which we can experience in breathing. If you put aside the visual body and go to the direct experience of the breathing body, it is a rather different experience: it doesn't have arms, legs, nails and hair. It's just a process of rhythm, suffusion and energies moving: breathing in, breathing out. Can you touch into that?

Again, you place your attention with a thought. What is the experience of breathing? How do you know you're breathing? You're looking

42. *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, Majjhima Nikāya 118.

at some basics, some fundamentals. Very often the process of clear thinking is to go right back to the most simple, not the most complex. The mind tends to run towards more complicated things, so go back to very simple assumptions like: 'Are you sure you're breathing?' What tells you that? Well, there is a series of sensations that happen over and over again. What are those sensations like? What's the difference between breathing in and breathing out? The Buddha constantly emphasizes: 'breathing in, breathing out.' What's a long breath? What's a short one? How is that measure known?

What is it that gets the breath going, even when you're asleep? The thing that gets the breath going is called 'bodily activity' (*kāya-saṅkhāra*). It's like an energy or an intelligence that gives signals to various muscles that pull, contract and open so the air can come in, and when it knows it's had enough, it gives another signal to the muscles so the air can go out. You don't have to mentally figure out how to breathe: it just happens, and you can contemplate and name that experience. This practice enables the mind to gradually dispel the notion of solidity or permanence, because the breathing process is dynamic. It's not really a thing at all; it's a series of energies, sensations and activations. When you tune into the energy of breathing in and out, you can feel a flow of vitality occurring within the body. So you cultivate clear thought and deep attention, you learn how to '*vitakka-vicāra*' something and keep that system going: you pick up a concept or a thought of your ailing sister, your beloved son or yourself, and then you feel the resonance. Instead of quickly dropping that thought or concept and scrambling or going into analysis, the mind just stays there and resonates and you bring that towards the body, successively from the outer body (the bones, the sensations, etc.) to the inner body (the breathing body). The benefit of doing that is that unlike your bones, the body that experiences breathing has a very immediate, involuntary and natural response to attention.

Attention is a boundary we place on something, and whatever we give attention to, energy goes towards it. Any topic that fastens itself in your mind is heightened. Whatever you attend to, there's kamma there. What you give attention to becomes empowered. It could be an obsession, an infatuation, a commitment or something wholesome. If you bring your attention onto exciting topics like games or sports, you can notice that your mind becomes excited. If you work on a project that you're interested in, your mind becomes interested. If you think of something worrisome, your mind takes on that quality. Your mind becomes energized in accordance with the nature of the theme you're giving attention to. Now, if you bring that mind energy onto your body energy, the two start to light up because these two energetic systems are beginning to touch each other. The body energy can hold the mind energy and begins to steady and balance it.

When you give your attention to breathing in and out, you're touching into the life force, that which refreshes, rejuvenates and cleans the body, that which gives it vitality. The mind touches into a source of deep nourishment. Breathing is a very generous thing: you don't have to pay for it, work at it, deserve it or be good enough for it; it just happens. Even 'bad people' breathe and that keeps them alive, no matter what they do. But unfortunately 'bad people' generally don't bother to contemplate their breathing. The breathing is beyond ethics, but the mind needs to be ethically attuned to have the interest to contemplate it. The mind also needs to be carefully trained to 'listen' to the breathing and then to receive the benefits coming from this practice. Your attention gives energy to the body and the body gives energy to the mind, and that creates a magnetic force: it builds up a certain power that draws your awareness in. Over time, the mind is drawn in, absorbed into breathing. This is the experience of *samādhi* (collectedness). The mind is fed, contented, it's not leaking, it's not invaded, it is content in itself.

This is a really lovely way to cultivate the mind. But you need to do it one step at a time. The Buddha's teaching gives you very practical steps, and that approach provides incomparable benefits. So you take the first step and you stay with it until it's fulfilled. As an analogy, when you first learn to walk, you need to really settle your foot on the ground before you can lift the other leg up. Once you are firm, it's quite natural you want to keep walking, because you're enjoying that experience. You're bringing attention to the body time and time again and as the mind bonds to it, you may come to a point when you feel you don't really struggle at it any more. The mind isn't conjuring up fantasies or worries. It feels rather pleasant and you're starting to experience enjoyment from that. That quality of enjoyment naturally moves the mind on to the next step.

The process moves forward in accordance with our ability to integrate enjoyment. When we're working towards something and get to the place where it's beginning to happen, it's beginning to bond and settle, then it's natural to experience enjoyment. You have to enjoy before you move on. You're not running up a stepladder! You don't briefly touch into something and then rush to the next thing; you stay with it. If you can be fully with that out-breath until its end, you stay with that. You stay with the point where your mind is settling and begin to experience a quality of enjoyment. Even if it still goes away, as soon as you notice it, you can come back to that place. Gradually you become better at it and you begin to dispel doubt and irritation with yourself. That place of enjoyment becomes a platform. Then you can extend your practice step by step, in accordance with the skill and enjoyment. You don't extend out of desire or hunger for achievement. By analogy, once you've learned to stay on a bike without falling off, you naturally want to go for a ride because it's becoming enjoyable, but if you're still wobbling in the saddle, you're not thinking about how fast you can go. First you have to aim to get in the saddle without falling off. Once that happens, there will be a natural process of moving onwards.

In your meditation, I encourage you to be prepared to stay at the place where you are gaining some ground – perhaps being in your body or holding your body posture – until it becomes really established and you don't have to struggle at it any more. Then as you stay with that, you're reaping the benefit and naturally your mind will deepen and move on. It will go into the heart of the matter. Often, it's those early places that take us to the simplicity of the training: one step at a time, carefully remember what you're doing, bring it to mind, consider why you're doing it and apply directed attention.

Practising With an Organic System

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ON THE MORNING OF 23 NOVEMBER 2014.

The first section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is an overview, a synopsis of what is laid out afterwards. Let's look at a few words in there: ardent (*ātāpī*),⁴³ mindful (*satimā*)⁴⁴ and fully aware (*sampajāna*).⁴⁵ Of course, these are all translations from the Pali into English and the Pali itself is a translation of an experience. No words are absolutes; they attempt to signify a direct experience.

Ātāpī carries the connotations of a certain quality of ardour, warming up, kindling, firing up. You have to light your fire, but at first the wood is damp, the matches are damp and they keep snapping. How can the wood start to ignite? What does it take to gather attention? What is attention? How do you collect it? How do you place it? Often we're doing very simple and humble things. During this retreat we're placing shoes on a rack, opening doors, cleaning up, straightening the bed, with an unhurried clarity of attention. Over time, this quality of clarifying and simplifying attention has its effects.

A significant part of our practice is pruning away or dropping what's unnecessary, cluttering, complicating and fuzzy, and just coming more clearly into what we're doing now. Often the mind's untrained habit is proliferation, complication, addition, so we try to come down to simple things like gathering attention and putting aside expectation,

43. *Ātāpī* is the adjective (ardent) and *ātappa* the noun (ardour, eagerness).

44. *Satimā* is the adjective (mindful) and *sati* the noun (mindfulness).

45. *Sampajāna* is the adjective (fully aware) and *sampajāñña* the noun (full awareness).

disappointment, self-imagery, histories, stories and narratives. We're putting them aside not out of anger, but because our mind has followed this track many times and we know where it leads. So now, we choose another direction. As we put aside these complications our mind becomes clearer and clearer.

Quite a lot of Buddhist language is couched negatively: 'refraining from', 'abstaining from', 'relinquishing', 'putting aside', not because the aim is annihilation, but because there's a recognition that when we clear away the clutter, a brightness comes through by itself. We don't have to create, believe or adopt anything. Much of our application and sense of 'getting it right' is established upon doing, building up, learning and adding another piece. The idea that you could reduce and be enhanced by reduction is an immense act of faith for one who hasn't experienced it. When you reduce the content, you feel better; when you reduce the amount, you feel better. Imagine carrying that through to a global level with the consumer fever and just saying, 'Simpler is better.' It's not just morally correct, it makes you feel better.

As you develop the quality of deep attention, ask yourself, 'What's of worth? What's helpful? What's suitable now?' Put aside everything else: expectations, disappointment, self-imagery, other people, the past, the future, because as soon as you touch any of them you might start proliferating. Of course, you can decide to deeply attend to another person or to your memory of another person, but then it's up to you to know what's happening. There's nobody else: you're dealing with your own perceptions, impressions, feelings, interpretations and responses, and the *citta* is aware of them.

We have three factors: *ātappa* (eagerness), *sati* (mindfulness) and *sampajañña*. *Sampajañña* is usually translated as 'full awareness' or 'clear comprehension' and comes from a certain listening quality – we feel or sense what's happening in relation to the object of attention. *Vitakka* is the pointing, the establishing of attention through directed thought

or directed thoughtfulness and it's a foundation for *sati*: you're placing your attention on an object, bringing it back as it slips away and trying to sustain it a little longer. *Sampajañña* is generated and sustained through *vicāra* (evaluation): you're asking yourself, 'How is that? What is it like? How does it feel? What is it doing?', and then listening in and feeling the resonances. *Sati* and *sampajañña* work together in this way, along with *ātappa*, which is the eagerness to do this practice. Together, they form the threefold model.

Later in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* you can see that you sustain those three essential approaches of *ātappa*, *sati* and *sampajañña* through a whole range of activities: when you're scratching, stretching, urinating, eating, lying down, walking, standing and so on. That has a clarifying and purifying effect because the mind would normally stutter, rush into, blur or become obsessed with certain things, and now you're pruning away to a simple clarity. Before you walk out the door you have to put your foot on the ground, so just do that. Before you go into the kitchen, you have to open the door, so just be there opening the door. You're reining in the runaway mind so you're poised and balanced. There's a lovely feature of presence in there and you can apply it to whatever you're doing – within the broad range of *sīla*, of course.

We can look at another map in which *sati* appears as part of the Eightfold Path. There, *sati* is accompanied by seven other factors which have to do with ethics, understanding and so on. *Sati* never stands alone; it's always teamed up, often with right view. One of the features of right view is relatedness, cause and effect. That gives you faith because if you bring up right intention and sustain it, you can't have a bad result. Even if the result may not be everything you want, you will still receive some benefit from that practice, and that benefit will give you enough understanding and clarity to take another step forward. So every good intention, every good application gives you a little more of a foothold on what is your path. You're putting your feet on the ground, you're

eager to get that basis. At this stage, don't think of where it's going: solving your problems, gaining clarity or *jhānas* – that's too far for now. You're just finding the measure of how to practise continuously, because the mind is a constant process. It's through that constancy that you're pruning away the clutter, the defilements, the unnecessary, and you're beginning to sense the strengthening, where it is and what comes into that.

Before you start a job, whether it's in the kitchen or the workshop, you need to check the place, tidy and clean up, get the lighting right and sharpen your tools. This is something I try to train myself in because I tend to be impulsive. As soon as I have an idea, I want to start and finish it; I become eager, excited. For example, when I do some calligraphy, I might think, 'I want to produce those lovely swirling letters. I don't want to take a piece of paper, draw a grid, get the angle right, get the angle of the board right, clean the nibs, make the ink, get the lighting right. I don't want to do that. I just want to do the masterpiece!' Then of course it doesn't go very well. So you might make a practice out of just setting things up; sometimes that's all I do.

Particularly in the beginning of a retreat, most of your practice is about clearing space and finding out where your tools are. What tools do you need? Are they in order? Are they in shape? Where do you get them from? Have they been exercised? The tools we have are organic; they are our own body, the breathing and this amazing experience called mind. We're an organic system. The body and the mind are related. Attention, intention and attitude are related. Everything is related to everything else. How you attend to your body will affect how you attend to your thoughts. How you attend to other people will affect how you attend to yourself. All this is related to practice and attitude. Your attitude affects everything.

There is another phrase in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* which says that you're applying mindfulness and full awareness to the extent necessary for

direct knowing or bare knowing – in other words, for non-proliferation. You're fully inhabiting your body, your own physicality, your own form, and cleaning it, clearing it. It means that you're giving it fresh air by breathing in and out and you're exercising it by moving around. Also, you're careful with regard to food. How much do you need to eat? What's good? Without becoming obsessive, it's often good to reduce the quantity and simplify. That's why, as a standard, we don't eat in the evening. Of course, people have various health issues and if they need to eat something after noon, then it's quite minimal; they just take what is necessary. You start to incline towards renunciation, not from an ideological position, but because you recognize its value. It's not that the person who renounces the most is the best. This view doesn't come from clear knowing but from ambition and self-view. It's not about being the best; it's sensing what the right balance is. Try to take a little less and see how that goes. Try to do a little less thinking, a little less planning. Clear some space and cultivate this attitude of renunciation. It wouldn't be taught if it wasn't good for you. It isn't just about moral probity; it's about feeling good, feeling fresher and clearer.

The amount of food you need will change in accordance with what you're doing, and the same goes for sleep and everything else. You can't create abstract standards for these things. You create general inclinations in which you train. An important thing to bear in mind and understand deeply is that you're dealing with an organic system and the feature of organic systems is that they are responsive. So you listen in and pick up the response. Sometimes the response is muffled or not clear, so you ask again, 'What is that? How is that?' You don't just feel the sensation, but you also notice how it's held or received. What is the result of that? You have to track it and give it time. This is what *sampajañña* and *vicāra* do.

When you pay attention to your posture, don't try to force your body into some abstract position, such as: 'I must sit with my back straight!'

Instead, notice what happens if you draw your lower back in, drop your shoulders and even restrain your breathing and breathe as little as possible. It may sound ridiculous if you have the assumption that you should be doing a lot of breathing, but actually less is better. You can practise like this: simplifying, limiting, opening up and clarifying. If you get that spring in the lower back, it will support the ribs. If you start drawing the body upright, the breath channel opens and your abdomen, which is where your breathing begins, can extend and open fully. Is there anything in the way of this opening? If your shoulders are pressing down and your head is hunching forward, give more attention to the centre of your back between your shoulder blades, and connect the front to the back of the body.

We relate to the body as a complete structure. This is why I often don't emphasize immediately going to one point, say breathing or focusing on the nostrils. We may go there, but for now, take the whole body in because it's only when the body is treated as a whole thing that it begins to wake up by itself. Then we have the right balance. When it comes out of its compressed or twisted state, the body begins to open up and respond. The response is quite involuntary and most of these experiences will be subtle. You may sense something in your back, then your nose opens up or your breath deepens or your shoulders drop back or something in your arm moves. Your breath at first can be quite fast, then irregular, because the system is still finding its way. All this irregularity is totally natural because we're dealing with an organic system. It doesn't switch on like a light. It comes into being, struggles, feels itself, fumbles around, gains a little bit, loses it and then comes back; it wriggles around a lot internally, energetically.

You feel all that and then your emotions and thoughts start to do the same thing. At first it may be very confusing, but that's just the system coming out of one set of drives, imperatives, engagements and functions into something completely different, so it flounders. Nothing

is going wrong, but how do we guide ourselves through that? First, we simplify our experience. You don't need to make a story, a self or a judgement out of what you're experiencing. That's not going to do any good at all. Instead, ask yourself: 'What is necessary? What is helpful?' Take another breath, open your eyes, clear some space and don't close down. Even if it's uncomfortable, open yourself to it. This doesn't mean, 'Force your way through it' or 'Take command of it' or 'Grit your teeth and push through it.' You just open to it. And because your mind is also an organic system, once you open to it, it will start to respond. It may take time, but it begins to feel the lightness, the openness, and move out of darkness and confusion. This is a lot of the practice: just bearing with what is uncomfortable and difficult, and opening to it. We can recognize that the default is to close, huddle or shut down. *Ātappa* is the eagerness to open, extend the body, feel it more fully and listen to these shifts and responses.

Much of the time we're living in relationship with inorganic systems such as cars and computers. They don't operate like organic systems. They don't respond, they don't care, they crash for no apparent reason. Inorganic systems operate according to rules rather than sensitivities: 'This is how I work and I don't work any other way than this.' So you have to follow their rules and in the end, you have this sense of becoming programmed by the things that are supposed to help you. They don't help you at all, they just support a function, and you become functionalized through that process.

Inorganic systems are not just physical systems, they're also abstracts, such as time. We see these numbers which are drawn on clocks and sheets of paper and we say, 'It's nine! It's four! It's six!' Where are all these sixes and fours and nines? They have incredible power. They don't bend. 'This is five, and not five past five! You've missed the train. It's gone!' Numbers are also inorganic; they don't respond at all. There is no such thing as a nice five or a friendly eight. They're completely

abstract and a real tyranny. You have to follow them, they're not going to bend at all. We end up being programmed by such things as time and date, and we lose the sense of reality. Dawn is a soft experience, twilight is a fading experience. It doesn't suddenly go day-night, does it?

It takes time to fully wake up. It's an organic experience of feeling, sensing, breathing, brightening, fading, brightening, fading, brightening, brightening, brightening, fading, brightening ... It wobbles and eventually it becomes awake. When I wake up in the morning, I get up, walk up and down, breathe in and out and just let the system come into wakefulness. I always find it useful to get up a good while before morning *pūjā*, because it takes time to prepare for that.

In our practice, we're eager to find our way into opening up. Finding that way in is going to involve fumbling through cloud, fog and rocky roads. It doesn't suddenly become neat and clean. Computers can do this, but organic systems can't. However, they do respond beautifully to goodwill, clarity, simplicity and to being met rather than forced. Then they will start to calm, clarify and feel happy.

Much of our work is preparing to tune into an organic system, into its quirks and the way it is. We start by the simple process of opening. The body is one of our primary workshops, so how do we open it? Notice where it's constricted. Is it constricted in your head, in your forehead, around your eyes? Is your throat open? Is your chest open? Is your abdomen open? Do you have a back? You get in touch with your *real* body, which is the felt body, and not the one you see or imagine. The pull of the senses is to create objects, and this includes your own physical form. We can 'lose' the real body, the wholeness of it, because we tend to move towards the visual one. The visual body isn't going to do you much good. It's just for other people to look at, that's all it can do. You can look really good yet be totally miserable, feeling really confused and energetically stale.

When you start to feel the body energetically, you will probably find that the strongest activity is happening in about a fifth of the body: basically, the front of your head, your eyes, your mouth, perhaps a little bit of upper chest and some fingers. Then there is that vague swirling mass happening in the rest of it, with occasional twinges. We tend to feel the front of the body very strongly but not so much the lower back or the shoulders, unless they hurt. You have to balance that out by bringing more awareness into the areas that don't have any sense organs, such as the back, the sides of the body, the ribs, the flexing in the abdomen, the legs and the soles of the feet. Feet encased in shoes quickly die as living systems. They're not permanently dead but they shut down, so you have stumps at the end of your legs and you march along. Walking without shoes gives a chance for the foot to open up. It's not just a stump on the end of your leg but something rather like a hand. There's a lot of energy in the soles of the feet and the palms of the hands. So you start by checking your workshop: is it all there and cleaned up, or is it closed down and covered over with dust?

The central organizing place for the body isn't the head or the face (which have to do with function, gesture and relationship) but the spine, a place that you probably hardly notice except when it hurts. If you're using a chair, try not to sit back in it, or only sit back when you're conscious of doing so, because you need to rest your back. Try to sit so that your back has to activate, wake up, and then feel that connection between the tailbone and the skull. Your body turns around the spine; everything operates around it. It's through ignorance about this that back damage has become one of the most common forms of accidents that occur at work and even in the home – people don't pay attention to their spines any more. Now you can notice how it works; if you draw your lower back in, how does that affect your shoulders? If you draw your head back, how does that affect your general sense of balance and posture? Is that clarifying? Is that steadying? Naturally, it's going to slip out again, but then you come back to that. You're preparing your tools, tidying the place, setting things up.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* the Buddha emphasizes the body as the first place to establish mindfulness – he prioritizes it. You can't do the work unless you open the workshop door and tidy up the place. In the same way, you can't do the work of practice unless you learn some of the fundamental skills of relationship to your body and mind: how different parts of your body integrate and synchronize with each other, how your body affects your mind through the experience of energy. Then you realize that nothing is really separate. Yet whenever there is suffering and stress, something separates, becomes obsessive and loses the whole picture. This is a very common experience in our mental landscape. One particular event, thought, person or topic becomes like a cancer. It swells and grows and the rest of our life is forgotten. We lose the bigger picture. One part breaks off and becomes bloated: 'This person who drives me nuts' or 'This stupid habit I have' or 'This pain in my back.'

When you have physical pain, the rest of your body tends to disappear and you're just aware of the pain. Then something tightens up around it when you don't want it and try to push it away. So the counter-intuitive instruction is to open to that pain and feel it within the larger domain of your body. If you have pain in your back, sense what's happening in your lower back or down your thighs. You're widening your attention and letting the body sort itself out.

This is not necessarily one hundred per cent successful with physical stuff, but it's very successful with mental stuff because the mind has no inherent, fixed quality apart from awareness. You have no problem and no identity as a fixed thing. The only fixed thing there is awareness. But we fixate, and by fixating, things become more lasting and solid. I feel I have them, when actually, they have me. They've created me and I struggle against them: 'I don't want to be this way', 'I don't want to have that thought', 'I don't like this feeling', 'Why does this happen to me?', 'How can I find an answer?' You can't find an answer from the

voice of the problem. The 'I am' is the voice of the problem, it doesn't have an answer, otherwise you would have had it by now.

So now, you open up with deep attention and recognize, 'This is worrying, resisting, struggling. This is a nasty feeling, an emotional state.' You allow the pain; you allow the splinter to come out. When you have a splinter in your finger, you might have a boil around it with all kinds of things going on, so you start to open up the tissues, which is not particularly pretty and pleasant. Then you are able to see that little splinter, which could have inflamed and swelled the whole hand, and you can pull it out.

You open up and get right down to the fundamental point, which is *feeling*, the second establishment of mindfulness. As you come into embodiment, it gives you a place to work, and then you can see that the triggering of *dukkha* is never 'them' or 'me' or 'the way it should be', but it's always feeling. All *dhammas* converge on feeling. It's the gate through which everything that affects you must pass. Our practice is to get down to that feeling place and begin to relate to feeling in a balanced way. We are no longer fighting or grabbing feelings. If wanting and not wanting could lead us to nibbāna, we would do that, but in fact they just take us to frustration. So instead, we are mindful of feeling. We are eager, keen to find the splinter. Mindfully aware, we tune into it.

We breathe into the resistances and we receive the magic of the response when things start to release. Release isn't something you can do; it's something that happens by itself because of the response of the heart. Remember, we are an organic system and organic systems respond. At first the response is often a bit confused, but somewhere in there, bearing with it, you're going to find the point where something opens and you realize, 'I was just trying to not feel the pain, but it is painful.' Then you recognize what's always here. Whether your experience is difficult or not, it changes. So, what's *always* here?

Not Clinging to Anything in the World

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In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the phrase ‘independent, not clinging to anything in the world’ refers to the full opening, the full completion of the practice. As with any phrase, you get some understanding, but perhaps not the correct one. That’s the trouble with words, we think they mean something. For a start, this is a translation from the Pali. Every translation carries its particular nuances, and sometimes it misses the nuances in the original. The Pali is probably not the original either. It’s a constructed language, but very close to what the Buddha spoke.

Upādāna is the Pali word for ‘clinging’ and it means ‘feeding on, adopting, taking as a basis, identifying with’. The Buddha was great at using these striking and vivid words such as ‘clinging’. It’s a graphic, felt experience; it’s not an abstract sense. ‘Clinging’ gives you the sense of something that is unnecessary and a bit desperate.

The Pali word for ‘the world’ is *loka*. It doesn’t really refer to Planet Earth. When we think of ‘not clinging to anything in the world,’ we might think that it refers to daily life, business, politics, economics and so forth, and we should therefore ignore all those, but that doesn’t seem to be what the Buddha meant. He himself taught kings and ministers, gave advice on political matters and ethics, and even gave advice to businessmen about the best way to conduct their affairs; he certainly wasn’t shutting all that off. So ‘the world’ here doesn’t mean ‘Planet Earth’, it doesn’t mean a particular sphere of activities, it means something further-reaching and more profound.

The world is our domain, our concerns, our entire personal world. Very often this is mapped out as the world of the sense-bases.⁴⁶ Sights, sounds, touches, tastes, fragrances and thoughts construct the world, don't they? The basic signals of our eyes construct a three-dimensional world. In fact it's not really three-dimensional because we don't see distance, we infer it, and we don't do it deliberately: it happens by itself. I can recognize that you're not two inches high, but four feet high, sitting far away from me. The combination of the eye and the brain creates distance, space, dimensionality. It generates a visual world that we seem to live within.

The auditory world is different because it doesn't infer space. You can get it roughly by the volume, but that sound could be an insect buzzing close by or it could be an airplane three miles away. When you hear a sound, the sense-data is transferred to the brain, which relates it to a pre-existing reference: 'What is that? What is it like? What does it remind me of?' That's what we call 'perception' and that happens instinctively. Sometimes you can see the mind wondering, 'What is that?' for a moment, before you get it.

So essentially, the world is an experience which is constructed through our sense-doors. We don't do it deliberately, it just happens if the sense-doors are functioning properly. Of course, they don't always function properly. People can have hallucinations, disease or neurological damage and suddenly their world becomes a strange place. If the chemistry in the brain changes, we receive different emotional tones. We might feel frightened of things just because something in our brain has changed. I heard of an interesting example of that. A man had a neural problem: the nerves associated with his eyes were properly connected to the synapses connected to the emotional centres in his brain, but the ones associated with his ears were not. A situation came about where his mother phoned him and as she was talking,

46. For example, as at *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 35.116.

he was thinking, ‘Who is this woman pretending to be my mother?’, because he could hear her voice but didn’t get the emotional sense. Then he went to see his mother and said, ‘Hello mum. There was this strange woman who sounded just like you talking to me on the phone!’ Because he didn’t get that emotional nuance, he didn’t recognize the voice as hers.

When you see something, the brain also throws its own piece onto it: familiarity, attractiveness, ease, friendship, hostility or threat. The world is constructed. The Pali word *abhisāṅkhāra* means ‘deeply constructed’. The word *saṅkhāra* appears very often in the scriptures and is rather complex. It means ‘constructed, fabricated, formed’. The world is a formed, constructed experience and the senses in that construction generate the perception that ‘I’m in here and the world is out there around me. I’m separate from it.’ But try to find out where you are in this body. If you were to cut one of these bodies open, you would see that there’s nobody inside it. Nobody is living behind your eyes; nobody is living up in your head. Where are you? The sense of self is constructed, and based upon that construction all kinds of attitudes and reflexes occur. That’s called clinging: it’s been adopted, taken as solid and real.

Within the sense-world, the nuances of separation – ‘me in here and other people and other things out there’ – generate all kinds of interesting and tense signals such as loss, gain, approval, disapproval, uncertainty, threat. Around these signals body reflexes kick in: you tense up, you reach out, you try to get, you deeply want to be bonded to, you want to find your place in ... in what? You’re in it! But your world is now also being constructed through the sense of loss, the sense of separation, the sense of not belonging. The sense-doors will always generate that sense of ‘you’re outside of it’ and yet you’re also deeply affected by it. You’re neither completely in it nor completely out of it. You’re on the edge, with things pouncing into you and the possibility of reaching out. That’s a precarious position; it gets us very edgy.

All those nuances are not created through the sense-doors alone, but also through the link-up to the brain, to the mind, to the heart, to the things we've learned, acquired and adopted. We have the impression of gaining something which we take on. But what are you gaining actually? Do you really have anything? Do you have a car? What do you mean you *have* it? Do you go to bed with it? Does it come running after you? Is it welded to your skin? What happens in six years' time when you buy a new one? Has something in you died? What makes you think you had it? With the sense of separation, there's a very strong wanting to bond to something, to find ourselves, to feel stable, but you can't *have* any of it. Some people might think, 'I don't want a car, I want a person. That would be much better. Can I have a person please? ... and preferably the right one!' Well, that's going to be a real game because I'm getting these perceptions, nuances and impressions, and she's getting these perceptions, and they're probably completely different!

You don't *have*, but you *exist with*. You interact and mesh, it works and you learn something, but you don't have anything. And when you don't have anything you also don't lose anything, that's the beauty of it. That's what 'independent' means. It doesn't mean there's nothing there, it just means that these impressions of gaining and belonging, which are deeply embedded because of the sense of separation, don't have to be inferred, they don't have to happen. Therefore, the psychologies of needing, grasping and holding on don't have to happen.

Everything is fluid, it comes and goes; nothing is held. We need to really drink in that perception of impermanence. These messages, these signals, these impressions don't change at the drop of a hat just by understanding the word. You have to learn it very deeply. Because the sense of separation, which the sense-doors create, is so poignant for people, this is a very difficult trigger to undo. In that sense of separation, we feel quite lost, alone, rejected. It's very painful, so we want to hold.

You don't stop clinging by saying, 'Don't do it' or 'It's wrong to do it' or 'You're stupid for doing it.' It doesn't happen that way. In fact, this is the worst thing to do. They did that to babies for a time. People were raising children for millennia, doing perfectly well, and then somebody decided that they had figured out a better way to do it. They thought that once you have a baby you shouldn't let them sleep with their parents because it creates an unhealthy bonding. So all these poor little babies were put in cots in another room and they totally freaked out, because they were not getting the sense that there's somebody there for them, which is what it takes to get over being born, being separate.

We can't cut clinging like that because in fact, we don't cling deliberately. The adopting of things is a basic response. You only get weaned off through finding a sense of refuge, security, safety and fulfilment, somewhere else. You can't find refuge in the world, in the constructed, because the constructed can never be safe. The real safety is in the unconstructed and we can recognize that it's already here, we don't have to keep creating it and getting it going. This is a synopsis of the Buddha's teaching: 'There is the Unconditioned, unborn, unconstructed, uncreated; that's the best place to be, this is where the world dissolves.'⁴⁷

As read in the suttas, 'You don't reach the end of the world by travelling.'⁴⁸ I would also say that you don't reach the end of the world by rejecting it. You reach the end of the world by noticing its arising and ceasing in your awareness. One expression of the world is the sense-fields, so notice the nuances that occur when sights, sounds or touches pass through: 'Is it desirable, undesirable, interesting, boring?' Try to persist with mindfulness, acknowledging those signals and staying

47. This sentence refers to the *Nibbāna Sutta*, Udāna 8.3.

48. Saṃyutta Nikāya 2.26, 35.116 and Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.45, 9.38.

steady. What stays steady through them is the door to the Deathless. There can be any degree of supervision, reflection, non-reaction, non-hostility to the flushing and flooding of the world. The fact that this is possible is an indication that every one of us has the door to the Deathless half-open, and the Buddha is just saying, 'I invite you to open it wide and walk right in.'

The practice is like learning to swim: first you stick your toe in, then your foot, your leg, then you wade in, have a splash around. It takes time before you have a sense of trust in it. That's totally healthy because if you don't practise in a progressive, trusting way, your capacity for sustained, dispassionate awareness does not develop adequately to keep you floating in that space and then you can go very strange and flip out.

Signals may come rushing through your system, hour after hour, 'Why doesn't he ring the bell? I've been sitting here for three hours. My knees are killing me; I'm going to die. I'm depressed, I'm going mad. I'm going to starve to death ...' because you're no longer in your known world, in your familiar place where you can organize and arrange things in a way that suits your preferences and gives you comfort. So everything starts going towards 'orange alert'.

In the 'contemplation of feelings' section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, we read 'worldly feeling' and 'non-worldly feeling'. Here the word 'world' has a different meaning. The equivalent Pali words are *sāmisa* and *nirāmisa*, which mean roughly: 'that which is associated with flesh' and 'that which is not associated with flesh'. 'Flesh' has an interesting capacity called touch and it generates feeling. The visual sense and the auditory sense don't generate feeling. They have to link up to the mind to do that. You see something and that's registered as a perception in the mind, then that perception in the mind generates a feeling.

For example, the other day I was outside and somebody was walking along with nice, big boots. It was raining, the ground was muddy, so

when I saw the big boots, they looked really good to me. I looked at those boots and felt the sense of assurance, comfort, dry feet and I thought, 'Those boots are great! I want a pair.' Now, imagine you go to your room, take your clothes off, put those boots on and jump in a shower. Do those boots look interesting to you? Don't you think, 'What an idiot! It feels completely out of touch. What an ugly thing to stick on my feet!?' Now you call them 'poor old boots'. They are the same boots but one time they make you look heroic and another time you look like a complete nitwit. The perceptions are different. The eyes see the same thing, but the mind adds its interpretations.

A lot happens around that, over fashions, styles, what's attractive, what's unattractive, what clothes are attractive, what body shapes are attractive and so on. What really happens is just that the eyes see shapes and colours, and the mind creates around it. You may be really passionate and desperate to make sure that your clothing style or your body shape is in line with what people are saying is good this time around, and that's going to change every year. What was number one last year, which you spent a hundred and fifty quid on buying, well next year that's out, so you spend another hundred and fifty quid on buying the next lot of gear. This is the way it goes because of mental nuance. Isn't it good just to see things as they are? Shape is shape, colour is colour. Looking at things simply in terms of their function gives you a little bit of independence from the world. Boots are for keeping your feet dry: you don't need them in the shower, so take them off, that's all.

The other place where feeling arises is the body. The eyes don't feel, the ears don't feel, the tongue doesn't feel, the nose doesn't feel, but the body does feel. What the Buddha is saying here is that there's a kind of feeling that arises in association with physical contact, a touch or even inferred touch – for example when you see something and think, 'Oh, it would be nice to stroke that.' We become aware of the feeling and of the particular energies that happen around it. We want to bond

to it or hold it if it's a pleasant feeling and we want to shrink from it if it's unpleasant. That's what is meant by 'worldly feeling' or 'feeling associated with flesh'.

'Feeling which is not associated with flesh' is mental feeling and particularly in this instance, it refers to the mental feeling which isn't derived or nuanced from the sense-doors but nuanced from itself. If it's not based upon a sight, a sound or a touch, what is the mind's own feeling? Intentionality is one of them. If I feel a sense of honesty or generosity arising in myself, that has come from the mind and I feel a bit brighter. The Buddha says these are very important bases of feelings to track because you have some say over them. You don't have much say over sights, sounds and touches, but you do have say over intentionality, courage, patience, generosity, loving-kindness and compassion. So you should not ignore this base of feeling. In fact, you should indulge in it. You should spoil yourself with it because this will help to redress the balance. You won't need feeling from touch and visual inferences; you'll feel quite happy and clear, independently of them.

There are also the mental feelings associated with the different states of mind. When mental consciousness is refined, sensitive, light and open, then it has a pleasant feeling with it. But when it is aggressive and forceful, the feeling is unpleasant. Again, seek your own welfare. Indulge, don't be afraid, get as much good feeling as you can. Through calm, brightness, generosity and deep attention, you're going to find a basis for feeling that will bring enough satisfaction in itself. Sights and sounds will just be seen as wallpaper, they won't matter that much any more. Then you have a place where you are a little more independent from that constructed world, and that's the basis from which renunciation can happen.

The cream of meditation is when you're starting to go past the rough stuff (when the system is clogged, tightened up, dull and groggy). You

go into it and it begins to flow; you have some say over it. 'I can calm, I can ease, I can bless, I can forgive, I can love, I can be clear.' Any of these intentions and mind-states are going to support agreeable feeling. You notice them as they are; you notice how they arise. You have some say over generating them. You also notice that they are constructed; therefore, you don't cling to them. If you think, 'I have to have these beautiful mind-states. I am them. Why don't I have them?' it's because you identify with the idea that 'I'm supposed to be blissed out and cheerful all the time.' But you can recognize that these states are not given, that you have to do some work to develop them. You have to do this deep, intimate, very sincere and honest work of disengaging the bases of stress, agitation, panic, demand and defeat that generate so much unpleasant mental feeling.

The pressures, the stresses, the demands, things being out of control and the feeling of being overwhelmed are the plight of the average person. You're in a system that is whirling away and you're floundering to try to catch up with it, and you never win. At the end of the day, there's still more to do and you feel defeated. So you're more or less forced out into the senses to provide yourself with the requisite of agreeable feeling. I hope it's not too bad for you. It can feel extremely difficult at times for some people. They end up so defeated that they just drink themselves to death or kill themselves because they feel they can't be around any more.

Meditation should touch into the stiffness of the system and come through it. Really aim for that; don't get too strapped down by the techniques that I do, or that other people do, or that you read about in books, because for you they're abstract, they're ideas. There's no way I can bring the Buddha's teaching across except through words and ideas. Maybe I could embody it a bit, but that would be an inference. Along with an inference could come certain unintended suggestions such as: 'You should do this', 'You should feel this', 'You should be able

to do this', 'Why aren't you getting that?', 'What's wrong with you?' This is not what I'm implying, but something in you might interpret my words and actions in these ways.

Whenever we set up something abstract, we have to be aware of what the mind does with it. We are very much under the tyranny of the abstract, the tyranny of numbers. Whenever we start to do something we go into the performance tyranny: get to the top of the class as quickly as possible, no dawdling! We generate mild panic. The average state of a city dweller, I'd suggest, is sustained, manageable panic. There is a constant urge to rush to the next thing, and at the end of the day feeling that there are still five other things to do. Those mental nuances are not just in the mind, because what the mind feels, the body feels, what the body feels, the mind feels. Their relationship is like that. What you feel in your mind is going to hit in your body. What you feel in your body is going to affect your mind. When I say 'mind', I don't mean your thinking, I mean your heart, your awareness, your sense of who you are.

Another thing we can recognize about feeling, however poignant it may be, is that it's innately mutable, it's shifting – that's its nature. And that's also the case for the clinging to it that occurs. The mind, as you've probably recognized, doesn't stay still for a second. It's a continual wave formation with patterns, senses, moods, dreams, images, instincts, intuitions, spaces and densities, all kinds of textures and tones. Sometimes in meditation we can experience states that we don't even have words for; it goes deeper than emotion. We may think, 'What is this grey, grizzly fog that I've been sitting in?' or 'I feel like a pot of lukewarm glue with lumps in it.' You're reading what's happening on the bodily sense. What the mind feels the body feels and it's very changeable, simply with a word, with a smile, with a burst of sunshine.

Why does something in us seem so stuck? When you feel a mind-state of anxiety, there's an unpleasant feeling that stays there, sometimes for a lifetime. You don't really know what anxiety means because you're always in it; your body has firmed up the mental signal. First the body encapsulates, takes a photograph of the mental signals – not a visual photograph but a bodily impression. Then the body begins to adopt those patterns, those mental feelings, perceptions and signals as the norm: 'This is how I am.' You can't even judge it because you're in it all the time. You don't have any place to see it from, until you see somebody else and realize that 'He doesn't operate the same way as I do.'

I know people who feel guilty about everything. If they can't find anything to feel guilty about, they feel guilty they're not feeling guilty enough. I don't know what generated that, but some of these emotional patterns, I would suggest, get embedded very early through the fundamental signals that you receive as you come into life. Whatever your mother, your father and the world around you are carrying gets into you. Most of it is good, some of it is not. This stuff is not absolutely fixed but it can be rather stuck.

In a social environment, we can have lots of signals about urgency, accomplishment, going places, failing to be good enough and so on. All these signals get embodied into a tense bodily pattern, which is then adopted – that's the clinging. You don't decide, 'Oh, here is some panic, I think I'll cling to that!' It clings. It's more accurate to say that there are bases affected by clinging, but there's nobody clinging. You don't have to feel guilty about clinging, you have to recognize that there's the experience of cleaving to, holding to, tightening up around, rejecting, forcing away, believing in a mental pattern as being 'myself'. That's actually not 'me', that's a program (*sankhāra*). With some investigation, encouragement, sustained attention and appropriate intentionality, it's possible to change the programming.

When the clinging (at least to the really defective stuff) is not happening, we can adopt something wholesome. As you become more satisfied and secure you also become looser and more free. You realize, 'OK. I can be with unpleasant feelings without getting stuck in them. I can be doing it wrong without going into a whole tribunal about it. I can handle people not liking me without going into a huge fault-finding mission or defending myself.' If you're looking to change other people's perceptions of you, it's going to be a long road, isn't it? All you can do is gradually clear the anxiety and bring up the skilful intention, 'May I be well, may you be well.'

The primary way of deconstructing clinging is right there, as so many things are, but we skip over it. It's what is called 'right intent': the intent of goodwill, the intent of compassion and the intent of letting go of the sense-world – not rejecting it but being more careful not to buy into it, not feeling you have to follow its signals. It's called 'renunciation', which may sound heavy but means restraining (*samvara*), gathering yourself back into the centre. It's a pleasant experience; it's not associated with ill-will or ideology. If it weren't for your welfare, didn't make you feel better and wasn't true, the Buddha wouldn't have taught it. It's only because it's like this, and that you can do it, that he taught it.

The fundamental intention is goodwill. Why do we meditate? Hopefully we meditate to make ourselves come to a more agreeable state of being. It's a good intention, isn't it? But take it slowly; that state of being will happen by itself if you sustain a quality of goodwill and kindness towards yourself and others. Goodwill is the first intent, the first step. It's like being born: as you come into the scene you need a sense of refuge and shelter, the reassurance that there's something receiving you in a pleasant, benevolent way.

Although external things can help you to feel welcome, what really counts is that you are constantly generating goodwill *yourself*,

internally. One way of bringing this intention of goodwill to mind is to recognize that all of us, every day, receive some degree of goodwill. Somebody may say, 'How are you doing? Please sit down, have some food' or opens the door for you. We may not notice these things, we may be so absorbed into 'how I am', 'what I'm not' and so forth that we don't really notice goodwill. Therefore, emphasize it, notice when it's happening, when there's any gesture of gratitude, respect, sharing or interest in another person. For example, right now I'm offering these teachings. I act from goodwill, there's nothing else there. I'm not expecting to get a promotion. It's one of those jobs that you always want to retire from, but goodwill keeps putting you back in it again because that's the requirement for this human condition.

When you see other beings in pain – like the other day when we dedicated the chanting for that person who has Alzheimer's – ask yourself, 'What does that do?' Don't just skim over it, linger. How we would love to help that person! How we would love to take that anguish away from her! I don't know her but still I would love to do that. Most of the time, we don't have that perception towards ourselves and others. But we can recognize that we're all brothers and sisters, we're not separate in this experience of distress, pain, difficulty, guilt, worry and anxiety. How I'd love to take that away, to wash that away!

Now, can that be coming back to yourself? Is it possible that somebody else has felt that for you? What did that feel like? Someone else has taken pleasure in seeing you, in seeing what they can do for you. How does that feel? Every one of us has had that experience, many times I would imagine. You may have noticed it for a few moments before your attention switched on to something else, but now linger on it, linger on the meaning of goodwill, of kindness, which is the most fundamental trigger of human beings. We tend to fear losing it, but instead couldn't we enjoy its presence? And couldn't we take responsibility for it by generating it ourselves? 'Whatever others think of me and how I'm

doing, I will not move into ill-will, guilt, judgement, criticism and aversion towards myself. In fact, I will seek to support myself, to be a good friend to myself. I will use that as the fundamental platform to build my practice upon.'

Start touching into that and spend a few moments taking in how that feeling in your mind affects your body. Perhaps something in you starts to relax and soften a bit. Notice where it does that. Does it affect your breathing? As you're experiencing any benevolent or agreeable state, it's really important to notice what's happening in the breathing, because the breathing is that which conditions the body – it's called *kāya-saṅkhāra*. When we feel that quality of goodwill, of loving-kindness, of deeply respecting and comforting ourselves and it's no longer just an idea, we then also feel what the breathing is like. By breathing goodwill, it takes form. It turns from this very mutable realm of the mind into something more deeply established, because it goes into the body and the body firms up mental states and feelings. In this way, you're able to form, to generate a felt body of goodwill that doesn't adopt enmity, bitterness, cynicism and inadequacy. You're building something strong. As you cultivate goodwill and honesty, you feel something in you shrinking from ill-will and dishonesty. This comes from more than an idea – yet the idea is important because it generates a perception, a sign, a signal. Do it many times, get the feeling for it, touch into the breathing, because that's where the mental signal can get embodied.

This is how *samādhi* arises. The process of *samādhi* can be very loosely described as: get happy, breathe into that, there's *samādhi*. It's not: do the best you can to get some *samādhi* and eventually you'll be happy. No, that's called panic, it's a wrong signal! Get really happy in the places that give you the greatest happiness and breathe into that, then your mind is not going to want to go anywhere else. This is what's called collectedness, and that's not just an interesting mind-state, it's

a transformation of how you're wired. You begin to have the sense of what's solid and real, what's transitory, what's worth being with and what just needs to be skimmed over. Then you begin to have a sense of independence from this sense-world and all its triggering.

The World of the Five Aggregates

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‘This is the direct way for the realization of nibbāna, for the ceasing of suffering and stress, for the purification of beings’⁴⁹ – namely the mindfulness that is framing and referring to experience in four aspects: body (*kāya*), feeling (*vedanā*), mind-states (*citta*) and what are called *dharmas*. This fourth aspect is in relationship to the other three: as we sustain mindfulness on the body, feeling and mind-states, things such as ill-will, investigation, sense desire and joy arise. It’s a crucial and key aspect because as the awareness is with the body (or feeling or mind-states), it’s telling us whether there’s the dissonance of struggling and resistance, or whether there’s something more enquiring and investigating. In a way, these *dharmas* indicate whether the relationship between awareness and its object is dysfunctional, antagonistic, not really there yet or if it’s beginning to settle.

The first culminating enlightenment factor is unification (*samādhi*), when things are completely settled. There’s no differentiation in the subject/object: no ‘me’ holding ‘it’, no tugging, no infatuations, no contractions. It’s just an open and steady state. The other culminating enlightenment factor is equanimity, which is the tone of that unification. The mind is very even, it doesn’t waver, it doesn’t go in, it doesn’t go out, it doesn’t grab an object. There isn’t the sense of ‘me struggling with it’ or ‘it getting on top of me’. When there is a differentiation in the subject/object, there is a splitting and a clashing. The ‘me’ sense

49. *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, Majjhima Nikāya 10.

becomes strong and is often besieged, struggling, afflicted or needy, and that feels very much like who I am as an identity. That experience is actually coming out of an unconscious relationship that's distorted by a lack of deep penetrative insight, but the Buddha is saying that it doesn't have to happen.

That doesn't mean that 'the real self' gets extinguished. There isn't a real self to be extinguished or a self to be let go of or an ego to be transcended – these expressions are just simplifications. There's a relationship that needs to be fulfilled, and in that relationship there isn't the creation of a separate self who is struggling with, controlling, on top of or underneath the experience it seems to be having. You're not separate from an experience. How can you be separate from what you are experiencing? Yet that separation is the usual set-up, but when you think about it, it's not really logical. There's something weird about it, and yet it's also extremely normal because we are all following the same pattern. We're all singing from the same hymn book, so it sounds like it's real. There can be functioning, understanding, clarity or humour, but the sense of 'the person there who is trying to make it work' or 'isn't getting it right' and so forth doesn't have to occur. There's the ceasing of that which has arisen, which is being formed, concocted, created, constructed. There's no annihilation of a real being; there's the ceasing to construct a ghost and a puppet who always feels unhappy – not necessarily deeply unhappy, but something is always bothering him or her.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the phrase 'Independent, not clinging to anything in the world' is an easy one to roll off your tongue, but it requires a bit of working out because we may not really understand the terms 'independent', 'clinging' and 'world'. 'The world' is constructed by the sense-fields. The three-dimensional reality which 'I am sort of separate from but on the edge of' is a constructed thing. It's particularly evident through the eyes which always place everyone else 'out there' and me 'in here'. The play between the eyes and the mind generates

this split and then 'I'm trying to find my place in the world, or change it, or I feel overwhelmed by it.' This world is actually all the six sense-fields, which are the external sense-bases: the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body, and the internal one, which is the mind, or more precisely, the 'mind organ' (*mano*).

There are two words for 'mind': *mano* and *citta*. *Mano* refers to the operating, organizing, doing functions. The *citta* is the mentality, the property of awareness, the knowing that things are happening. It's the basic receptivity that resonates with and is affected by experience. Sometimes people use the word 'heart' for *citta*, but although it's emotive, it's not just an emotional faculty. The *citta* is that which can be brightened, gladdened, steadied and released. The Buddha is said to be one who abides with a purified or emancipated *citta*, a *citta* which is gathered into the Deathless.

The world is essentially constructed by the play between the external sense organs and the internal organ of the mind bouncing the inputs around, organizing them, considering them, comparing them, contrasting them, referring them, resisting them and so on. But one of the snags with that analysis is that we can easily come into a position where the external sense is 'the world' and the internal sense, the mind organ, is 'me watching the world', 'me dealing with the world': the world is out there and I'm in here; I'm the mind that is doing all of this knowing, watching, witnessing, pulling the levers and so forth. We may have a certain detachment but it's a detachment that can give rise to conceit, indifference and a dissociation effect. We live in our heads.

Another analysis of the world is called 'the five *khandhas*'. *Khandha* is a rather mysterious term meaning something like 'conglomerate' or 'aggregate'. There are five *khandhas* and each of them is a conglomerate of factors, so the world is a conglomerate made up of conglomerates – bits and pieces sticking together.

The first aggregate is *rūpa* (form), which is the sticking together of the qualities of earth (solidity), water (harmony or cohesiveness), heat (temperature and vitality) and air (movement). The visual forms are easy to discern. You can look at the human body and reflect on what gives the body its shape. If you take a body and burn it down, you just have ashes that don't cohere at all; it could be any old shape. The shape of body is contributed by water. That's what sticks it together into a cohesive form. Without water, it would just crumble into dust. But of course, if it were just water it wouldn't be able to hold any pressure; you would be oozing all over the floor, absorbed in the carpet! So there's a certain amount of earth, just enough to create the right soupy, muddy quality that holds it. There's a certain rigidity to it. And of course, the most rigid parts of the body that we experience are the bones.

The vitality or heat is an important element we can experience in our body. You can't always see warmth through the eyes, but you can discern brightness, light and vitality. The last element is air or mobility. A living body is always moving, breathing in, breathing out. That's the most obvious sign of it, but there are also subtler movements, such as the shifting of energy through the limbs. These subtler movements are part of the larger sense of what we mean by 'breathing'. Particularly in the Eastern context, breathing is not reduced to the movement of the air. It's also a movement of chi, prana or vitality. We can see these four elements blending and merging to different degrees, and that blending makes up the first aggregate of *rūpa*.

The second aggregate is *vedanā* (feeling). There are three kinds of feelings: pleasant, painful and neutral, and each of them is based on two fundamental bases: body and mind – so there are six kinds of feelings.

The third aggregate is *saññā* (perception), which refers to signs, signals, memories, meanings, felt meanings, the impressions we get from things. For example, 'That strikes me as ... interesting or bright or sad'

or 'It seems like a cow to me' or 'It sounds like a bell.' Perceptions are constructed and contextual. They create categories for experience. Often you assemble a perception to a whole range of things: if it's metal and you strike it with a hammer and it makes a ringing sound, it's a 'bell'. We have a certain group-held perception of 'bell-ness'. And as a sound changes, we can all agree that it's not a 'bell' any more: it drops out of the 'bell' category into the 'buzzer' category or the 'alarm clock' category or the 'chime' category. And of course, you can subdivide these: 'That's not a bell, that's a gong' or 'That's a wind chime.'

Perception is just a relative understanding which groups together a bunch of experiences into manageable packets that we can relate to. In fact, everything is specifically itself: no bell is like another one. But that would be very difficult to communicate if we didn't use words, wouldn't it, so we have large topics such as 'bell' or 'cow'. No cow is like another cow. There are Friesians, Jerseys and so on, and each cow has its own individual qualities as well, but we can use the category of 'cow'. At a certain point, we might say, 'That's an ox.' And then you can quibble over whether it's really an ox cow or an aurochs, 'When does a cow become an ox?' and so on, but basically it's a 'cow', it moos! When does a dog become a wolf? Let's say you have a wolf and an Alsatian and you cross-breed them. You look at them and their offspring and say, 'That's an Alsatian ... that's an Alsatian with a bit of wolf blood in it ... that's an Alsatian with a lot of wolf blood in it ... that's mostly wolf and not much Alsatian ... that's a wolf.' Where is the dividing line? Perceptions are really a matter of opinion. They are concoctions, and yet we act upon them.

Whatever the mind has constructed something as, we respond to it. The response is *saṅkhāra* and that's the fourth aggregate. Dog: nice, pat it. Wolf: terrible, run away from it! *Saṅkhāras* are activations, mental formations, kamma, activities, impulses, the qualities of intentionality that jump up. This is a fairly easy way to handle this rather complex

term. *Saṅkhāras* could be associated with loving-kindness, compassion, malice, greed or fear – all kinds of impulses can rise up. Out of the rising of feeling, perception and *saṅkhāra*, we have the experience called emotion.

The last aggregate, *viññāṇa* (consciousness), is the potential to receive impressions; it's the messenger. Consciousness is a property that brings a basic entry of experience into awareness. If you are not conscious of something, it doesn't happen. Consciousness occurs through the ears, eyes, nose, tongue, body and thinking mind. It receives things in different ways depending on whether it's affected by fear or wisdom, and so forth. You can be slightly paranoid or edgy. You can also have impaired eyesight – for example, not being able to differentiate brown from green – or hearing difficulties, so you don't get it. We can end up identifying with that and thinking, 'I'm stupid or inadequate,' but it's all just a matter of consciousness, which is a conditioned factor. It has limitations, it brings what it can.

How is this then considered 'the world'? First of all, consciousness cognizes a form – it can be visual, auditory and so on – and brings it into awareness. Then a feeling occurs, a perception arises, an activation occurs and consciousness is then bounced into further becoming. For example, you hear something, a pleasant feeling arises in the mind, it reminds you of a song you heard, you become interested and your consciousness then goes to, 'Where was I in 1994? Oh yeah, I was in Paris having a good time. It reminds me of that song.' So your consciousness has then bounced into 'Paris 1994', and there you are for a few microseconds until something else happens and the consciousness bounces to receive it. This process of consciousness being bounced along to keep picking up new messages and new signals is called 'rebirth' or 'further becoming' and is directed by *saṅkhāra*. *Saṅkhāra* keeps throwing consciousness on.

Some of this bouncing is extremely painful because when you have these *saṅkhāras*, which are afflicted by ignorance and trapped in

self-view, you're bounced around the cage called 'myself': 'He did this!', 'They never do that!', 'Why should I be like this?', 'How can I stop being like that?' The energies of agitation, aversion, resistance and worry bounce consciousness around. Lo and behold, another perception arises in line with that and we give it another spin – and so on. Through this non-awakening or non-realization, there is an experience of being trapped inside the cage of the five aggregates.

Like a squirrel finding something rather juicy to carry inside that cage and nibbling on it, we're occasionally having a nice time there. But when something comes in and disturbs us, we become ratty and nasty. We run around our cage again, thinking, 'How am I going to get out of here? I don't want to be in here!' Then somebody comes and gives us a peanut, so we think, 'I like it here. Don't disturb me!' That's what feelings can do. When you have a pleasant feeling, you think, 'This is really all right!' But when it goes wrong, you think, 'I want to get out! I want liberation! I want freedom! I want release! But ... a banana would do!', and you settle down inside the cage again. But when you see the non-fulfilment of pleasant feelings and perceptions, however agreeable, when you realize that eventually you will have to face the unresolved stuff again, then you start to think, 'There's no point getting buried in this again.' You're going to have to really understand these five aggregates and let go of them.

The *citta*, the awareness property, is seen as not really within the five-aggregate system. It tends to be affected by ignorance. The unawakened *citta* is confused; it runs around inside the five-aggregate system, experiencing a self who is either finding some quiet or comfortable place inside this cage, or wanting to get out of it. That's its default and it leads to confusion. You may wonder, 'How do I get to nibbāna?' The blunt answer is: you don't! It only occurs through the release of the self within that cage.

The *citta* can feel very much embedded in the five aggregates, but it can be released from them. This release comes around because the five aggregates are not really solid at all. They are like the tracks of electrons around an atom. They are all conditioned, concocted, constructed, dynamic and fluid (we could say they're all '*saṅkhāred*') and they become reified or solidified by the degree of ignorance, fascination, resistance and aversion – in fact, by a defective relationship with experience. If we can bring perfection to that relationship, then these aggregates don't have to solidify; they can be brought into being when it's suitable – so we're not in some spaced-out state – and they can also be rested. But whether they're forming or not forming, there isn't the sense of *being* them. The main point is that the aggregates are not fixed realities.

In meditation practice you can contemplate the five aggregates within your own body. For example, you can contemplate form by noticing the earth element. A common error is to assume that *rūpa* means 'body'. *Rūpa* doesn't mean 'body', it means 'form'. It can mean any form taken in through the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and it can even be a mental form. Fundamentally, it refers to an object that we can know and relate to; it's experienced as having a certain consistency. But as we come to that object with our awareness, we begin to recognize that it's not actually as solid and consistent as it seems. The experience of earth, right in our own mind-body, is actually changing. Where is the real element of earth? The bones are fairly rigid, other textures of the body are more fluid, but we can notice that the experience of earth is actually subtly shifting and changing in its intensities and energies. Sometimes your body may feel extremely spacey and formless. At other times, it may seem extremely void of vitality and fire and you feel like cold porridge! Sometimes there's no flow left and you feel like broken glass or bits and pieces, dysfunctional or snapped; there's no cohesion between the arms and the head feels like it's separate from the rest of your body. When you contemplate these elements, you can really see that they're not consistent or fixed; they're shifting and changing all the time.

If you look at the body externally, you notice that a sitting body is rather different from a standing body or a reclining body. The body in profile has a different shape from when it's facing you or from when it bends forwards. So which is 'the body'? If you look at it distinctly from moment to moment, which is the real one? How high is it? Is it male? Is it female? Is it somewhere between the two? What colour of hair would it have? What about the eyes? What colour are those eyes? How big are they? You realize there's no such thing as 'the body'; there's only a very general perception of it.

Before an autopsy, the body looks like a person laid on a slab, but it's not moving. It's not a person, it's a body. When they take bits off it, at a certain point it's no longer a body, it's just meat. It's quite a shift. The most wrenching moment is probably when they take the face off. The construction 'this is auntie so-and-so' is gone; when the face goes, the person goes too. There's a body, but it's not a person and pretty soon we wouldn't even call it 'a body', we would call it 'meat' – various kinds of meat and bones. And yet it's all there. Where did the body go? They just rearranged parts of it, and yet we would not attribute a person to that. We probably wouldn't even consider it a human being any more.

So what happened? Change happened. And this is what happens all the time. Are you the two-year-old? The five-year-old? The eight-year-old? The fifteen-year-old? The twenty-eight-year-old? The forty-year-old? The sixty-year-old? The eighty-year-old? Which one are you? Really bear this in mind: *change is the doorway of liberation*. By sustaining mindfulness you're not mesmerized by any facet of the change into thinking, 'Oh *this* is the real thing! This is what we really are: we're just a bag of old meat.' No, I wouldn't say that. That's one way you can look at it, but you could also look at it as 'a lovely person' or 'my nephew' or 'Susan' or 'the light of my life' or whatever. A designer, a fashion person, a photographer and a doctor would probably see the body in rather different ways; they will have a different perception of it.

When we experience *rūpa*, along with it come perceptions, impressions and probably qualities of feeling and reactions. These five aggregates are mixing together. If you sustain attention and don't get fazed by any aspect of the change, you notice that your mind stops injecting fascination, aversion, identification and comparison around that experience. That's the practice, essentially. Even though this could be quite a complex analysis, the practice is actually looking at very simple things and being able to distinguish them: there's the object of attention and there's my feeling about it, my perception of it and my measurement of it. Those two things (the bare object and my additions around it) are different. Could that measuring quality, that differentiation, cease? What happens when it stops? Something seems to go very quiet, cool and open. This is what release is about. How does that feel? When you look at another being or at yourself in the mirror, ask yourself, 'Who is that?' and observe what you make out of it. Could that stop? What happens then? Stay there, stay with it. That's a fairly simple meditation.

You notice arising features of the body, you notice passing qualities of the body. You notice arising perceptions and you notice perceptions as they cease. You notice the arising of feelings and activities, you notice what they are, you notice them cease. As you allow that process to occur, ask yourself, 'What's always here?' You establish mindfulness so that you don't flicker from that attentiveness, that coolness, that dispassion, and you are prepared to witness the 'nothing much', the rather disturbing, the interesting, the poignant, the frightening, the boring ... and you stay with it. It's arising, it's ceasing and also there's a sense of 'what's always here' – the *citta*. You're cultivating awareness of the movement of the aggregates.

You can't concoct, decide, determine or have an attitude outside the aggregates. These activities are all within them. You can't be somebody outside the aggregates because the sense of self is an aggregate. If you start forming judgements or opinions about your aggregates,

whether you are them or aren't them, that forming of an opinion is called *sankhāra* – that's an aggregate. The aggregates don't exclude any piece. However, there can be an increasing dispassion, openness, non-resistance and non-fascination with the aggregates, and through that the relationships of aversion, fascination, blindness and reactivity gradually cease. The *citta* becomes more apparent; you begin to see the light – rather than the colours.

Awareness (*citta*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) can sometimes be synonymous in language but they are different qualities. Let's say there is a green wall; light bounces off the green wall and you see the colour green. In this analogy, the colour green represents consciousness. The light striking the wall is the *citta*, which has no property other than awareness – it's not a colour. Consciousness is the manifestation of impressions: the reflected. Yet we could say that light is inherent in all that. It's the light bouncing through consciousness that gives rise to perceptions and impressions. Consciousness is the finite aggregate through which the *citta* manifests. As we grow more dispassionate towards consciousness, less mesmerized by it, less averse to it, less frightened by it, there's dispassion, cooling, relinquishment, liberation, the realization of the *citta*: awareness knowing itself.

We're noticing the arising of the world, the ceasing of the world and the path leading through that – it's another formulation of the Noble Truths. In fact, nothing is really destroyed apart from ignorance. We can see these aggregates as a problem (and they can be very problematic) but they're also the natural creations for life in this realm. They give us functionality, language, navigation, locations, purposes and motivations, and can be purified. During his life, the Buddha had the purified aggregates as his potentials. He continued to manifest in terms of these aggregates. To say the Buddha is outside the aggregates is incorrect, and to say he is within them is also incorrect. He can manifest in these aggregates for the welfare of beings as long as the

lifespan lasts and then when it's finished, there isn't a bouncing on of consciousness into another series of aggregates; they're relinquished. That's the trajectory of the practice.

As it's said many times, the nub of the practice is being fully aware of form as form. Form is constantly forming, deforming, conforming, malforming, informing; shapes change. Seeing this, we get a sense of, 'I've seen it all; enough!' One is no longer mesmerized or taking a stand upon or against form. Form is just what happens and we practise likewise with the other aggregates.

It's important to distinguish between *rūpa* and *kāya*. *Rūpa* can sometimes be translated as 'body' because that's the most obvious place where *rūpa* manifests. *Rūpa* has the sense of a discernible object. In fact, the eye is often associated with *rūpa* (in the sense of a visual object) because it's nicely clear and defined. There's this thing here; it has boundaries around it. That's one of the easiest ways to determine *rūpa*. But it can also refer to a bodily form or even an auditory form: a sound strikes the ear and there's an impression of it, a perception of it, a feeling around it, and then the activations around it. *Rūpa* could also be a mental form: a thought sustained in the mind becomes a mind-object (or mental form) and then there can be a perception of it and you can react and respond to that. The aggregates cover everything. There's no 'person' separate from them, so we keep aware of that tendency to take a stand. Taking a stand is *saṅkhāra*, it's an activity and a clinging, an adopting of a particular set of theories, notions, positions, views or attitudes. That's called *ditṭhi*, which is one aspect of clinging.

The aggregates are said to be affected by clinging. Clinging is *saṅkhāra*, an activity. *Saṅkhāra* is both within and also whirling away, weaving and binding everything together, setting up all the reactions, all the stances, all the standpoints, all the opinions and counter-opinions. Again, we can simplify the practice right down to handling *saṅkhāra*,

because that's the one that bounces consciousness along to the next thing. If we could quieten *saṅkhāra*, tame it and master it, it wouldn't do that – or at least it would bounce to somewhere nice, such as the blissful realms which arise through cultivation. So *saṅkhāra* has to be handled and cultivated; you can't just switch it off. The practice itself is *saṅkhāra* because it has to do with intentions. The leading aspect of *saṅkhāra* is intentionality; it's the impulse to do, the attitudinal impulse that is saying, 'I'm up for that' or 'I'm interested in that' or 'My attention is swinging towards that.' That movement of the mind is *saṅkhāra* and we can deliberately recognize it in our minds.

We begin by handling *saṅkhāra*, mollifying it and making it skilful, instead of allowing it to lurch along in its old habits. Intentionality creates kamma, it creates habitual ruts. The mind then goes down and becomes 'myself', which is also a kammic formation. Therefore, *saṅkhāra* has to be handled with great attentiveness and responsibility. What could be managed? Since there's a huge inheritance in *saṅkhāra* – the ball is already rolling – we're not starting on level ground; we're starting already impelled, rolling along. How long does it take to turn an oil tanker around? How long does it take to shift *saṅkhāra*? It's best to switch the clock off, because that's another *saṅkhāra*, and not a very helpful one. It gets in the way. So just do it a moment at a time. Apply yourself to: 'Could this be steadied? Could this be listened to? Could this be gently opened out? Could this be firmly restrained? Could this be shifted to a more skilful attitude and response, to a more skilful relationship with experience?'

In the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* the Buddha is referring to, 'Calming the *kāya-saṅkhāra*, smoothing it out.' *Kāya-saṅkhāra* is a *saṅkhāra* in the body and it's associated with breathing in and out. It's the activations that make us breathe. When we're cultivating *kāya-saṅkhāra*, we're actually working on *saṅkhāra*. It wants to rush off into the mind, so you bring it back to breathing and let it stay there so that your breathing experience

becomes softer and more fluent. You're soothing it, giving attention to it. You give up time, give up identity and open your body. As you're breathing in and out, you're discerning the entire body, feeling all the bodily experiences: the energies, the pressures, the channels, the openness, the fluidity, the vitalities. The quality of breathing in and out (the *kāya-saṅkhāra*) begins to steady and moves through the body, giving rise to a certain unification, a calm and subtle pleasantness called *pīti* and *sukha*.

The *citta-saṅkhāras*, received by *mano-viññāṇa* (mind-consciousness), are the forms within the mind: thoughts, impressions, attitudes, reactions, all the living, moving stuff that we so often take our mind to be. The body-*saṅkhāra* and the mind-*saṅkhāra* run together, so you can 'breathe into your mind'. As you're experiencing a powerful thought, a powerful feeling or emotion, you hold it and widen your attention. Within this experience of fear or worry, you're not trying to change it but just widening the lens. How is the breathing within this experience? Then, how is the breathing right at the base of the belly? And how is the breathing as it sweeps up into the diaphragm? By placing the two together, without losing the mental pattern, you're inclining the mind much more to the fundamental bodily pattern. The bodily pattern begins to pull the mental pattern out of shape. The mental pattern – say, of agitation – is probably going to be up in the top of your chest and your face and there is going to be a certain tightness in your body. When you come back to the fuller and more calmed body within that, the two energies meet and the body begins to gently release the *saṅkhāra* in the mind. You can't really be angry and upset if your body feels relaxed and open. You can't get it going. The body has to tighten up and contract to do that.

Let's say something annoyed you in the morning. The topic of the annoyance was a five-minute conversation; that's now finished. Yet the affected tone of annoyance is still there: you're still feeling brusque

and tetchy. You think, 'If anybody else gives me flak, I'm going to give them what-for!' The body pattern firms up and sustains that emotional pattern, even when the event that triggered it is over. You can remain in that contracted, defensive state all day long and when you see your partner or your friend you easily get grumpy at him or her or at yourself, because it hasn't been released.

It works both ways: if your mental pattern is strongly encouraged towards patience, *pāramī*, kindness, generosity, grounding yourself when you're calm, experiencing real, loving patience and forgiveness towards yourself, then that's going to firm up as well and become more your ground state. Then, even when disappointing experiences happen, you get a little bit of affect but it doesn't really matter: stuff doesn't rock you so much because your ground state is much more confident, assured and comfortable. It's not in any particular point in the body, but in the embodiment of *kāya-saṅkhāra* as it becomes more healed, that you get a firming up of the resources for freedom and confidence, for the elimination of stress, agitation and self-criticism.

All these things can seem extremely psychological, but even with events that happened years ago, here and now there can be the firming up that releases you from their affects. This is certainly something to give full attention to because there isn't another way to do it. If you approach it in some other way, it will lead back to this eventually anyway. If you work it out psychologically, you might feel a sense of, 'I feel better now' and it will land in your body. If it hasn't landed in your body, the release of the affects hasn't happened yet. It's really in the embodiment that any understanding, any degree of shift or change is grounded, held, sustained and becomes a foundation for your freedom. Otherwise, it's just an inspiring moment, a good idea or a nice person, but it hasn't been integrated.

The aggregates are everything: it's the retreat centre, the mist on the windows, the light, the rain, the shrine, the nice food, the people looking after you, me, everybody – they are all part of the resource field, something you can open to. Is any of it carrying ill-will, pressure, fear, judgement or demand? Take in the wide qualities of the whole field of the retreat, so you're not on your own somewhere in the back of your head or in the deep depths of your heart. When you contemplate the aggregates, there's nowhere you can look where they can't be found. There's nothing you can touch that isn't them. So it's in 'this world' that we find the release from the world. And when our meditation becomes very open and full we can see where the resources are. Essentially, they are in the perceptions, energies and activations, as you begin to shift from distressing patterns to patterns that give you groundedness, contentment and relief. That's the way it builds up from such small things to liberation. Once you get the ball rolling, if you sustain it, that's where it's going to go.

Breathing Through the Four Elements

THIS GUIDED MEDITATION WAS OFFERED

ON 25 NOVEMBER 2014.

To contemplate the four elements, first get an overall impression of your body. Don't focus on any particular detail, but simply spread out into the whole experience of how you know you have a body: that kind of substantiality, that sense of an extended living mass.

The element that's most clearly associated with breathing is air. You can feel that repeated flowing movement which we call breathing. It doesn't really matter where you feel it, simply notice where it's most thoroughly and easily felt. Feel the completeness of each breath: through the flow of the exhaling to the end of it, through the flow of the inhaling to the end of it ... Be aware of that flow of air within the domain of the body, which is perhaps more akin to earth – it's relatively solid. This flow of air pushes, massages, opens and spreads the experience of body. At the end of the out-breath, you may notice that things seem to solidify for a moment and come into stasis; the earth element becomes more dominant, then it changes and loosens. That flow, that movement, is not really a thing, is it? You can call it a 'thing' like you call the wind a 'thing', but it's actually not a finite thing: it's a process, a movement through the earth. Give your awareness over to these two aspects of *rūpa* playing together, balancing. The air predominates, then the earth, then it changes back into air again: stasis, movement, stasis, movement ... You can trust this; this is where you are. And you can, of course, adjust the focus and notice that same pattern in your chest, your throat, your head or your abdomen.

You might also notice a kind of vitality or energy. Sometimes your breath has low vitality. At other times, particularly at the end of the breath, it feels strong and clear, it has energy within it. At the completion of the inhalation, energy builds up. At the completion of the exhalation, energy gathers to draw a breath in again. This is the fire element. It has a warming and vitalizing effect. You can look out for that quality in any part of your body: vitality will be there. If you focus on it, it will even increase and there will be a certain shining quality, particularly in the head. It's a very important element: it can soften, it can heal. When you sense the body, feel the vitalizing effect of breathing. If you take it in – in your chest for example – you can have the sense of it spreading a little bit as you breathe in. The breathing comes in and perhaps your chest becomes a little more charged. Then when breathing out, it becomes cooled. You're feeling the vitality of that. Perhaps you can encourage some of the tissues to soften, to release, to let go a little more, just like you're massaging something. You can pick up this sign by bearing in mind your throat, your shoulders, your head or any other part of the body and sensing breathing. The part of the body you're bearing in mind doesn't have to be necessarily associated with the respiratory tract, because the energy moves wherever you bring attention to.

The water element is the property that allows experiences to resonate, ripple and travel through the entire form. Here we might imagine the sense of the body being like a pool. All these different affects occur in it: tensions, swirls, still places and so on. Instead of cutting off or rigidifying around difficult places, we breathe into them, feeling the energy of the breathing travelling through the entire form. You can ask the body to loosen a little bit in its tension, to soften, to widen. You're breathing, sensitive to the entire body, and whatever intention of goodwill that you want to bear in mind, you carry it through the body. Notice its effects. This is the beauty of the water element.

If you can pick up these elements and get a sense of how they blend, you have a quality of balance: the earth, the firmness (without getting seized up and rigid); air, the movement of breathing (without getting blown away and spun out – it's contained); the vitality of fire, warming; and the suffusiveness of water. If there is too much water, you lose form; if there is not enough of it, you become rigid. These elements are all blending together with breathing in and breathing out. Your bodily experience can become the play of these elements in harmony.

Melting Down to the Natural State

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED
ON THE MORNING OF 26 NOVEMBER 2014.

I have been presenting the map of the practice that the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* offers; now I would like to talk about the very process of practice. It's like when you want to cook, you go into the kitchen; there you find the stove and all the spices, herbs, vegetables, knives and pots, but how do you actually do it? What is 'cooking' for you? The retreat time gives us a chance to unwind and look into that because during this time, some of the usual daily life signals are not generated. On this retreat, there are certainly times we have to be places, there are experiences and bells, but these are perhaps less violent alarms, pressures and drives than in daily life; it's quieter.

In the practice, there is a lot of emphasis on coming into the body: being aware of your body, feeling it more fully. Can you get your breathing? Can the breathing become long, complete, involuntary, pleasant, so you're not struggling around it? Can you tune into that? Now, you might take these instructions to mean 'hurry up and get mindful of the breathing, hold it together, focus intensely on it.' But what does that kind of signal do? Probably nothing good for you.

I didn't give you a lot of instructions about how to enter into the body domain. You may think that's a bit vague, but it's actually compassionate. The bodily field is your home base. Notice what occurs as you're entering into it. Perhaps there are a lot of discordant experiences. Some can be put down to physical pain or discomfort, but also other things like feeling really tired, sleepy or woozy. All sorts of strange emotions, memories and perceptions can come up and they become very fluid.

As you're entering into the bodily field you're also becoming more aware of emotions like fear, worry, nervousness and sadness. Where did they come from? I haven't said to you, 'Feel your emotions' and yet that's what happens because as you are sitting and entering your bodily field, you are starting to melt a little from the impacted, compacted, functional state, which tends to be much harder-edged, into something softer: the water element. In that melting, the body starts to release experiences that we feel as emotions or as felt experiences, like feeling sleepy or dull. Our emotions tend to be the register of experiences we can most easily classify – for example as 'sad', 'nervous' or 'tense'. They are attuned to the auditory experience and have strong signals of happiness, rage, threat and so on. When you're entering the bodily sense there's a much wider range of felt senses than the normal range of what we call emotion. How am I feeling? Slightly groggy, spacey, stuck, sticky, gluey, spinning? This is the result of beginning to melt.

Every now and then you may get the signal: 'I'm not meditating properly.' You may think, 'I should be getting this clear attention and sustained mindfulness on the breathing in and breathing out, but things are going wrong.' No, they're not going wrong. You're having a totally normal experience, which is the 'meltdown'. Within that, this rather disturbing sense of 'slight hostility around me' can come up; you feel judged: 'There's something I have to be nervous about because I might be getting it wrong.' Where is that coming from? Who is doing that? In daily life, there are many occasions that can trigger the sense of hostility, and that can be quite valid, but nothing of that sort is occurring here. The sense of hostility and all the emotional patterns are retained in the body. As the body-sense begins to release, they start floating up. We can regress to quite early experiences.

Everybody here is following the Precepts and is pleasant and reasonable. Yet we all probably feel differently about the group. You may feel welcome, reasonably OK, nervous and so on. The sense of 'the

other' is registered differently for each one of us. Don't worry about it. Try to not add to it. Feel the feeling in your body, using the sense of the upright posture, the simple and fundamental organization of the body around the spine. You're centring your attention around the spine when you walk, when you stand, when you sit and even when you lie down. It's a useful reference. It means you have something there that acts as a mooring post. Holding that as a basic frame of reference, you can then sense anything that may occur around breathing in and breathing out – and maybe that becomes clearer and stronger in accordance with the degree to which your meltdown has occurred.

You may wonder why the practice seems so easy in the suttas and so difficult to realize. How come in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* the Buddha mentioned that we can realize nibbāna in seven days? It may take seven days if you're in the natural state, if you've already returned to normality completely. But we haven't switched the clock on yet; we haven't even got to the starting block. We're still limbering up, taking off the armour and switching off some of the triggers, and they don't switch off easily. In fact, you can't switch them off, but you can enter a situation whereby the fundamental awareness begins to sense them more fully. Eventually, you may start to notice that the original signal is no longer there. You can notice its release in the mind and body.

In meditation, you go time and time again to those places where you're triggered, while holding in mind and trying to fulfil the simplicity of the posture. You can hardly call it a practice; it's just being aware of the rhythm, which is a very soothing, comforting experience. Don't try to get pinpoint accuracy, just get into the rhythm and give it time. The awareness extends fully into that as if this is exactly right, this is all you need, everything is fine. You're reaching some of those triggers where they're happening in your bodily sense. If you can't get it exact, don't worry about it. It could be an overall sense of 'not much room here', 'over-alert' or 'edgy'. These senses may be not specific to locations.

They can be overall bodily senses. You touch them and you breathe through them, and it allows the system to reorganize itself around the involuntary quality of stresslessness. Then things begin to melt.

When things begin to melt, what occurs may be a sudden sense of relief, but it's probably more likely to be a feeling of disorientation. Perhaps some of the emotional patterns that are in there begin to unfold and we feel sad, exhausted or whatever. Often people want to crash out. They think, 'Why don't we just have a sleeping retreat?' I think there are retreats set up like that. You learn to rest a lot, which could be a great idea. Here is a bed and every now and then someone comes around with a glass of mango juice, 'Are you all right, dear?' They offer you a little foot massage if necessary and you gurgle. That may work to a degree at a symptomatic level, but if you want to get some understanding of how to release these patterns, then it's better to stay in a meditative state without massive amounts of stress, attuned to your spine – even if you are lying down – alert but open, switched on with no particular program. You want to fully feel what is being felt.

As your awareness spreads through your body and even into the space around you, ask yourself, 'How is that?' Is your awareness happening around you? Maybe your nerve endings or your signalling system is *sensing* what's around you. Every creature does that, and we can do the same thing if we allow ourselves to do so. You can feel at the edge of your skin and the periphery of the body: 'What's around me? Is there anything here that I need to organize or get done? How am I being seen?' What if there's nobody looking or what's looking at us is benevolent and admiring – the Buddha? What would that be like? You can play with these perceptions.

The entire body system can come to what we call 'the natural state'. The path to it may take you through some rocky territory as things unfold, but it's extremely encouraging to recognize that this process

will occur with only a little effort, just what it takes to stay mindful in a very broad way, with no conclusion, no aim, no performance, no graduation, no marks, no certificates, no time boundaries. It will all start to unfold because it wants to. In a way, we have to hand it over to something that's intuitive and not controlled through our normal way of operating.

One of the things to frame up is the control system. How important control and organization are for us in our lives! We're driving a car, working on a problem, fulfilling a function and so forth. We control, organize and make sure everything is working in order to arrive at a result. This has a profound effect on our lives for a very long time. My father started working when he was fourteen and worked until he dropped dead at sixty-eight. He was in work-mode for fifty-four years and he basically died of stress.

The primary signals of 'I have to get it done! It's important! It's urgent! It's necessary! Get the right results! Make everyone else happy! Achieve!' are very easily switched on because our system responds easily to stress, to the danger of getting it wrong. We go on alert. Switching these signals off takes a bit longer; you have to check them out, feel them out. Because that signal of stress goes into your body – which then firms it up – you stay in that mode. So even if you sleep seven or eight hours at night, you're still not completely resting. Sometimes you can't even fall asleep because the body is still holding that signal in a subliminal way. You can't control your ability to control. If you think, 'I'd like to be in control of my control systems so that I can switch them off,' that's a control attitude. You can't control un-control. You have to allow – allow the chaos and find it safe, allow getting it wrong and find it safe, just sustaining that present awareness to allow things to happen.

We control a lot: our social behaviour, what's suitable, what's acceptable, what's polite, what's decent. It's happening a lot, but does it work? Yes,

control is necessary, but how can you undo it so that you can let the system rest? When we control, there's a certain activating, energizing, a tightening up that occurs with it. When you're doing abstract things such as developing ideas, work programs, schedules or goals, that's going to be held in your head and your eyes, which can become very tight, and that does not switch off. As most of us can recognize, the work is never finished: 'OK, I have today's quota done but tomorrow ... by the end of the week ... and let me think ... the way it's going now, perhaps by next weekend I could relax. But how am I going to get that done?' And you go to bed with these thoughts. The stress is still there; you're still on alert. When you wake up in the morning, maybe you have a cup of coffee, toast and a bowl of cereal, most likely with the drive of 'getting the thing done'. So you've hardly even stopped! The work is a very strong program. There's nothing inherently wrong with earning a living but when the criteria tighten up, they become less tolerant and more abstract. You're then operating in a completely inorganic way and that's more stress on the system. You keep upping the stress quotas to the point where it becomes absurd.

A man I knew had been feeling really tired, exhausted, sick and nauseous. When he became so bad that he couldn't go to work any more, he went to the doctor and asked to take a week off work. He didn't know what was wrong with him. The doctor said, 'Come back in three days' time, when we have examined these samples.' When the man came back the doctor told him, 'I'm afraid I have to tell you that you need to go into a hospital for ten days or so in order to do more tests because it looks like you have a serious form of pelvic cancer and might only have two weeks left to live.' The man replied, 'But I only took a week off work!' ... as if he were thinking, 'I can't laze around in a hospital and die! I only took a week off work!' Imagine you know you only have two weeks left to live and only took a week off work ... and have this kind of reaction!

When I look in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, I don't think people at the time of the Buddha were operating like that. They may have been farmers or merchants so they didn't have this huge amount of stress to unpack. Nowadays, we really believe in numbers and that makes us disembodied; we go very abstract. It's a common enough observation. It was particularly so in the early days when some Westerners went to Thailand to train in the forest monasteries. A lot of the Thai monks had been village men, farming and tending buffaloes. They were in their bodies because that's what their lifestyle was about. They couldn't believe how clumsy these Westerners were. They were constantly stubbing their feet on roots of trees, walking into spider's webs and bashing their heads on low-hanging branches. They were thinking, 'How can these people be so utterly stupid?' and the Westerners were thinking, 'I'm trying to be mindful as I walk!' They thought mindfulness is something you do with your mind, which is up in your head, so to really be mindful, you want to screw this head up tight so you know what you're doing. But then you go out of your body; you're not fully embodied.

When Ajahn Amaro was an anagārika he had to chop some firewood with a machete, so he held the wood between his feet and thought, 'I'll be really mindful.' He took a sweep of the machete and he slashed his foot. One of his toes has been permanently affected since. The Thais could not believe how anybody could do something so utterly stupid and 'be really mindful' in doing it! They were somewhere between shock and humour. We haven't really operated through our bodies properly, so all our mindfulness is up in our heads; that's where we live.

Some people hold the idea that mindfulness or awareness should be collected onto one point. But when an ice skater is dancing with her partner, she's aware of the whole thing: her partner, her skates, her legs, the movement of her muscles, her hands and so forth. Everything is working together. The awareness is completely saturated, steeped

into the entire form. That can be a very ecstatic and happy experience, not stressful at all. And yet these champions had to practise again and again over many years to get their body to learn that.

To concentrate (in the sense of *samādhi*) doesn't mean to go up in your head, screw it tight and go unconscious in doing so. Particularly in traditional Buddhist countries, people think that if the mind is anywhere, it must be in the centre of the body. Sometimes they sense it in the heart, sometimes in the belly. This is where the GHQ is. We're sensing things through there and through the entire form. The experience of being there is a happy one, because those centres are directly connected, not to abstract thought, but to sensory contact and feeling: 'Oh look, there's no pressure. Nobody is bothering me. I'm in a safe place, I've taken refuge.' A sense of happiness comes from that.

Whereas if you're just thinking with your brain you will have these kinds of dialogues going on in your mind: 'I am in a safe place. I have taken refuge in the Buddha.' 'So what?' 'I did a good deed yesterday.' 'You shouldn't congratulate yourself! That's attachment, that's egotism!' 'Oh ... sorry.' 'Now remember you're a failure and you have to get it right.' 'Yes, I know that.' 'That experience you are having is not what you should be experiencing at all. You should be experiencing something other than what you are experiencing.' 'That sounds convincing.' 'So try harder. Screw it up a bit tighter!'

The movement towards collectedness starts when you recollect skilful states. You recollect feeling warm, being appreciated or you recollect the happy qualities of your generosity and your goodwill. You touch into these recollections and you let their signal run through your entire system. Then your body begins to relax and you feel fresh. The Buddha says that when the body is relaxed and fresh, the mind starts to feel happy. When the mind is happy in this way, internally happy, there is no need to make an effort to concentrate. It concentrates on

its own because it has somewhere comfortable to sit. Why would it go anywhere else? Unless you create a comfortable place, your mind is not going to sit down. Creating a comfortable place isn't exactly something we can dictate, but we can set up processes that begin to allow that to form. It's both voluntary and involuntary. We can ask ourselves, 'Do I have enough faith and determination to open up and keep practising this very simple thing?' and then, 'Do I have enough faith to trust what's happening in its own bizarre way?' We look at whatever is happening with the perception that 'It's what should be happening' instead of 'It's wrong.' We let it change; we let it rest in impermanence, while feeling it in the body.

Instead of thinking, 'My mind is always wandering off to other things when it should be concentrating on the breathing,' could it be that, 'My mind is going through its unpredictable process of unpacking itself and it's doing exactly what it should be doing'? The mind is starting to go through those familiar areas of concern and keeps visiting them again and again, but instead of visiting them with a feeling of, 'Oh, don't! Stop doing that. Go somewhere else!' or just recycling the same concern, touch into it and investigate it: 'How is this? What's the real feeling with this? How could this be sensed?' Look at it in body metaphors, in terms of pressure, space, threat or need. Instead of looking at it with the thought, 'I have such-and-such a psychological issue' – which *could* be true – rather, sense it from the body's way of sensing things. What's happening in your body? Maybe it doesn't feel safe or it doesn't feel it has any ground underneath it. It may feel teetering or pressed. You don't have to locate a particular area, but it may be that some part of your body does seem more heightened, perhaps your chest or your face. Whether that's a general sense or a more localized sense, you're touching it, breathing in, breathing out and gradually opening to it. This is the process of clearing. It's partly decisive and partly random.

You wouldn't be able to construct some of these patterns of experience. Sometimes you don't even know them yourself, so you're clearly not

doing them. You didn't decide, 'Let me think ... I'll get really tired and exhausted.' It just opens up, doesn't it? How much control do we have? On a certain behavioural level, when it becomes functional, we have a reasonable degree of control: we can drive a car, write, read and organize. We could say that the external, functional level is under our control. But the closer we get to the real business, the less we have decisive control. Could you stop worrying? Sometimes you can't sleep. You can't even control that. You can't simply decide, 'I will be happy. I will forgive others. I will not have jealousy.' It would be nice, wouldn't it? But it doesn't happen like that. The closer you get to the real business of where you are, the less say you have over it.

We can control what we say. Sometimes we don't, but we can have some say over that. We can learn to write, but sometimes our handwriting is scrawling all over the page. We have a reasonable degree of control in driving a car, but even that's not complete. We can forget, we can slip, we can make a mistake, we lose attention, the car breaks down. How much decisive control do we have in our life? Can you say, 'I will get to work on time?' No, because you could be stuck in a traffic jam, the bus could break down, you could slip on the street and break your ankle – a hundred and one things could happen. You can't decisively say what will happen; you can just set up an intention.

In meditation, one thing you need to learn is knowing what you *can* do. What can be done, do it fully, completely, slowly, carefully and fully sense it out. If it's sitting up, do that. If it's having a meal, just do that, be there with that. What you don't need to do, don't do it. Don't think about the future if you don't need to. Don't remember the past if you don't need to. Anything you can switch off, do so. You don't need to be nice to people, just don't violate them. You don't have to smile and look happy for everybody. Don't bother. You can be as miserable as you like. It's a great relief, isn't it?

Simplify what you need to do, do it thoroughly with full awareness and recognize what you don't need any more. Some of the stuff doesn't switch off easily, so try to keep putting your energy thoroughly into what *can* be done and gradually things will shift. As you regain normality, the *citta* begins to unfold and open. Its nature is wise, intelligent and balanced in the natural state. What are the qualities where our controls kick in? Fear is certainly one of them, along with threat, making things work, getting things right, being a nice person, achieving what I need to achieve, being liked and so on. You can sense these profound and ingrained things as they happen.

When we hear, 'Without clinging to anything in the world', we might think, 'I really have to stop clinging!' But how much say do you have over that? As I said, it's a very simple phrase but do we really know what that *upādāna* (clinging) refers to? Clinging sounds gross, but what actually happens is not gross at all. The five aggregates are described as 'the modes of experience affected by clinging'. They are 'clingable'. Now, using an analogy, planets have gravity, they pull things towards them. If you go into the gravitational field of one of these planets, it pulls you in. The aggregates are rather like that. They have the potential to pull in; they have a gravitational force. What happens when we perceive a form (*rūpa*)? There's some sense of 'There is the form and I'm here.' That already is the first degree of *upādāna* because what occurs is the sense of a separate self. Form attracts attention and if attention is attracted to it, then there's the sense of 'I'm here, that's there.' This is mild; it's functional.

When perception and feeling kick in, a little bit more energy happens: 'That's a nice-looking thing, I want one of those.' And as it happens, I become 'a needy person' or 'a hungry person'. That thing becomes 'very nice, desirable, absolutely necessary' so 'I want it.' Its gravitational force has increased through perception, feeling and *sañkhāra*, which are these impulsive habits: 'If I put my two quid on the table, I'll get

one of those.' Then you get it and think, 'Right ... so what? I have three of these in the drawer already. How did I do that?' It's just the force of gravity alone – clinging.

Some people are shopaholics. They like to go to the shopping mall and spend some money because they enjoy the feeling of, 'There it is. It's desirable. I'm about to get it. I have it.' Perception and feeling are subject to clinging. They arouse a particular energy that sets up the basis of desire, craving, need or want. That's a totally irrational experience; it rings in our nervous system. Most people have some degree of say over that, but sometimes – especially during the January sales – some people become very excited and think, 'Look! I'm going to save fifty quid!' They're going to spend two hundred quid to save fifty and they would trample other people down to get that special offer. People do this to each other. It's like a herd driven by an irrational instinct. Suddenly, the behavioural systems begin to melt under the effect of craving.

What does craving do? The object becomes luscious, desirable, cool, neat, necessary and so forth (I'm exaggerating of course) and my experience is feeling a bit depleted, so I think, 'How good that one would be!' or 'I really need this!' I see a model in the catalogue with a smiling face sitting on a chair with the desirable object. She looks totally blissed out. With this signal comes the thought, 'That lovely, glowing, luscious object is out there. I feel depleted. I want it.' This is *taṇhā* (craving). As soon as we have the object, it's no longer out there: it's here. I can't want it any more because I have it. The glow has gone and I still feel depleted.

What sets up the psychology is: 'What I don't have is full of lovely, glowing, good energy; what I am doesn't have it.' The more the mind follows the gravitational force of that habit, the more you spin into a sense of need and depletion. You don't feel good enough until you get the stars, the gold marks, the status, the approval, the degree and so

on. Once you have it, there is a kind of glow but then you start thinking about what else you could get. It transfers to something else. *Tañhā* is a state whereby a lot of the richness of your life is projected onto an object and leaves your presence. Your awareness then loses its intelligence, its richness, its joyfulness and all that juice flows out onto the objects around you. That's the effect of clinging and craving.

Extreme states of craving are called addictions and perhaps we all have mild addictions. People we would call 'addicts' feel extremely depleted and lost. They are repeatedly drinking, shooting up, going into porn or something or other, and they're still not feeling full enough of the joy juice. And yet they can't stop because they're in the pull of it. It's like they are in a black hole and it has an immense gravitational force. That's clinging. They don't decide to do it, it just takes over. But we can decisively begin to edge out of that. That's what restraint and renunciation are about. We're switching things off. It's a bit like going cold turkey when you deliberately switch off your mobile phone for the duration of the retreat. You may get the shakes for a text message but you can be with that. Then you come through the sense of depletion, nervousness or compulsiveness, and begin to enrich your awareness. This is the way we regain the fullness of being.

If you say, 'I shouldn't cling', you end up going back to the control system up in your head telling you how naughty you are and how you have really terrible habits. That system is not awareness. Awareness is not ideologies. You have to shift to full awareness, and sometimes the full awareness first touches into the sense of depletion or the not feeling full and joyful. You have to be aware of the rather uncomfortable pieces until awareness begins to sense something healthy, stable and begins to sense itself: 'There is awareness, there is *citta*.' Thus you abide independent of anything in the world of the five aggregates. It doesn't mean there aren't any aggregates, but you have the ability to experience them in a much more aware way. You notice the signals, the triggering, the pulls, the pushes, the comments.

For example, there is the perception of being late: 'I'm terribly late. Oh, disgrace, shame, shock, horror! I can't even get to the shrine room on time. How am I going to meditate like this? Idiot, stupid, lazy, fool, failure! I'll disturb everybody! The teacher is there and he sees me. He's always on time. He disapproves of me because I'm so lazy, stupid and self-indulgent, always having a kip after breakfast.' It was only two minutes late! It's all right. Learn to be late, but don't deliberately be late! You can't all go through the door at the same time; it's not big enough, so somebody has to come in last, feeling, 'Oh, I'm last. I'm going to move the cushion and disturb all these people.' Check out your perception of other people. Who are these other people? Who is looking at you? Who is commenting on your posture? Who is commenting on how much food you eat? Who is commenting on how you do the chore? You know who it is! It's not other people, is it? That's called 'projection'.

When there isn't an object of clinging, we create one. The subject and the object are created by clinging and perception. If there isn't anybody, I can create somebody who disapproves of me. That isn't a choice; nobody would want to do that. That's the effect of clinging. So we come back to the basic experience of, 'Here I am getting it wrong ... feeling my body ... getting it wrong ... breathing out ... getting it wrong ...'. There's a very different set of intentions that occur from established awareness. Instead of the habitual negative reactions, you start to feel some of the signals: 'I'm getting it wrong, therefore I need encouragement', 'I'm getting it wrong, therefore I need to be given a little more time', 'I'm getting it wrong, therefore I need just a little more kindness', 'I'm getting it wrong, therefore I need to trust my ability to learn', and you refuse to send a different kind of signal. Then you begin to question: 'What is *wrong* anyway? Who are other people?' These experiences can be very difficult.

There was a young man who became a monastic at Chithurst and he had to be in the corner with his back against two walls on either side to be able to sit in a room with other people – even in a sangha

meeting of about sixteen people. That was as much as he could handle. Clearly, as much as he tried, community life wasn't something he could manage. The sense of 'other people' was irrationally terrifying, nerve-racking, and there was history to back that up. Now I'll give you another example of one of our devoted Thai supporters. We offered her a kuti in the forest so that she could have some time on retreat, and she replied, 'That would be very nice. Can I bring my friend?' – because for her being on her own doesn't feel nice; it's so nice to be with a friend. So how are we going to organize this monastery? For some people, the idea of being on your own feels a bit bleak and lonely, for other people the idea of being with somebody else is terrifying or awkward. What's happening? There are different signifiers of what 'other people' means. Generally speaking, in village communities, where people have learned to live as extended families, running around, sharing each other's houses and so forth, being with other people is pleasant, comfortable and fun. For other people who have been in war zones or are severely traumatized, being with other people is nerve-racking.

At Chithurst, we built this very nice Dhamma hall with plenty of space and we sit and meditate in there. Some people think, 'Great! Now we don't have to be in our room hearing people walking down the corridor and so forth.' But some monks who live in a kuti in the forest would tell me, 'Oh, I don't like to be in a hall with other people. I feel more comfortable on my own.' I would reply, 'OK, fine, go out to your meditation hut.' Then I would see them at teatime, sitting around and chatting with people, so I would say, 'I thought you wanted to be alone!' and they would reply, 'Well, I'm just having a chat.' In this case, the difficulty is not just about being alone, it's about being somewhere which represents form, formality or an organization. We can feel over-formalized being with other people in that situation. When we sit around and have a cup of tea together, 'other people' suddenly become a form of friendship and company. So 'other people' are not people, they are signals.

As a *mettā* practice, try to feel the impression that everything immediately around your body is spacious, open, warm and friendly. Feel that in your arms, your chest, your face and your belly. Perhaps you can imagine you're sitting in a warm bath or on a sunny beach. Play with it. How does that feel? These experiences are very much bodily signals. We may have psychological interpretations of them and emotional responses, but the primary thing is what the body senses.

Clinging can't be undone completely just through clarity and intentionality, but it can't be undone without them. You use clarity and intentionality to come into the place where clinging can undo itself, and that place is in the embodied state, breathing in and breathing out. We can all do this practice. If we couldn't do it, it wouldn't have been taught, and because we struggle with it, it needs to be taught and encouraged.

Some of the maps presented in the suttas can be very daunting. In the map, you can move from the beginning to the end in a few minutes, but when you start your practice at point A, it may take quite a while before point B begins to open. The way I recommend practising is to stay with what you know, what you can do, until there's an opening. At some point, the breathing is completed and long. Then it's calming down and becoming much briefer and quieter. Then you can sense your whole body as a unified thing, rather than bits and pieces stuck together. You look for these openings as they come in, and you incline towards them, but you don't try to push from one stage to the next.

Before you practise *ānāpānasati*, recollect, feel comfortable. Really get the sense of refuge. Look at those 'getting it right' and 'getting it wrong' messages. Start to unhook those workaholic 'I have to get it done by Friday' messages. Really look at those 'I'm not as good as somebody else' messages, and breathe through them, feel your body independently of them. The body in itself is independent of them, but

we don't often feel the entirety of the body. When the entirety of the body is felt, is sensed, then your breathing will come through and you can pick it up. There's a gradual unfolding which doesn't support the sense of the controlling self. It's a sense of relaxation, subtle joy and happiness. This is why it's for our welfare.

One-Pointedness

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED

ON THE MORNING OF 27 NOVEMBER 2014.

Wisdom is one of the great blessings of the *citta*. True inner happiness is a lovely quality which allows the *citta* to unfold and be free from anxiety, criticism, doubt, anger and so forth. As the *citta* unfolds, its wisdom capacities become more available, more revealed. You can imagine the *citta* as something that gets contracted, distracted and tangled up. Even when it's excited, it doesn't have the deep, comfortable happiness of this process of practice we're going through.

First of all, we establish our foundation and maintain our faith. The *citta* is able to do that. We have a certain faith and determination, the confidence that we can be here and it's going to be for our welfare. Even though at times it's going to feel difficult and painful, or confusing and pointless, we persevere with faith and determination – not in a jaw-grinding way, but by steadily reminding ourselves, 'Don't believe in that mood. It arose: you weren't permanently in this mood. Because it's arisen, it's going to pass.' If you were happy you wouldn't be worrying about being in this state, would you? But when you feel unhappy, you worry about it. Happiness and unhappiness arise and pass. We're not always happy; we're not always unhappy.

Happiness has many features and faces. The deeper happiness of serenity comes from faith and confidence and is associated with clarity of realization; it is enhanced by the skilful process of practice that we're in. The *citta* spreads over the experience; it spreads over the moods and the mind-states. Wisdom is not just intellectual knowledge. It's the capacity for constantly assessing, 'How is this?' It wants to get a sense of how something really is. And then, having assessed how it is, there

may be the arising of thoughts like, ‘What’s needed is this’ or ‘What’s helpful is this’ or sometimes you don’t know: you need to wait and test a few things.

Making less, clearing away, discarding what’s not necessary, firming up what is helpful: this is the ongoing process that we call ‘meditation’. This is what leads to collectedness (*samādhi*). What is not necessary? That which tangles, agitates, leads away and doesn’t settle. What is helpful? That which enables the *citta* to settle, to unfold. It has to settle down to be able to unfold. What does that? Patience and skilful relationship. We’re not forcing, we’re not hanging back; we’re not pushing forward, we’re not dithering. Or if we are, we’re trying to stop doing that.

Wisdom supervises the practice, and the result of supervising wisely is that wisdom develops. As wisdom increases, happiness becomes deeper. The wise and completely unfolded *citta* is resplendent. In the suttas it says that one abides with a great *citta*, a *citta* ‘abundant and exalted’.⁵⁰ The *citta* of a Tathāgata is even described as ‘measureless’. You can’t get any angle around it, it’s completely open. What does that mean? We can notice what the contracted *citta* is like: it’s tight and continually fragmenting into, ‘I should be ... Why? ... Who? ... What’s happening now? ... What do they say about that? ...’. It’s contracted and it’s broken up into fragments that often contend and compare with each other. A thought quarrels with an emotion. An emotion objects to a thought. An emotion wants to hang on; a determination wants to get rid of it. There’s this kind of clashing of mental factors, of mental experiences. It’s like when you fold up a sheet into a clump and one bit of the sheet is quarrelling with the other bit: ‘Get out of here!’ When you have this tangled-up ball, it looks like many separate forms with creases in between them, and you want to try and get rid

50. Majjhima Nikāya 106.3, and see Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.100 for the imperturbability of the developed mind.

of those creases. How do we try and get the cloth so it feels clear and unified? Well, let's try and press it a bit more firmly so that it will come into one shape. Or, what about if we spread it out so that all the lumps and all the creases disappear? The Buddha used an image to illustrate this: it's like stretching out the hide of a bull.⁵¹ First it's all twisted and tangled, then you stretch it out until it's refined and smooth. This is the process of emptying out all the inner boundaries, contradictions and dissonances; the *citta* is made vast through this.

This process leads towards the unified experience: what we call *samādhi*, collectedness or concentration. But the processes that take us to that are not just one thing. There's a variety of factors coming together and wisdom supervises all of it. When is the time for relaxing? When is the time for exerting? When is the time for gladdening the mind? When is the time to restrain the mind? – 'Don't go there, come back here', 'Put that down.' When is the time to soothe the mind? – 'You really don't need that, you know.' And like calming a frantic dog, the mind doesn't calm down at just one word. You have to stroke it time and time again, talk to it, give it something nice to eat, and then it begins to settle down. This is the way you train the wild *citta*.

We can illustrate the training of the *citta* with two elephants: the wild forest elephant and the tamed elephant. In order to tame the wild elephant, the tamed elephant is taken out into the jungle. It goes up against the wild elephant, strokes it with its trunk and soothes it. Then they go back together. In other words, the skilful aspects of mind such as wisdom, faith and confidence don't reject the unskilful aspects but actually recognize, 'We're of the same kind; this too is a mind-state, this too is an aspect of mind: this is the dissonant mind, this is the jealous mind, this is the complaining mind, this is the frightened mind ...'. And instead of having one bit fighting against the other, the

51. Majjhima Nikāya 121.5.

skilful mind receives the unskilful mind and begins to soothe it, calm it and straighten it. We have to take in unskilful states as they arise in the *citta* and work with them. We ask ourselves, ‘What’s needed here?’ Wisdom knows when it’s time to firm the mind, to encourage it, to relax it, to calm it, to love it, to gladden it and to rest it.

The descriptions of the results of practice apply to both the body and the mind: they are malleable, pliable, light, fit for work and strong; they’re not bowed down or heavy. You train the mind just like you train the body, so it becomes fit. Then you can work it. The Buddha sometimes likened this process to taking a lump of rock with gold in it.⁵² First you melt it down; then you repeatedly blow on it and skim off the dross until you finally end up with very pure gold. Then you can make whatever you like with it: beads, ornaments, etc. This process is about putting aside what isn’t necessary. First, we have to recognize that every lump of rock has gold in it – when it comes down to the human being. So we ask ourselves, ‘What helps to melt?’ We never give up on ourselves: we hold the whole of it with faith, kindness, goodwill and right intent.

This is how we work, but one doesn’t want to make it sound too frantic because it can be a slow process of working. Wisdom will tell you, ‘Now is the time: I am settled to this extent, I have enough space in this respect – there’s a space within my breathing where I feel settled.’ Don’t wait until everything is completely settled because it isn’t going to happen! You have to find the flecks of gold within the rock; then you attend to them and begin to work them out. The *citta* will unfold in that process.

When you feel a skilful mind-state such as confidence, happiness, loving-kindness, ease or compassion in your *citta*, sense how the breathing is then. Don’t make a particular effort to breathe; just stay

52. Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.101.

in touch with the breathing in a skilful mind-state. The quality of the breathing is not something you have to *do*: it just happens. And if you stay with the skilful mind-state, it will carry that quality into you. It will spread. As it spreads it helps the *citta* to unfold. This is the relationship between body and mind. As the body can unfold, the *citta* can unfold. The breathing is the vehicle for doing that. First we need a little bit of open *citta*, a heart that's not seized up, then we follow that and use it to sense our breathing – so the two come together. We stay with that quality and breathe into it. The *citta* will then spread and unfold. This is the unfolding of the *citta* through the body. Then, of course, the breathing itself receives the effects: it becomes brighter and stronger. This relationship between body and mind is everything.

Sometimes you lead with the body: when you feel angry or upset you just sit down on the ground or walk up and down until some of that rage has dissolved. Sometimes you lead with the mind: you bring up the memory of a person who was kind and gracious to you or the person you love, and you take that into your body. This is *samādhi*. It means bringing disparate pieces together. We so often believe that the mind is separate from the body and is going to get on top of it all and make the practice work – and we try to practise from that basis. That's not relationship. First of all, we need to meet ourselves, then we investigate: 'Where is the strength? What are the skills?'

Walking meditation is a very dominant practice in forest monasteries, partly because of the heat. When it's hot, you can become sleepy easily and lose energy. Walking meditation energizes; it's one of its features. Being with the whole movement of the body gives energy and you can stay within that for an hour or two. Sometimes people do three or four hours, or even non-stop walking. By feeling the rhythm and the movement of the body, the *citta* begins to come out of its restlessness and distractedness. You don't have to squeeze it into shape: it slowly picks it up. There's a certain steadfastness when you commit to an hour

or so of walking, or an hour or so of sitting. But you do that from the place of, 'I'm up for this.' You lead with confidence, with faith. You lead from your strength rather than pushing yourself into it. Wisdom leads, cultivates and supports everything. It collects everything and discards what's unnecessary, and that naturally leads to *samādhi*, collectedness or unification.

In the Buddha's presentation, both in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, we might note that there isn't a description of 'concentrating'; there isn't a 'holding the mind on to a point'. There is an expression 'one-pointedness' but it's presented as a result rather than an approach. In the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, the Buddha says, 'Mindfully one breathes in, mindfully one breathes out. One discerns (*pajānāti*) one is breathing long; one discerns one is breathing short.' There's an assessment occurring: one discerns it's short, one discerns it's long; one trains oneself. We're actually one-pointed on this intention to train in that way. It's one-pointedness of *intention*, rather than one-pointedness of *attention*, that leads to one-pointedness as a result. You're not necessarily focusing on a particular spot, although that may be a skilful means; you can find a place where you're feeling the best quality of your breathing and stay there. Later in the sutta it says: '*Sabba-kāya-ṭṭhisamvedī*' which means 'experiencing the entire body'. Where is the one-pointedness? You're one-pointed on one aim, which is to thoroughly feel your entire body. Do you see the difference?

You may find it helpful to locate where you feel your breathing the strongest: maybe it's in your belly, your chest, your head, your throat or your nose. Find out where the mind feels comfortable, where it tends to naturally sit. As your attention sits there, you begin to receive something quite dynamic and flowing. You don't want to crush that by gripping too tightly. The point of attention is an open point through which things pass. Sometimes the image is used of someone turning wood on a lathe: he has his eyes on this particular place where he has

his chisel. If he wanted to look at the wood, his gaze would be going round and round. But he is actually looking at an area through which the wood turns. If he wants to really look at the wood, he has to switch the lathe off and hold it steady. But in your practice, you actually want to keep your mind focused with a certain openness to allow a dynamic process to flow through.

Wisdom supervises our attention and gives rise to a helpful sense of where and how we want to focus. In a way, it doesn't really matter. I often encourage people to get to know what breathing actually is by feeling the complete flow and movement of it through the body, because we don't necessarily really take in the fullness of what breathing is as an experience: the happiness of it, the ease of it, the involuntary quality of it. We can overdo our attention and tighten up. You want to simply experience the fullness, the full length of the breath. As your mind settles a bit and becomes calmer, the breathing becomes shorter and calms down. You're feeling that, assessing that. 'Sensing the entire body' doesn't mean that your mind is skipping around to your fingers and your toes. Rather, as your mind settles down, it's like being in a centre of a communications network where you have these nerve endings or wires, and you're picking up signals from all over the body. You don't run around to this place and that place; you stay where you are and you feel what you can through the entire body. This is unified and one-pointed in that respect. The mind is settling down.

The next step in the practice of *ānāpānasati* is '*passambhayaṃ kāya-saṅkhāraṃ*'. '*Passambhayaṃ*' means calming or soothing – just like you're stroking something gently to soothe it. It's not numbing, blocking or suppressing. We're looking at an organic system here. We're not belting something into shape, but rather soothing a living system into a rest state, soothing the entire experience of body. The body-formation (*kāya-saṅkhāra*) refers to the dynamic that gets you breathing: the energy behind the breathing. It might be jerky, snappy

or flaccid, or it could be shuddering, gasping or flapping around in your chest. You want to smooth it out so that there's a regular, easeful breathing. You're feeling the full, complete release of the out-breath and you're not in a hurry to pull one in. Then, you're feeling the end of the in-breath, the moment when things seem to hover before the out-breath starts. You're fully sensing and soothing, calming, steadying. The energy is easeful.

The word '*pajānāti*' is similar to '*sampajañña*'. I use the Pali because it's quite distinct as to what particular kind of wisdom is being used. In this case, it's a directed, sensing, feeling type of wisdom: one is witnessing or knowing the arising, changing and passing of bodily states – the experience of body. One may sense the elements of the body, the energies or the pressure in the body, or even an overall sense of what the body is. One may sense certain qualities in the body shifting or dissolving. Sometimes the body can feel very open and spacious, sometimes it feels rigid and rusty. This is what is called 'the body within the body'. We're touching into the breathing behind and through all that experience of body.

The first realization touched into in the fourth tetrad of the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* is 'One abides contemplating change' – the changeability, the shifting, evanescent and ephemeral nature of whatever is manifesting. Instead of trying to hold a particular sensation, you open up to allow the sensations and energies to change, the experience of body to shift. When we're looking at the body – not the visual one but the direct, here-within-you experience of body – it doesn't necessarily change between dichotomies like day/night or pain/pleasure. Instead, every feeling within it flows and is vibrating, pulsing. It may be painful but the pain comes in waves or pulses. You might feel it running down your leg and up again or moving around. You abide contemplating change, changeability – *there* is the one-pointedness: staying at that place and witnessing change. This kind of one-pointedness gives rise to dispassion

(*virāga*) because you're not taking a stand, you're not reacting. This is what leads the mind to unfold, to release. The relationship of antagonism to feeling changes; the relationship of infatuation with feeling changes. The relationship to feeling shifts from 'want/don't want' to 'it arises/it passes.' Then one's faith and confidence increase.

As one's confidence increases, one's inner happiness increases. It doesn't become more bubbly; it becomes smoother and deeper. It's not excitement but a happiness of well-being: soothed and contented. Because of this, the *citta* becomes subtler and more able to distinguish the space element – the moments at the end of experiences, when a sensation fades out, when the breath pauses. The body feels lighter, a little more spacious and less compacted. The mind is spacious, less frantic and welded to experience, less gripped by it. You may wonder, 'How is it that the same kind of situation is happening, but I'm not getting the same immediate hit or reaction to it?' Dispassion leads to unfolding into spaciousness – we can trust this process.

When we become a little more spacious, we're able to discern subtler experiences that we thought were actually fixed, such as 'my opinions, my standards, my attitudes, what I need to do, who I am, what's wrong with me ...'. What is all that? Just more stress and tension, isn't it? How would it be to not have an opinion? Instead, we could just be open. Things that seem so structurally important for us – for who we are, for our integrity – are actually all just mental structures. Instead of believing in and following an opinion, we may find that there's something wiser and more open about simply noticing it come and go – even when we think it's a 'good' opinion. Having an opinion can be useful in its time, but does it have to be here all the time? Do we have to always take a stand and convince others of it? These very senses of identity can simply be experienced as a structure that is useful in its time and place, but not something you need to have all the time.

To take an example: boots are great, but you don't want to have boots on your feet all day long and all night as well. It's nice to be able to take them off, not because they're wrong or bad, but simply because you don't need them right now. We have to keep asking ourselves, 'What is not necessary?' When we say 'not necessary' it doesn't mean 'never again for the rest of my life', but just 'not at this time'. Right now, I don't need to think of the future or who I am, where I am, what I am, why I am, how I am, who I'm not, what I could be ... That very aim of seeking to find myself is stressful. I don't need to find myself, because I just am. When something seems very intimate, obsessive, difficult or important about *me*, when something makes *me* seem special and different – like my character – then we should put it aside and tell ourselves, 'Let's take a break!'

The mind, as it opens, is measureless: there's no definition, no identity, no naming itself. As the Buddha remarked, the world is lost in the tangle of names.⁵³ And we look for security in that world by defining ourselves: in having certain things we can place, find and register about *me*. Well, when that's necessary, then, make your identity a good one. But don't make it so obsessive that you have any old rubbish as your identity, just for the sake of having an identity!

What gives our mind the opportunity to open and be measureless is the ability to release the compulsion to compare ourselves with others – as being better, worse or the same as them. You don't throw the compulsion away; you release it, because you know that the quality of openness and space is actually much more delightful, supportive, beautiful, wise and happy than the tangled, contracted mind. That's the kind of movement that allows what's called 'ceasing'. You don't need to keep regenerating all these defective functions that nag you and beat you up all the time. It's enough!

As an experience, the understanding of impermanence reminds us that the practice is not about getting rid of anything, because everything is

53. Saṃyutta Nikāya 1.23 and 1.61.

in fact continually being regenerated. We reflect and consider: if the nature of phenomena is changeable, arising and passing, it means that what may seem to be a fixed state or a fixed problem or standard is actually something that's just regenerating. It's like when you switch the fan blades on, you suddenly seem to have a very solid circle. But when you switch the fan off, where did the circle go? Did you smash the circle? Did you throw it away? No, just by switching off the motor, the circle disappeared.

This is the nature of formations. They seem to be permanent because they are running down the same track. And the track seems to be permanent because it's held by certain assumptions and views, such as: 'I am', 'I need to be', 'I should be'. Because of that assumption 'I am', I need to fill the space with being something so that I feel I'm worthwhile, that I'm doing a useful job, making something of my life and getting somewhere. Underneath these perceptions there is no real substance at all, but simply a view – a wrong view – that takes deep penetration to relinquish. It's only relinquished when we have a deep happiness that replaces it. Then we don't need to know the future or 'who I am' any more. But as long as you do, focus on generating skilful factors such as virtue, loving-kindness and simplicity. If you're going to generate an identity, make it something that's made of good material. The process of practice doesn't really negate a self, it just relativizes it. That's what is meant by the word 'ceasing'. We don't regenerate the compulsive and addictive mental factors; we let them rest. What's called *paṭinissagga* (relinquishment) is the giving away of the limited view which is called 'self'.

The mind, really, is measureless. Awareness is measureless. Everywhere you go, there's awareness. You can't find an edge to it. According to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, we should not only bring our awareness to the body-states and the feeling-states, but also to the mind-states. The Buddha presents a synopsis of a whole range of them. We register or recognize,

'This is a mind affected by, measured by, defined by or covering the characteristic of aversion (for example).' When there is aversion, the mind is limited: it only sees things in terms of aversion. For its three-second duration or however long it is, it's experiencing things that are registered, limited and defined by aversion, and then another state arises. Mind-states have a characteristic, a definition, a measurement. They see things within a certain range, an emotional range. The Buddha also talks about the radiant mind as being limitless, really open. Our practice is 'knowing the contracted mind as the contracted mind', acknowledging the panoply of mind-states – of course, it doesn't mean you have all of them.

You're probably not harbouring a permanent, undying hatred: that kind of mind-state comes and goes. You acknowledge the transiency of mind-states and more deeply rest in that understanding. That is your one-pointedness. You rest in one-pointedness on wisdom. Don't give up on it. Be tenacious. This means you refuse to reject or adopt mind-states. Sometimes we are ready to see mind-states pass, but we don't want mind-states to arise, especially a wobbly or confused one. But it can't pass until it has arisen. Once something has started to arise you can't say, 'I've changed my mind, go back!' You have to go through it; you can't push it back.

Once the feeling of frustration has arisen you can't say, 'I don't really feel like that' because, 'Yes, you do!' Whether it's justified or not, whether it fits your self-image or not, here it is! Stay steady within the body and open to the movement of frustration or disappointment. Contemplate it but don't keep feeding it with a thought. Just feel the raw quality of the emotional movement. If you keep adding another topic to it, then you are cooking up more of it, or keeping it going. You may have noticed that just as you get to the end of your upset, you start thinking, 'But! Another thing ...' or 'After all I've done!' or 'But I already said that anyway!' or 'He never said this!' You keep throwing a

little bit more wood into the fire as the flames go down. That's a habit to keep in check. If you open to the fullness of the frustration or the disappointment, hold it in your body and don't keep going back and feeding it, it will pass through. It has to come through and be felt, then it passes. And generally the passing gives rise to more compassion in the heart. When we have allowed ourselves to feel the fullness of an emotion as it rushes through, holding it in our body carefully so that it doesn't overflow, then it passes through.

Adding thinking, criticizing or more topics to it will prevent the fulfilment of that process; the emotion will come back again. That's what we notice in this cycling of experience: the worry or the fear comes back because we haven't really had enough space, enough embodiment, to handle it. Emotions can be extremely powerful; they blow us away. There's no point in getting blown away or overwhelmed by an emotion, so when you feel overwhelmed you have to carefully pause, turn your attention inwards, feel your feet, walk up and down until there's the capacity to allow the emotion to move through. Many of them are not that intense, but some may be. Wisdom needs to check: 'Is it the right time? Do you have the capacity to allow this to pass through?'

The growing development of that capacity is why and how we meditate. It takes a long time, but who's counting? After about forty years of meditation, I think I'm just getting to be able to experience my emotions more completely, without blaming them, feeling ashamed of them or dumping them on somebody else. It's only forty years! Forty years could be a finger-snap; it depends what you're carrying. And because you don't know what you're carrying, there's no point having a clock around this one. You just know when it's finished: the triggers occur but the fire doesn't get going. Maybe you see that kind of warming-up and you think, 'What's that? That's really pretty annoying! I could go there ... but I don't think I'll bother!'

One-pointedness is really a faith in oneself. If we keep quarrelling with ourselves, we're not going to allow the process to come through. You have the wisdom to know what would help. Is it wise to sit, to stand, to walk or to recline? Where are your faculties ripening? Where does the confidence ripen? Where does the joyfulness ripen? Where does the clarity ripen? Can you firm it up? That's one-pointedness: one-pointedness on freedom, on liberation, on meeting yourself. You can employ a whole range of skills to fulfil this process of 'purification of beings' – and not the *eradication* of them!

As we see in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, 'One knows the collected mind as the collected mind; one knows the scattered mind as the scattered mind.' We might think, 'So, what do I do about it?' It doesn't seem we're doing anything about it, apart from knowing it. In a way, it's not just what the sutta says that's awesome, it's also what it *doesn't* say. For example: 'He knows the mind affected by ill-will. He worries about the mind affected by ill-will. He feels guilty about the mind affected by ill-will; he wonders what he should do about feeling guilty about the mind affected by ill-will. He blames other people for the mind affected by ill-will; he feels guilty about blaming other people out of a mind affected by ill-will ...'. No, the Buddha just says, 'He knows the mind affected by ill-will.' The more we can terminate some of those knock-on effects, the proliferations (*papañca*), the clearer and cleaner the process is going to be. Unfortunately we do proliferate, so we check, 'What is the bit that I can chip off – the proliferations?' And what helps that is returning to compassion and goodwill, again and again. Gradually, we allow the melting of the past.

The first enlightenment factor is mindfulness. Then there is investigation: one discerns and enquires – that's a wisdom factor. Wisdom carries many different faces and many different hands. It holds attentively and discerns: 'Why is this? Who is this? Where did this come from? Once it arises, what are the results of that?' Wisdom

stimulates energy, which is the third enlightenment factor. Energy comes because you know there's something purposeful to do. It's not a command to apply more effort. As you begin to see the relevance of the practice, your energy is kindled, your fire is lit (*ātāpī*). These are the dynamics of it.

Mindfulness, the True Monarch

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ON THE AFTERNOON OF 27 NOVEMBER 2014.

Mindfulness is sometimes likened to a monarch. This monarch is surveying, supervising, impartial, aware, connected. They are not pulling, not struggling, not trying to hold things, not arrogant. It is the true monarch – the true king or queen. The false monarchs are the inner tyrant who keeps bullying you and the braggart who becomes cocksure when they get a little bit of something good. Mindfulness doesn't want anything, it isn't interested in owning anything; it doesn't need that. It's a benevolent quality that is blessing everything. Mindfulness is established with equanimity as its tone: it's even. It's like a hand on the shaft of an umbrella, holding a safe and steady space in which all *dhammas* can be encompassed, settle down, firm up – or dissolve. This abiding in mindfulness sits in its confidence.

When we come to sitting, walking or standing practice, or in any other postures, we should have that sense of a carriage that has a quality of dignity, safety and assurance. It doesn't really matter what it looks like. What matters is what it feels like internally. Is there anything constricted or withdrawn? Can we open to that? Opening requires both a really good connection to the ground – the earth element, the sense of being grounded – and a clear and consciously acknowledged sense of benevolence around us.

When we are in a hostile, insecure or frantic environment, when people are quarrelling or fighting, we pick that up and that affects how we feel. Now that you are in a harmonious environment, acknowledge

it and sense how you feel. Most of us don't know that feeling because the world doesn't provide many harmonious situations. So you have to generate it: whatever the world is doing, you're living in *your* harmonious environment. There's a boundary, 'Let no harm come here.' The wise monarch has that authority. Feel the front of your body, the back, the face, the throat and so forth. Get a sense of that. You stay focused internally and don't go somewhere else. The experience of the body can change into something quite bright and clear.

The assured monarch has no need to run after or catch anything, no need to become anything. They know their place. When you sit, as if in your own court, other things can come, such as the body and the breathing; mind-states can arise, but you're not rushing after them. If they try to push you, come back to that centre in your body, into your confidence. It's an embodied wisdom centre. Everything else is just weather passing over.

The practice of sustaining that centre is to bear in mind that this image of the true monarch is not a personal identity. If you move off the throne, you're no longer it. It's as immediate as that. If you start chasing something or running away from things, you have lost your seat. All those forces and energies that wash over and rush against you are the host of Māra. You don't have to take issue with them. They're working themselves out. In a way, you simply hold a blessing attitude and let whatever is there find its way. When confused, fearful, angry or doubting energies come, let them find their own way, let them go, let them pass, let them be in peace. You don't fight with anything. You don't fear anything. As long as you hold that seat, you can maintain authority. If you move off it, you lose it.

It's very important to know that seat. This is the place of resolution where the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree. It's not something you can feel as a sensation. It's where sensations stop, but it's awake. It's

something like a silence or a stillness; there is no particular feeling. There's a sense of inner space which is not spacey. It's aware of the delightful, the esoteric, the refined and the coarse alike as *change*, and it's giving a kind of blessing to them, letting them be the way they are.

If you feel you can't maintain that balance within yourself, then use one of your primary supports. It could be sensing the upright structure of your body or setting your heart straight with loving-kindness. What is your strong force? What is your strongest meditation ally? Use that to take a rest on. When you're cultivating the sitting position, really inhabit your body: either its physicality (the sensations, the textures) or its energies, which are often associated with emotional traces. If you're looking for steadiness, you need to step back from the energies of the body. Instead, go towards the simple sensations like the pressure of your body sitting on the ground, the quality of the spine or the skeletal structure. You can also return to the ground of goodwill, kindness or compassion (towards yourself or towards others) or to the ground of faith in the Buddha, using an image or the recollection of his qualities. You use your allies so that your heart can easily find a stable place.

In a retreat situation we are holding a special space, a rare place, so we need to hold it very carefully. You may feel quite happy and comfortable; it does not mean everyone else is happy and comfortable. You may feel relaxed and at ease; it does not mean everyone is relaxed and at ease, so be sensitive to the needs of others. One thing we are really encouraging is the quality of silence, deep silence – not a silence of disregard but a silence of respect. Sound carries such emotional tones for us and strangely enough, even benevolent sounds in a sensitive state can feel intrusive – and as we all know we can become quite sensitive in these retreat situations. It really is our responsibility to make an effort to be restrained and to hold an attitude of respect of each other's consciousness – and it's helpful when we can acknowledge that from everyone.

Hindrances and Enlightenment Factors

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ON THE MORNING OF 28 NOVEMBER 2014.

At the beginning of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the Buddha refers to the four establishments of mindfulness as being the direct, undeviating path for the attainment of the true way, for the disappearance of sorrow and grief (*dukkha*), and for the realization of nibbāna. We may gloss over these terms but it's helpful to consider them and give them some directed and applied thoughtfulness.

Often we try to 'attain nibbāna' or something we call nibbāna, but that way of speaking is inaccurate: we don't *attain* nibbāna, we *realize* it – we attain the way. These two terms have some overlap, but they're not entirely the same. There's a different quality of *citta*. 'Attaining' is something we feel definitely: 'This is it. I have it. I own it. I'm with it. Here I am on the direct way.' That's not nibbāna. Nibbāna is the end of the way. There's nobody on it, so it's a realization. Realization is a complete, holistic opening of the *citta*. The forms that encouraged us, disappointed us and challenged us, have all dissolved, just like the creases in a cloth when you spread it out, just like the folds in a map as you flatten it out. All those terrible troughs, all those wonderful peaks, are now dissolved: this is the realization of nibbāna. We rather like peaks and we dread troughs, but they all can be opened out and freed. Every peak is followed by a trough, I assure you. How can it be any other way?

What is 'the disappearance of *dukkha*'? *Dukkha* means suffering or stress, and all its subtler forms. I am suggesting that there's a process

which leads to its disappearance: an unfolding of that which can unfold, that which can open. What can do that? When you say, 'I opened to something,' what opened? It's this holistic sense, isn't it? Perhaps your thoughts paused, your directed energies relaxed, your fears disappeared, your holding back wasn't there, your defensiveness wasn't there, your sense that you have to hurry up and get it done wasn't there. When those mental factors disappear something seems to unfold: a greater receptivity and full awareness. There's less drag and drive or perhaps no drive: just a steady, open state. What can do that is the *citta*.

How do you sense the open *citta*? Instead of verbalizing the experience, try to understand it as it happens, to any degree. When does that become possible? When you feel safe, steady, trusted and there's no particular thing you have to get to, if you can fully pause in that moment and take it into your body, be awake but relaxed at the same time, doesn't it happen by itself? Yes and no, because it's easier said than done. In some way something in us still holds on, sinks, spins around, gets fretful, desperate, haunted or driven. How do we touch into these areas that are confused, out of control and coated with ignorance? How do we relieve or unburden them? According to the conventional Pali Canon, it happens through a process of undoing all that needs to be undone. That can sound negative and we may even wonder, 'What's left after all that undoing?' What's left is the *citta*, but we shouldn't hold it as an idea or as a state, because any name we give it will put some restriction on it. The Buddha lets it be; you will know it. It's there all the time, and if we really dwelt in the heart of it, with clear presence and intelligence, then the fetters would drop away.

The path, the fruitions or realizations of that way, are sometimes termed 'nibbāna', which means that something isn't happening. It's a verb: something is not burning, not firing, not revving up. Nibbāna is called 'the undoing', 'the blowing out', 'the cooling': something is

stopping. We can also express it with the word ‘Deathless’, which is an affirmative and refers to the completed *citta*. This gives us a little more of a positive slant on it. We tend to think nibbāna means that everything has to stop: it’s the annihilation, destruction, end of everything and we’re just empty shells floating in a void – that’s extremism. Another way of taking it is that we’re all going to be communing in some deathless state, having a ‘knees-up’ somewhere in Buddhist heaven – that’s eternalism. In both cases we are looking at it in the wrong way. We’re looking at it as if it were something personal; we take it as an emotion, as a thought or as a form of some kind. Yes, something has to stop: suffering does; and something has to arise and be firmed up: awareness does.

To me, the four *satipaṭṭhāna* seem to work as a map. It’s a complete map: not just a map of the terrain, but also a map of what your legs are doing as you are walking on the path. The first three domains of body, feelings and mind-states are things we place our attention on, and the fourth domain of *dhammas* is what happens as we’re doing that. In other words, the first three domains are the territory and the last one is describing the kind of effects that occur as we cross this terrain: whether we feel exhausted or inspired, and how strong we feel – whatever the *citta* is experiencing. We use the metaphor of ‘path’ or ‘way’, meaning there is a progression here; it’s a movement. When you’re travelling, you have to know both your journey and your own strengths and limitations, and that requires a thorough attention.

The fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* deals with the processes that we come across as we are mindful of our body, mindful of feeling and mindful of mental states. We begin to notice things like ill-will and sense desire, which are called ‘hindrances’, ‘challenges’ or ‘obstacles’. This is the aspect of the folded-up *citta*: it’s tight, it fears, it’s confused, it needs, it wants, it has to have, it can’t stand for another minute, etc. It’s a very contracted state. It feels extremely painful. When we think, ‘I have to have something!’

our mind is filled with sense desire, and what we really mean is: ‘Because I have so little joy or juice in me, I have to have something to fill me up.’ I’m exaggerating slightly, of course. Another hindrance is the quality of torpor, when the mind contracts, loses vitality, slumps and shuts down. The mind can also be overcharged. It’s in a continual feedback loop, seized up in a hyper state. It’s restless, worried and it keeps conjuring up more things to worry about, more things to do. It’s an endless to-do-list that keeps reduplicating itself as you give it energy and attention.

The last hindrance is the sense of doubt, which is a lack of confidence. We think, ‘Why bother? Who am I? Does it matter? Is there anything? Is there nothing?’ This doubt is not just an intellectual lack of information, it’s a loss of faith and confidence in oneself. One doubts oneself profoundly and thinks, ‘There’s something wrong with me.’ And all the other hindrances confirm that: ‘You’re right!’ They all line up. The contracted *citta* is self-fulfilling. As it contracts, it believes in its contracted state of feeling inadequate, and because it’s holistic, it all folds in upon itself. In extreme cases, this doubt doesn’t just manifest as a wavering mind, it turns into deep depression. We might think, ‘What’s the point? I’m a failure. I can’t do anything right.’ When that really bottoms out, it’s not just a trivial spiritual affliction, it can be a vitality-threatening experience or even a life-threatening one. Nothing will do you as much harm as the contracted *citta*.

We also have what are called ‘the seven enlightenment factors’ (*bojjhaṅgā*). The first one is *sati* (mindfulness): the ability to stay present, to sense, to be aware of what’s going on without reacting to it, with a sense of ‘that’s *that*’. Being able to name the hindrances is a step towards mindfulness. For example, we can recognize, ‘This is ill-will’ and not dwell in thoughts like, ‘He’s such an idiot!’ He may be behaving like an idiot, but our direct experience is ill-will. We are taking in our own *citta*’s state. Other people may act in ways that are stupid, inconsiderate, abusive and so forth, but right now the first thing you have to deal with

is your own contractedness, otherwise you're going to respond to them with rage, insults or fear. If that contractedness relaxes, maybe you will find yourself wondering, 'Why did she do that? Maybe she ...'. You will be a bit more open and able to look at that situation with a clear mind. You will be able to see the projections and proliferations (*papañca*) that happen when the *citta* is contracted. They make us believe that there's a problem 'out there'.

You gradually build up a reference of the experience of ill-will – or any other hindrance – as something absolutely standard. It's a very simple concept: everybody has that, but we need to study it. Using mindfulness and investigation (*dhammavicaya*), which is the second *bojjhaṅga*, we look into the experience of a hindrance: 'How does it feel in the body? What does it rest upon? Is it resting on a particular perception?' A hindrance lands on a sense-base, like a sight, a sound or a touch, and, more significantly, it rests on a perception such as: 'He's such a bully' or 'She thinks so much of herself' or 'She took my seat! That was clearly my seat, and she took it!' We carry perceptions and these perceptions become people: 'There are some people in this room whose sole purpose in coming here was to deliberately take my seat!' I'm exaggerating here, but at that moment, that person becomes a 'seat taker'. You may even think that we deliberately bring 'professional sniffers' here or 'door bangers' or 'people who insist upon using the toilet in the middle of the night'!

You may then be bristling into rage or sinking into despair. All this movement is swinging around and you can contemplate that. The body and mind get into a contracted and flattened state, and in that state you can't see anything but the object of aversion. Most of your mind can be obsessed, with huge disproportion, about what one person said or did at one moment. For example, the other evening, when I was answering the questions some of you wrote, I looked at this particular question, said, 'Huh!' and put it down. The person who wrote that question might

have perceived this as dismissal and thought, 'He thinks my question is stupid! He thinks I'm an idiot!' That kind of reaction – in this case, ill-will – can become the overriding experience. But who knows what really happened? Maybe I just picked up the question and thought, 'That's a really good question, but it's better if I answer it tomorrow.'

Ill-will has two particular ways of operating. One is: 'I feel aversion towards others'; the other one is: 'People feel aversion towards me.' The latter is called the 'inner tyrant' or 'inner critic'. We imagine other people's perception of us and proliferate around that. Of course sometimes people do insult and abuse us. When somebody attacks you, you usually tighten up to defend yourself; and you can stay in that defended mode, without even recognizing it, because the body holds it as a constant pattern. It could even be that you're just defending yourself against lots of lights, noises and bangs, especially if you're in a city. When you're in a defended state, you feel tight and sense, 'There's ill-will around here. It must be from somebody else.'

There are times when we don't feel comfortable, we don't feel happy, we don't feel welcomed – basically, we don't feel open. There is anxiety, the sense of 'something is wrong or could be wrong or may be going wrong ... and I don't know what it is,' and we project that unconsciously. In the extreme, the defence becomes established as a particular pattern where you're defending yourself *against something*. People can get so used to that state that it feels strange to not have it, so the mind keeps throwing things in to keep it there. This is the inner tyrant. We get familiarized with slightly defended states: 'I'm all right. I'm doing my thing. I'm OK' or saddened ones: 'Am I OK here? I don't know.' Something keeps telling us, 'There's something wrong with you.' As you have probably seen, these retreat situations highlight and open up these qualities; you're criticizing yourself, criticizing others and so on. Even little things can trigger this inner critic.

For example, you come late to the morning *pūjā*. You're the last one in and you criticize yourself for being late: 'Everybody else hates me

because I am late. The teacher thinks I'm slow, slack, laggard, lazy and useless!' So the next morning, you get there on time and criticize yourself for being such an automatic conformist: 'You're just so concerned with conforming. You're just a sheep, aren't you? You're a sheep in a herd of other sheep!' The next morning, you decide to get there ten minutes earlier, before everybody else. Then you criticize yourself again: 'You're such a goody-goody, aren't you? You think you're better than everybody else. You just want to show off how prompt and keen you are!' You're wrong again! And from that state you can criticize others around you: 'Look at all those laggards who turn up late!' This inner tyrant can take just about any form.

Ill-will closes us. And when our system is closed we sense ill-will and hostility around us because the pain of closure is here. We feel 'not safe', 'not comfortable'. When we become mindful of that, we realize the need to practise *mettā*, which is the fundamental medicine. *Mettā* doesn't mean wishing, 'May I love everybody,' but rather, 'May I understand the phenomenon or the activation (*saṅkhāra*) of ill-will.' When ill-will is present, allow it to be, and feel inwardly the ability to relax. Feel comfortable and wish to yourself: 'May I be free from harm,' as you're consciously breathing in and breathing out. 'May I be free from harm. May I be able to operate as best as I can according to my own body-mind.' Breathe out the pressure. There's a little bit of *nibbāna* there: something has momentarily ceased. Take this into the body. This is how we investigate, how we develop this second *bojjhaṅga*. In line with that presentation, we could say that the enlightenment factors work on the hindrances. We don't get rid of the hindrances and then add the enlightenment factors: the enlightenment factors arise *because* of the hindrances. They are the ones that meet those hindrances.

The third *bojjhaṅga* is *virīya*, which is sometimes translated as 'effort' but actually means 'energy'. We are fully with the present experience and feel this is the important process to be with. We are feeling it, breathing it, getting our body energy into it. We talk a lot about

energy – the breath energy, the mental energy, the energy of loving-kindness, etc. – as a certain sense of opening, spreading, bestowing or giving. When we give, when we share, when we open to something, when we love, it's not really an emotion, it's actually an energy, which is opening and spreading. We're breathing into our goodwill, breathing into our body, and putting the two together. Our energy comes out of these contracted states and begins to fill up into a more healthy form. The *citta* starts to unfold like a collapsed tyre that you are gradually inflating. The crinkles of ill-will (or any other hindrance) start smoothing out.

We can use *virīya* to work with sleepiness. First we need to be aware of this hindrance and not be averse to it. We're not blaming ourselves or the situation for it. Sleepiness is something that all human beings experience. Feel what you can feel: your back, your knees, the skin, and keep giving it energy – a steady, warm, good, supportive energy. Investigate the pieces that can wake up, even if it's just your eyes or your belly. If you're experiencing restlessness, calm the pieces that can be calmed. They will gradually release, both in the mind and on a bodily level: the tissues will start to unfold. We all know what deep stress and tension can be. If you want to explore that, try and get as tense as you possibly can. Tense everything: your eyes, your lips, your jaw, your fingers, your feet, your belly, your chest; tense it all up a hundred per cent so you know which bits are operating. As you breathe out, relax and notice which bits start to loosen up. You can track that as a bodily experience. When you are frightened or angry, it's going to tighten, isn't it? When you are happy, it's going to loosen up. Sometimes we're just working on the body-sense: breathing in, breathing out, breathing through the entire body and through the mental energy also.

The fourth enlightenment factor is *pīti* (rapture). It's the hinge because it's where what we're doing begins to have palpable results. *Pīti* isn't something we do, it's something that happens. It's not something we

apply ourselves to, it's something we receive. It's a quality of joyfulness, of brightness, that is both bodily and mental/emotional. We feel open. The way *pīti* happens for me, in a very ordinary way, is when I wake up in the morning and feel, 'It's a lovely, bright day, with fresh air, dew on the grass, flowers, plenty of space; nobody is bothering me ...'. Everything opens up. That's not just a thought, is it? That's more subtle than thought. As the *citta* begins to unfold from a driven, hounded, harried or needy state, *pīti* is what is experienced, but you don't experience it through a thought. *Vitakka* is the application of a thought or an idea, and *vicāra* is feeling it, sensing it. Isn't it lovely when tension releases, when your shoulders drop and you really can breathe out and feel a full in-breath that isn't driven or pulled but just happens?

A very significant feature of *pīti* is that the hindrances are no longer getting in. They may be hovering, but they're not getting in because the *citta* is unfolding. Also, some of our conventional identity drops away. A lot of our conventional identity can be about being very busy, organizing, managing the stress that we are giving ourselves and getting more stressed out about it, getting busy being 'me', with all my agendas, routines, histories, possibilities, obligations, requirements, needs, worries and so forth; and now, with *pīti*, we're starting to forget some of that. Isn't it nice to just be here breathing? The density of identity is often creating all kinds of structures and connections to manage its own stress, and that of course gives us more stress.

There's a certain quality of innocence about *pīti*. It's an embodied chest experience, a skin experience. Because the boundary is safe, the body opens. It's really important to sense how *samādhi* is coming *after* this sense of *pīti*, because the way the common mind understands concentration is: 'Tighten up your attention in order to get concentrated.' Unfortunately that attitude can feed right into the contracted state again. We may become very attentive, but we don't necessarily get *pīti*, which is associated with opening.

The process the Buddha describes starts with mindfulness, investigation filled with buoyant energy – not effort or striving – and a sense of *pīti*. Then things are turning: you are feeling less heavy. If you can get in touch with that, you realize the hindrances are your whetstone, the thing you have to work with. You sharpen your enlightenment factors on that whetstone, on that grindstone. The hindrances are tough, but nothing else you can do is going to get you out of them. No situation or friendships are really going to get you out of them. You're not going to come to an idyllic retreat centre where they're all washed away from you. It's more like you go to a retreat centre, thinking, 'It will be nice,' but after a few days of retreat, you start to think, 'It would be nice if only it wasn't for the bell, the routine, the people, the noise, the weather, etc.!' The hindrances will come, so come prepared to meet them. The attainment of the way means that you recognize you have to meet those hindrances. There's nothing going wrong. It's the first frontier you could say, the first piece of the landscape. This is the way you are going to learn. However you shift things around to make them more manageable – and I'm not saying you can't do that – eventually the only thing you can do is to try to sustain enough *sati* to investigate and to turn your energy into something redeeming, benevolent and fulfilling. This already is plenty, actually. Through that, the contractions come out and the result is some sense of *pīti*.

It took me maybe ten or twenty years to undo lots of pressures, stresses, contractions, wrong views about meditation, bottled-up irritation, grief, depression, compulsions, urgencies, trying to get it right, inner tyrants – the whole thing. It doesn't mean to say that I didn't have times when I would say, 'Oh, this is very nice!', but they would all tend to come back again. Maybe that's the way it goes. You get times when the mind finds its way through the hindrances, and then they come back again. It's not just a one shot: you keep crossing that territory time and time again, until it no longer causes you doubt or confusion. Doubt is the hindrance that cuts the path away. You keep crossing that territory

until you notice: 'That particular hindrance is not present as much. Now, it's not triggered by that. This thing triggers it, but that thing doesn't.' You start to notice and take joy in the number of times you are not caught in ill-will or sense desire. These two hindrances have a very broad meaning: they can refer to strong mental states but they have subtler forms too. They don't pass away until there's a profound degree of realization, but we can get breaks and at those moments we can touch into something more joyful.

Somebody wrote a question about devotional practices. How do those fit in? Devotional practices are for joy. They're encouragements; they're opportunities for rejoicing, celebrating. One thing that makes it possible to experience joy is knowing that 'The blessed one is here. I have received his Dhamma. It has told me there's nothing wrong with me. This is indicating the way out of stress. I've been given the way, the keys.' There is joy to have even touched into the possibility of that. 'I have been seen as a worthy human being who can try to cultivate the way. I have sensed myself in that. I have touched into the joy of being harmless. How wonderful!' That's what devotional practices are. We often use images, conventional words or flowers, incense and candles, but don't get too mesmerized by the images; they're just signs that you can use.

Why do we bow? Bowing involves the body, doesn't it? It's a movement of the body into a softness, into a 'lay it down!' Don't try to figure out devotion and ask, 'What exactly are you doing this for? What purpose do you see in placing your head upon the ground?' From a heart level, sometimes it's really the only thing you want to do! You just want to surrender and put your head down – this proud, arrogant head, with its conceit, its views and its ideas. Just lay it down! These ideas of 'I am', 'I shouldn't', 'people should think this of me' and 'why am I?', just lay them down! But remember, this is not a command. There comes a time when that is really a lovely experience. Devotional practices are

for that loveliness, for that celebration, for that *muditā*. *Muditā* means taking joy in that which is good and really taking it in. The trigger of joy doesn't have to be about *me* any more. Even in this conventional Buddhist culture, I don't think people necessarily understand the practice of bowing. They just do it and get a real sense of faith and support from that. They feel in a safe place: 'Now, I'm empowered. I have the Buddha's teachings with me. I have the Buddha's presence with me. Great!'

When you experience *pīti*, be mindful of it, sense it, survey it, and cool it so that it doesn't get more excited. Sometimes when people experience *pīti* it can come in great rushing waves. Tears start coming and you feel like you are lifting off the ground. This may be incomprehensible to somebody who has never experienced it. If it comes on too strongly, you need to put your attention on the body or the back – breathing out, grounding. When the experience turns into something more contented, it's called *passaddhi*: the fifth enlightenment factor. We feel tranquil, calm and soothed. The *citta* unfolds a little bit more.

Samādhi, the sixth *bojhaṅga*, comes when the sense-fields begin to quieten down. The sense-fields may seem like fields we can run out into, but actually they're things that hold us in. They limit us. They limit our experience within sights and sounds. Once we begin to experience *pīti* and *sukha*, we don't see them as fields any more, but as a cage, something that is limiting our experience. There's a change of priority. There still can be impact: sight, sound, smell, taste or touch, but the mind wants to spread wider – and *samādhi* is what enables that. You may think that these meditation masters who sit in a manky old hut in a desolate forest are tough ascetics, but they're actually sitting there feeling blissed out!

This experience of *samādhi* can be very transformative and quite astounding. There are incredible stories of people whose minds have opened to a profound degree, describing the sensitivities and

the ‘world’ that this openness presents. In this unification of mind, there is centredness and poise. Its tone is evenness and equanimity (*upekkhā*), which is the seventh and last enlightenment factor. The *citta* is unfolded; there are no creases left. There are no preferences. There are no contractions. There is no differentiation in the subject/object. It’s all even; the *citta* has evened out. The realization of nibbāna implies that ‘things have gone out.’ That which we thought was real and solid has proven to be a shadow. Once a crease is gone, its shadow is gone. Nothing has actually been destroyed; that strange thing which seemed so real, so *me*, so energized, has simply opened out. But some shadows are very strong and seem so clearly there, don’t they?

This is the map, but consider it very simply, as the progressive unfolding of the potential for real beauty – *pīti* is beautiful – for real ease, for deep, spacious opening and poise. That evenness gives you huge authority over the senses because you recognize: ‘It’s *this*, it’s *that*, but it’s not bothering me. It’s not pulling me in. It’s not something I have to get.’ There’s the freedom of release.

I talked about relationship right at the beginning of the retreat because it’s what practice is about: we’re coming out of contracted relationships of liking, disliking, holding on and rejecting. Those are contracted ways of relating to experience, aren’t they? But *sati* doesn’t partake in that. There is liking, there is disliking, but it’s just something that is happening; that’s not where I’m standing. I’m standing aware of liking and disliking and not following, not projecting, not proliferating around those energies. As a result, the hindrances starve. By being aware, mindful, but not following the proliferations, you withdraw their energy. You’re withdrawing the demon’s hostility by not giving it any.⁵⁴ The demon loves hostility. It feeds on fear. It loves you to feel like you’re a wreck, but now you’re telling it, ‘No, you’re not having any of that. Here is loving-kindness instead. Here is an open body, here

54. The ‘demon’ here is a personification of the hindrances.

is presence instead.’ That makes the demon shrink. It’s not that you adore demons, but you relate to them differently.

When you face a demon, you may feel you want to tighten up, but see if you can work against that tendency. Feel less guilty and ashamed, less lost and confused. How does this work? What triggers this demon? What happens? What happens in my body? What does my mind start to weave out of that? See if you can reduce the proliferation. Slow it down, take it back a little and ask yourself, ‘Where is the real point of this?’ Often it comes back to simple things such as pain or feeling attacked. As we cultivate those *satipaṭṭhāna* we recognize: ‘This is a mind-state ... this is a feeling.’ This is not so easy, but if you hold the mind-state and withdraw its energy, then your enlightenment energy will increase. You can’t get rid of the energy of the hindrances, but you can transfer it. Then, amazingly enough, you begin to be able to be with ill-will, just sensing it as a kind of buzzy, grumpy, edgy state, but it’s not jumping onto anybody; it’s just hovering. That’s very good! Now you can try to feel it more in terms of your heart, with loving-kindness and acceptance. You start starving it and using it. That energy then shifts to the enlightenment factors of investigation, energy and *pīti*.

Over time, you’ll even be able to come to a very strong trigger of feeling without reacting to it. You can probably do this in your body, at least to a degree: when you feel physical pain you don’t contract around it. Being able to practise with pain is a skilful thing, but it doesn’t mean that you are staying with it until your muscles rip! This is a workshop. We can’t really fix physical pain, but it’s much less penetrating than psychological and emotional pain. It’s just there and here I am with it. Now, can I change my relationship to it? In order to do that, you’re widening your focus, feeling the entire leg (if the pain is in the leg) or even the entire body with gentle goodwill. You’re widening, not contracting. You stay with the pain or discomfort for about five minutes. This kind of workshop is going to help when it comes down to

the real business, which is the pain of the *citta*. The pain of the *citta* is something that's formed. Its whole way of operating is very profound, so you really need the qualities of *pīti* and *samādhi* before it becomes possible to be mindful of it and to investigate.

In the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, the first tetrad has to do with the body. The Buddha takes it through to the point where you begin to experience calming the body. The quality of *pīti* comes after that: when you're in your breathing space, you start to feel some lift. Then, you're thoroughly sensing the *citta-saṅkhāra*, which is what activates your *citta*: your mental feelings, your mental and emotional triggers. We require the fullness of energy and the fullness of heart to be with the *citta-saṅkhāra* before we can really ease into it and calm the grief, the fear, the agitation, the hostility, the sadness, the sense of never having made it, never going to make it, the failure, etc. *Pīti* is the sign that there's a real capacity to do that. Before that stage, you just have to keep sidelining the present experience: 'OK, there is *that*.' You're coming to your good place and, as that fills up, you'll naturally find: 'Now is the possibility to meet my place of despair.' But don't go into that until you have your faculties together. There's no point going into your difficult places again and again, and sinking into the same overwhelmed state. First, you want to properly build up your capacity: don't climb down until you have good legs!

A lot of our practice is just about building up the self-respect, the faith and the faculties for this process. It takes time, but there's nothing else to do, and it is the true way. If we know this, if we feel the confidence that we're on the true way, it will lead to a lessening of the burden, of *dukkha*. These external practices of devotion, chanting, loving-kindness, helping and respecting each other, breathing in and out are all part of it. It's holistic. The way is not a technique; it's a way of living. Now is the time to gain some confidence in that.

As we're coming towards the last couple of days of the retreat, you want to use this time not for simply getting into some nice, calm state, but for finding the places of certainty that you can take with you: 'This is what I have to do to reorganize how I'm operating. I don't want to come to another retreat in the same wrecked state again!' You want to move on. The clearer you are about your trigger points and your faculties, the smoother and more progressive your experience is going to be.

Recollections - The Door to the Universal

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED

ON THE EVENING OF 28 NOVEMBER 2014.

Tonight some of you have dedicated the chanting to your departed relatives. You did it voluntarily: there has been no instruction to do that. What makes it something so natural and spontaneous that you overcome whatever self-consciousness may be there to write down a dedication with your name on it and put it right up here? What gives you the authority to do that? Where does that come from? When you really touch into what is very important, you can move forward with courage and faith. You are not doubting. You are not thinking, 'I don't want to disturb anybody by asking for a dedication. Is it right? Is it proper? I don't want to take up your valuable time.' Where is your strength? You see how much strength there is in us, in the quality of compassion – the great heart. I don't think anybody is expecting a dedication to bring their mother back from death. What is important is to bring forth one's great heart, and other people help us to do that.

We often comment, sometimes humorously I hope, that we can irritate each other or experience other people as irritations – and that's also true, isn't it? What makes it that way? What makes other people irritations to us, disappointments to us, fears to us? What makes people that way? Why do we experience it like that? How limited we feel within that experience! How made small we feel! How unsafe we feel! The heart drains in that experience, doesn't it? So, what are people? Are they 'irritations', 'people who challenge me', 'people who annoy me', 'people who get in my way', 'people who disturb me', 'people who don't do what I have told them to do'? Is that true? As I have said many times, relationship is important and when we're feeling annoyed by

someone, it is an afflictive relationship, isn't it? It's a relationship that brings us into a very limited, depleted state of being, and no matter what we do within that, we won't get out of that state. There's nothing criminal about being annoyed by someone, it's just what can occur – and you can always find very good reasons why that does occur. We can be this or that to each other, deliberately and undeliberately, consciously or unconsciously.

What resets the relationship is remembering death: we're all dying. You don't have to be that old to do it, I can tell you. You're totally kitted for it as soon as you're born. Some people don't even make it out of the womb. In the monastery, you receive all of it. A woman came here to tell us that her baby has died in her womb – he hasn't even been born yet. She will have to go through the whole process of giving birth to a dead baby. Heartrending, isn't it? Some people don't even make it here. Some people die pretty soon after they're born: one year, two years, five years. In the monastery we're receiving what are called the *devadūtas*, the 'heavenly messengers'. Why are they 'heavenly'? Because when they touch you, your heart opens in compassion. Suddenly the relationships are reset: 'These annoying, irritating people ... they too are subject to death, pain and fear.' Once you start with death, you start to unravel the script of what must happen to all of us: not just death but also being blamed, feeling rejected, not getting it right, being seen with less than loving regard by other beings. Any individual can feel they're not liked or respected. We may cultivate kind regard to each and every one of us – that's the practice of *mettā* – but strangely enough, what resets the relationship is remembering death. It resets many things actually. Compassion is one of them, and from that position we start to sense others as in that same predicament, along with all the other predicaments of *dukkha*: 'I too am not separated from *dukkha*. She is not separated from it. He is not separated from it. They are not separated from it. They too have experienced the loss of those they love, the being blamed, criticized, hurt or abused. They too will experience this. They have not gone beyond this.' When you see it like that, it resets the attitude, doesn't it?

Those dedications are the indication of how absolutely necessary it is for us to be able to find a way to express our compassion. And it's not just for the other person, although that's certainly the aim, but in your compassion you become grand, big, large, rich, fruitful, skilful. Suddenly, everything starts to click. It's not panic. It's not even trying to make things better. There's nothing we could do that would bring these people back from death. We may delay it, but there's nothing we could do that would prevent each other dying. Compassion is not to 'fix' things. It's because things can't be fixed that we experience compassion. Of course, we may very well act upon that to cherish, to nourish, to support, to do what we can. But the most important thing is to experience compassion and to be able to present it. Then we are finding ourselves in a relationship that is really worthy of us and brings forth our strength, our grandeur, our beauty. When you are filled with that, there are things that you would do that you would not do from any other basis, efforts you would make that you would not make on another account, things you would give up that you would not give up otherwise: you would give up your time, you would give up your precious sleep! That's a very powerful quality for us.

The Buddha presented what are called 'the Four Noble Truths': suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation. What is so 'noble' about suffering? It doesn't make us noble if we hear it as: 'I'm suffering all the time!' That has certainly a pang that one can sympathize with, but it's not a Noble Truth. '*There is suffering*' is the First Noble Truth. When you see suffering in that way the heart comes into its fullness and you can feel the power of that.

Like zip files, recollections help to encapsulate practices. You can then open them up. We can have deep experiences and come to very beautiful states in retreat – and the encouragement is definitely to continue with that – but they tend to quickly fade when the retreat is over. So, as I have asked you to do in the group dialogues, recollect how

it has been for you. You can cognize and remember the keys, the pieces that work for you, otherwise you'll forget them. You'll easily go out and get flooded by other things, so really bring them to mind, verbalize them to yourself. This is recollection. It means taking the meaning and putting it into a series of words. This is the skill of the thought faculty. Thinking is a skilful aspect, a guardian and guide to meditation. Many ragged, helter-skelter thoughts are driven, but the problem is not the thinking itself; the problem is what drives the thinking. It's like a fire: it can burn your house down or it can warm you up. Runaway thinking is certainly a problem, but don't throw the baby out with the bath water! There's nothing intrinsically wrong with thinking. You need to use *vitakka-vicāra*: recollections, pointing the mind until you really get it so that it's not just an abstract thought. This skill is a simple process: think the word, the image, or a piece of experience that you can encapsulate, point your mind there and get the feeling for it. What is that about? What does that mean?

'Death' is an easy enough term, but what does that mean? We don't want to spin out on it or come into a mood, so when we recollect death, we don't just look at it as: 'This is my own death or my sister's or my mother's,' but also as something universal: 'This is me, this is her, this is my dear mother, this is everybody's dear mother, everybody's favourite grandfather, everybody's beloved cousin, and sometimes it's my son.' It's everybody. And some day, someone will be grieving over you. When we recollect that, is there any separation? Is there anyone that you can leave out of that? Try to expand your awareness to include everybody, even these figures of animosity like 'my unreasonable boss', 'my pig-headed neighbour who continually argues' and so forth: they too experience the loss of the loved. When you recollect the death of others in that way, it helps you to come out of an unskilful relationship. There's still going to be an unreasonable pig of a boss, but when you see him like that, at least he is not bothering you when you sit down on your own in the evening. He won't be sitting there in your head. Then you will think, 'He wasn't so bad after all!'

When you recollect your own death, ask yourself, 'What does that mean?' You don't know it yet, do you? You haven't done it yet. The first thing it means is no future, no future for this being, the end of 'tomorrow'. Sometimes it's a blessing: 'All right, I don't have to get the job done because I'm dying tonight! I don't have to worry about next week's rent because I'm dying tonight! It's somebody else's problem!' That sense of the future is gone. Then, what do you want to take with you? Look at your mind-state. Is it really necessary to keep that piece of story going? That person you have a problem with, couldn't you just tell them, 'Oh, look ... good luck! I'm dying tonight, so just get on with it!'

Then recollect also your own past: all the things you never were, didn't do very well, and didn't quite work out ... Is it time to say, 'Enough of that!?' If there is something you really regret, now is the time to give attention to it. When you use 'I'm dying tonight' as your meditation, then genuinely forgive, ask for forgiveness and give a blessing to all the people you feel you may have hurt or disappointed. Spend some time with that. This is house-cleaning, keeping your place tidy.

Since you're dying tonight, recollect what's really important now. What's important to treasure at this moment? What's the beauty of your life? Where has it been? What do you really feel gratitude for? Much of your life has probably been nothing much, just going along, sometimes on a rough road, but there was one piece that makes you think, 'It was good to have been alive for that!' Try to find that one moment or that person; perhaps it wasn't a person entirely, but one time when it really worked, when you met each other properly. Maybe it's something in yourself or a good deed that you have done. Try to bring up your treasure. You're distilling what's important and brushing away what is not going to do you any good. It's very important to die every night. This is like house-cleaning: you refresh and clean, and you find out what really has been important, what is important now, how you are, how you carry yourself, what you feel is worthwhile, what

you stand for, where your dignity is, who is the person (or the people) or whatever it is that is vital to you. You are giving it some shape so it's not just a blurred mass of experiences; you are distilling them.

Bearing that in mind, if you now had one more day to live – ‘OK, we won't take you today, but tomorrow you're going to go!’ – what would you do? What would you want to say? Is there something you would like to express? Then you prioritize. Maybe the most important thing was to say, ‘Thank you’ properly. Maybe for these people tonight, the most important thing was to say, ‘My mother has died, may she be well.’ So the most important thing is to find out what the most important thing is. Death helps us with that. Cut all the stories and ask yourself, ‘What's the most important thing?’ That may change from day to day or from time to time, but it really does help to crystallize your priorities.

Then the heart and the head have spoken to each other. When they have spoken together, we say the king or the queen has arrived, the just leader or the true monarch has arrived. It's really up to each and every one of us to support the just ruler. They are not going to be selling you anything. They don't want anything but to keep you in correct alignment with your truth. That's all they want. It doesn't matter what your truth is as long as it is your truth. That is the truly grand ruler. They are not saying, ‘I want you to obey me or be like this for me.’ They say, ‘I just want you to find your truth and align yourself to it.’ The truth occurs when the heart and the head speak to each other – I mean *really* speak. It's not the moaning heart and the twittering head, or the demanding head and the frightened heart. It's the heart of value and the head of clarity that meet each other. Then what you have there is a message that's really irrefutable. It may not be something that you would have thought of or even something that you want to hear, but it's saying, ‘This happens to be your truth.’ At a personality level, you can then react like: ‘Well, I don't know if I'm up to that!’, but you have to follow it. It's a great blessing to have any of those moments when there is that inner voice. It's not necessarily

going to say anything in words but there is a felt sense and gravity to it. It's coming from this inner quality, the wise ruler. This is our inner friend.

The Buddha said there are two essential resources for realization. It's not mindfulness and wisdom, or kindness and compassion, or energy and concentration, but deep attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) and spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇamittatā*) – and they are mirrors of each other. A spiritual friend helps you to align yourself to your truth. It could be somebody who doesn't believe in your stories and your doubts, somebody who says, 'Yeah ... But I see *this*.' They may give you specific advice but primarily, they are the ones who see you in the light of Dhamma. We can see each other in a number of ways. At a personal level it could be: 'I like you', 'I dislike you', 'I'm frightened of you' or 'I admire you'. We can also highlight the functional aspect of someone: whether he is a great engineer or a good this, that or the other. Or maybe you're sharing the dormitory with a noisy person or someone who snores or whatever. But the *kalyāṇamitta* sees you in terms of your alignment to truth. They help you to speak your truth. They don't really want anything out of you. They're not demanding, 'Be nice to me,' so that's really valuable. It can be a person or a group of people or it can be a person in a specific situation.

The *kalyāṇamitta* is often seen as a teacher. But who is a teacher? At times, I can come into that relationship with you because you are prepared to be taught. But I'm not a teacher of my brother: I'm just his brother. That's a very different thing. You create me as a teacher. Of course I'm part of that, but it's a co-created thing, isn't it? It requires a certain sense of discipline or restraint: we're not going to be kidding around or doing stuff that, while it may be blameless, isn't about the practice. That particular role helps to hold that alignment. In these dialogue sessions that we have, I try to train myself to just listen and mirror, not to change you and not to put myself too much into it. On

many of these occasions, I'm very moved and truly honoured by your expressions of gratitude. That's very touching and also supportive for helping to affirm that I can provide that for you, and that you're getting something there. But I also would like to tell you, as a *kalyāṇamitta*, that no matter what you think about yourself – which is probably not always so gracious – I have seen strength, honesty and aspiration in every one of you; and also I have seen your pain. Who you are personally, I don't want to focus on that right now. This is the support a *kalyāṇamitta* offers. That support might help you to see yourself. But surely, sometimes it's difficult for us to see each other in that way. We tend to see each other in other ways: as partners, friends, co-workers or strangers – and that is particularly the case in a retreat situation.

What can help is recollecting death and suffering, and also the *nobility* that's brought you here. When you come here, you're coming into random situations, sharing facilities, restraint and discipline, and that can be very tough. Yet you have really made that effort; some of you have travelled many miles to come here. There is courage and strong intentionality. Can you remember that in yourself? Can you touch that in yourself? Through the doubts and all the difficulties, can you recollect that? This is another topic of recollection and it's not a simple and trivial one. Recollection of one's virtue is not thinking, 'I have been a good boy today: I did this, I did that, I fed the cat, put the milk out, helped so-and-so ... good, good, good!' No, it's not Sunday school. When you recollect your own virtues, at first your mind might go, 'Come off it!' because that recollection doesn't operate at the personality level but at a deeper level of heart. What really drives you? What would you do out of compassion? What would you do in a life-and-death situation? Which way will you jump?

Recollecting your own death and the death of others is helpful to sieve out the diamonds from the rest of the grit; then you take these diamonds. It's important that you hold them carefully, and do that

every day. You keep aligning yourself to your truth rather than to your distress and your confusion. How much time we can spend recycling our stress and confusion! Is that meditation? Recollection and many other practices are about the function of *vitakka-vicāra*. You get out of the groove and place it somewhere skilful, whether it's the body, breathing in, breathing out or whatever. It's there as your skill-place and will give you some grounding. Recollecting your values, your virtues, your diamonds, your pearls is another subject of recollection.

Another very important one is the recollection of the Triple Gem. Where is your refuge? What takes you to refuge? The *kalyāṇamitta* may help you to see that. Can your own deep attention help you to see that? Why is it called 'refuge'? Because it brings us the sense of being safe and protected. You may find that the *mettā* avenue is the way to help you remind yourself that you have real needs for nourishment, protectedness and safety. The refuge is unconditional. You don't have to be good to take refuge. You don't have to be good to be seen compassionately. You don't have to be good to be loved. You don't have to deserve it. You take away all those things, because they lead you to the wrong place – the judgement place. What is it that takes you to the place of safety? Where does your Dhamma arise? It can be in your body, in a quiet place in your heart, in the sense of non-aversion. You have something there that acts as a place you can go to (metaphorically speaking), where there's no need to defend, justify, prove you're good enough, deserve things or earn it. It's there, it's given. It's a given quality. This is your Dhamma, and from that Dhamma, the Buddha, the clear knowing, arises. It's very important to spend some time on this most valuable recollection.

Look at it also very specifically. What conditions support your taking refuge and what conditions hinder that? Maybe you need a place where you can close the door. It can be as simple and as external as that. Some conditions can help you to feel you don't need to be, or do, anything. Refuge is a given quality. We are given refuge. We take it, we don't

earn it, we don't deserve it. You don't have to pay to get in. That's why the teaching is as it is. It's always open. It's a given to anybody who is so inclined. You have to remember that you don't have to be that good. When you find a place of safety, within it, the clarity comes. Then you find that the good starts to manifest; you begin to experience it. Recollections take you to a very fruitful place.

These recollections should be done daily. You can choose one, two or three of them – for example, recollecting death and suffering, your own virtues, your own past, what is really important for you, the Triple Gem – and do them every day, even for just ten minutes. That will help you to keep resetting your experience. Some of these recollections may of course open out and what they reveal then is the 'not-self' nature of experience. Even if it's a subjective experience – what is happening for me – it's also universal. Any person who cultivates like this will come to their refuge, their truth; they will touch into a universal place. Certainly, one of the beauties of practising together is that it makes the Sangha possible. Whatever our differences, our disagreements and our dissonances, there is this possibility of touching into a universal quality, which doesn't claim anything. You can rest in it, you can open to it, you don't have to grab it; then, something changes. That's why you *bow* into the refuge. You don't claim it, you release into it. You release into something universal that is bigger than yourself, bigger than your self-image and your self-limitations, bigger than who you think you are. This is the truth of not-self. Awareness is always bigger than any self-image, good or bad – thank goodness for that!

Relationship is the whole of the practice. This means that instead of *being* yourself, you *relate* to yourself. You relate to yourself by looking through all that self-experience and at one end of it you put 'death' – that helps to line it up. At the other end you put 'awakening' – that's another possibility, a universal possibility. You put those two on either end of your self-impressions. This is *really* who you are. You're

in a place that has death and awakening. That's what you're in; that's what everyone is in. It's universal and yet it's also subjective: it's what happens to *you*; this is a potential for *you*. When we sit within that, it starts to realign our lives.

Recollections don't necessarily take hours or involve you going on retreats. But certainly, within a retreat situation they become very potent, because as we're on retreat, we're all inevitably trawling through all the processes of our apparent self, of our personal experience. When all the worms are coming out of the can, as it were, this is a really good chance to put them under that light. You have a way of getting all your laundry out, so you can clear a lot of stuff. In retreat situations we're often entering a process: opening things up, revealing things. Things come up and now there's also the requirement to scan and filter the diamonds out of the dross. These recollections within retreat are very potent experiences. They really can help you to shape up and drop a lot of old kamma, a lot of old habits, a lot of old misalignments, and establish the wise leader, the one you can trust in your life.

Nibbāna and the Four Noble Truths

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED
ON THE MORNING OF 29 NOVEMBER 2014.

It seems one shouldn't conclude a retreat without mentioning nibbāna and the Four Noble Truths, which are the main working axis of the Buddha's teachings. Nibbāna is difficult to see, realized by the wise, the secure, the unshakable, the place you cannot go beyond, the end of ageing, sorrow, decay and death. It's likened to an island, a safe place. It's the sublime, the peaceful, the highest and most fulfilling kind of ease. Nibbāna is hinted at as both subtle, not easy to see, and yet available and attractive.

There is a sequence I sometimes bring to mind about the nature of *dhammas* (phenomena). 'Rooted in motivation': all *dhammas* are rooted in some kind of interest or motivation; something in us brightens up in response to attractive forms, something switches on. 'Rising with attention': attention steers towards something. 'Coming into being': taking a definite form with contact. 'Converging on feeling': feeling is the bit that really touches and gets things going. 'Led by concentration (or collectedness), dominated by mindfulness, surmountable by wisdom, yielding deliverance, merging in the Deathless, terminating in nibbāna.'⁵⁵ This is the whole sequence. Nothing stands alone. There's a conditioned path to the Unconditioned. Here, the Buddha is saying that if you track them, this is what *all dhammas* do: they end in this incredible peace. That's pretty jaw-dropping, isn't it?

'Converging on feeling' is the lively bit, when something touches us. Where do *dhammas* touch? Do they touch the skin or the eyes? No,

55. Aṅguttara Nikāya 10.58.

they touch the heart, they touch the *citta*. We can be quite oblivious to sights and sounds at times. Some sights you see, some you don't, but what touches your heart is where the action happens. We place *sati* (mindfulness) on feeling instead of on the reverberations, proliferations and all the processes that get stirred up. It's just unpleasant feeling or pleasant feeling. Things are not always that strong. If you don't know what you're feeling, ask yourself, 'Would I like this to continue or not?' If you think, 'Well, it would be good if this was over', it's called 'unpleasant feeling'. Naturally, we have the capacity to endure and we may think, 'I'm OK. It's fine, no problem,' but that's not the point. We can all manage unpleasant feelings to a degree, but when we feel, 'It will be good when this is finished,' it's an unpleasant feeling. We need to supervise feeling with incredible patience and honesty.

'This is sublime, this is peaceful: the stilling of *sañkhāras*, the relinquishment of the basis of attachment, the destruction of craving, dispassion, *nibbāna*.'⁵⁶ There is a process here. The first thing we come to sense is the 'stilling of *sañkhāras*'. *Sañkhāras* are the activations, the mental formations, the intentions, the activities that arise depending on something touching us and a feeling of being aroused. The verb 'to still' indicates a calming process, doesn't it? We're calming, soothing and making less by either deliberately saying, 'It doesn't matter' or letting the feeling pass. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the Buddha recommends us to be aware of the rising, the flowing and the passing. Can you have the presence of mind to acknowledge that something is difficult or unpleasant, open to it and let it pass? It won't pass if we add more to it, if we keep regenerating it.

What is required is a kind of patience, relinquishment, letting go, and also enough inner stability to be able to do that. If we feel calm and assured, if we have what we call the 'refuge foundation' – it could be self-

56. Majjhima Nikāya 64 and Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.32, 9.36, 10.6 and 10.60.

respect, kindness, patience, faith or confidence – then we can witness the arising and passing of feeling without snagging on it. *Saṅkhāra* could be the ripple of, ‘I don’t feel I can manage this!’, ‘How is that?’, ‘What am I supposed to do with this?’, ‘Whose fault is it?’ or ‘Something is wrong with me, I shouldn’t feel this way’, and we gradually feel OK with that shivering. When the perception ‘I can’t bear it!’ arises, it’s just for a moment.

A certain amount of stilling can happen as an attitude, but generally it requires enough basis in inner calm, inner steadiness, inner refuge. We need somewhere to stand, a place from which we can let things run through. This is developed by what we call the *samatha* practices, which can be anything that helps the mind to settle down and feel comfortable. There’s a whole range of them that you can use, for example: *mettā*, mindfulness of breathing, mental recitations, walking up and down, awareness of the movements of the body. There’s no particular system. When the *citta* is held and gradually settles, you can understand a lot about the *citta*: its jumpiness, its contractedness, its doubting, its turning itself inside out. You’re handling it – relationship is everything.

The *saṅkhāra* process can be stilled with regard to its intentionality: its impulse to do, to become, to have or to make something out of an experience, and that certainly begins to sweep away what I call ‘the tinder’ for further *saṅkhāras*. They’ll keep flaring up, but you don’t have to get into this cycle of reactivity. This is *samatha*, and I think it’s a big part of the practice. It’s certainly something to make use of a retreat for, because a retreat provides such a rare encouragement and support. We really try to hold that retreat space as a safe, secure place. Most of the world is about excitement, running, getting stirred up, being annoyed, frightened, going faster and so forth, so *samatha* is definitely to be encouraged a lot. It enables your system to come out of its spasms and its shatteredness. With that stilling, a more subtle form of *saṅkhāra* can begin to relax.

Another way in which mental *saṅkhāras* manifest is through the quality of attention. Attention is that which forms a boundary. We can notice this with our eyes: there's a certain zone that is clear and there is a fuzzy zone around it. The sense-bases are held by what you are interested in: your focus crystallizes around where there's interest. *Dhammas* are rooted in *chanda* (motivation, desire, interest). They spring up where your attention rests. From there, things start manifesting. The process of engagement with phenomena begins with attention; *dhammas* arise there. *Dhammas* are the experience of engagement with phenomena.

The mind has no natural exterior object. It doesn't see, hear or touch anything. The subject matter for the *citta* is its own creations. The *citta* is likened to a spider that draws silk out of its body to weave its web and then runs around or sits on it. It feels everything that touches the web: if a fly touches the web, the spider feels the effect of that. That's what the *citta* does in its unawakened state. Because of its intention, it's constantly generating webs. All kinds of things get stuck in that web. It's shivering a lot because of the number of things that touch it. The web is called 'attention', and that could be to just about anything: the state of the world, the square root of minus one, your knees, your grandmother's arthritis, the emperors of the Song Dynasty, etc. In fact, there's almost no limitation to what the mind can create a web around. The *citta* then scuttles over that web, ruminating, thinking in terms of the web that it's spun. It gets delighted by it, curious, desperate, hungry for whatever it can catch in that web – this is where the juicy flies are going to land! We don't consider that to be an activity because the *citta* is always doing it; and because it's happening all the time, we can't imagine that it could switch off or that the mind could not have to create a web to run around on.

Could you possibly at least still the attention? Instead of generating one web after another, just stay in one particular web – your body. Don't get too refined: stay with your body or your breath as you are experiencing

it, right now – this is your web. Now, see what lands in it: phenomena that come and go, this, that, juicy flies, nasty stuff, sticky stuff ... there's a lot happening in this thing! And what does it all do? It arises, it causes the web to shiver, the spider gets a bit excited, desperate, hungry, or finds something to nibble on, then it goes and something else lands in it. Where is the 'right' one? When is nibbāna going to land in my web? No, nibbāna is the destruction of the web. Does that mean you're blanked out, in a coma? No. You don't need a web to trap space, do you?

Why do we pay attention to something? We have certain particular reasons. We are looking for something to be interested in, something to feed on or something that will give us understanding or happiness. The other thing that we're looking for is something that makes us feel we have a grip on life, we know who we are, we're stable, steady and protected. Sometimes we can notice that our attention is on the lookout for things that could hurt us. We are aware of the possibility of being rejected, hurt or disapproved of. The web is very attuned to that. Attention carries all kinds of subliminal messages. Why did the spider weave that web? Sometimes it can be very mysterious and we may wonder, 'Why on earth am I thinking about this? How did I get here?' We don't understand the subliminal motivations, which are called *upadhi* (basis of attachment). *Upadhi* is not quite the same as *upādāna* (clinging); it's the underlying tendency upon which any kind of clinging is based. The fundamental tendency is 'I am' – 'I am this body', 'I am this being here' – and therefore it needs protecting, caring for and so on. At the same time, we recognize that it dies; no matter what we do, it breaks up. This thing here that I call myself, my body, in the end it breaks up. There's nothing you can do that can really protect it.

Nothing can be owned. This incredible phrase, 'All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise' is a very bitter medicine, but do you think the Buddha is trying to make people feel depressed and unhappy by using this very straight talking? It's through really tuning

into this truth that something else happens: the spider stops spinning because you begin to sense that this is pointless. Also, as the *saṅkhāras* begin to still, you begin to sense the *citta* knowing itself. It's aware of awareness. Awareness and attention are different things. Attention is the boundary, the thing that creates the focus. Awareness is the ability to receive an impression. What creates our objects of attention? What are the boundaries of it? What do you want to hold? What do you want to gather with attention?

The stilling of *saṅkhāra* is not the eradication of it. As you get calmer, you don't really want stimulation and excitement. You don't want to have things to think about. You don't want games or entertainment, not because you hate them but because they don't feed you any more. There's a progressive way in which the gathering of your awareness begins to become deeply satisfying, so these other things fall away. Similarly with attention: as you're gathering more awareness, what your mind perceives is no longer so striking. The web doesn't shiver. It's just sights, sounds, people, comings, goings ... that's not too difficult. You cultivate like that, but then there are further ones. When you are blamed, is there any shiver there? When you're being left out or didn't get the same as everybody else, is there any shiver there? When people are not being the way you want them, not following your rules, what does that do? Maybe there is a bit of shiver there – shiver and shake. You become aware of all that and recognize: 'Oh, here goes the proliferation!' Then you can trim it back so that at least you don't feel guilty about it any more. You come back to: 'This is just the experience of irritation or desperation' and you hold it with mindfulness until the *saṅkhāra* can be held steadily, still. The feeling is felt, moves and changes, and then the *saṅkhāra* quietens down.

At times, these mental *dhammas* can be very poignant. 'I have been practising for fifteen years and ... I failed!' That's a poignant one, isn't it, when you get to that sense of despair. The suttas are always quite beautiful: the Buddha says something and within three paragraphs

the people who are listening become arahants. It's really great: they just listen to one talk and all the defilements drop away! But in the *Therīgāthā*, which are poems of enlightened nuns, there is a nun saying, 'In twenty five years my mind has not had one single moment of peace, not a fingersnap!' This nun was so despairing that she thought, 'I have had enough, I'm going to kill myself. I can't stand it any longer.' She hooked up a rope on a tree and just as the rope touched her neck, something went 'Oh!' – realization occurred, just in the nick of time! Some people really got to the edge. The stories of the monks (*Theraḡāthā*) and the nuns (*Therīgāthā*) are very gritty. One nun said, 'This grouchy old so-and-so of a husband, I finally got rid of him and I went to see the Buddha.' They had their feet very much in the mud of human existence. For the one who said, 'In twenty five years, my mind has not settled for one fingersnap,' recognizing this, sensing this, realizing, 'It's just the mind; it's just feeling', suddenly the Deathless opened.

You can look at the path in several ways. It can be progressive: going up, getting calmer and quieter, having better behaviour and so forth. But there's also another way, which is a stepping back – not ascending, not descending, but just stepping back to: 'This is the mind, this is a feeling, this is a *saṅkhāra*.' It's much more than an intellectual statement; it's a statement of the heart. You have been with this so many times; it doesn't have to end. You don't have to find an answer to it. It's just 'this'. The most deeply experienced practitioners say you get pure to a certain degree but some stuff remains and 'it's just *this*', there's no self involved with it. The underlying fundamental basis of 'this is who I am' or 'this is what I am' is not there. There are still these recognizable identities doing their thing – they are called *vāsanā* (traces) – but your spider isn't running around it. It has stepped back, it has gone off the web.

Ajahn Mahā Boowa was renowned as a real tiger of a forest master because of his severity: he could be a very firm, stirring and powerful teacher. He was certainly not reluctant to point things out to people,

where they were lacking. When the chairman of the English Sangha Trust was looking for bhikkhus to come to Britain, he went to see both Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Mahā Boowa. After having stayed for some time with Ajahn Mahā Boowa, he asked him, 'Why are you always so grumpy? Why are you so rude to people?' Nobody had ever said that to Ajahn Mahā Boowa before. I mean, you just wouldn't dare to say that to this kind of tiger! Ajahn Mahā Boowa looked at him and laughed: somebody finally had had the guts to present it to him. Then he said, 'It's just the way I am.' In other words, that's just the way his aggregates manifest.

This means we don't need to 'destroy' the aggregates. That gives us some possibility because trying to wipe yourself out is like the spider running around the web trying to pull all the silk back into its body. It doesn't go back. The really sticky stuff loses its glue, the gross stuff wears out and some of it is just there. You have to be somebody. These traces still remain but there isn't a kind of embeddedness in it. Our attention then remains open to what is – not just to what is externally but even to what is internally. This is a very holistic process. Whatever is happening in the mind, there's attention to it. Whether it's a busy mind or a worrying mind, we're knowing it. We see the spaces in the web: when things pass, the empty space is there. Our attention is stilled to the point where it's not rigid and gluey.

We relax the boundaries of what we are desperate for or hope won't happen. We allow feelings to arise: sadness, fearfulness, etc. These are not easy, but when we have become more calm and steadied, we can allow some of these very poignant emotions to enter. All of this is generally considered really good stuff to exercise. As you become more steady, you are able to handle conflicting emotions without getting knotted up about them. After all, most of the web is space, isn't it? In the space is the Deathless. Things merge in the Deathless, they terminate in that space – you could call it 'psychological space'.

Realization is progressive. Classically, you have four profound levels of realization, but you can take it as just being able to notice and allow an emotion to arise and pass. As it passes, how is that? When the echoes die down, what's that? We could say it is a *nibbāna* movement. The movement unbinds the furthering of stuff. We could say that *nibbāna* is a verb: to unbind, to undo, to release. We need to realize that potential we all have. We all have the potential to let things fade, let things pass without holding on or tangling with them.

Nibbāna is sometimes called 'a property' or 'an element', just like earth, air, fire and water. Therefore, it's as much an element as your skin, your spittle or your vitality is. It's of the same quality, but it's one you don't discern. It's not synonymous with space, because it's something that has a releasing quality to it. And if we didn't have that, I think we would be completely mad. Fortunately, we do let a few things pass. All of us have '*nibbāna*'d a little bit already. Imagine if everything stayed with you forever and you got fuller and fuller and fuller of every impression: every thought and every emotion would be locked in there. Can you imagine what it would be like just at the end of a day? Let alone decades of it! We would be bursting!

Can you notice the ability to soften and widen? It can be cultivated. *Nibbāna* is not the end of the pathway in the distance. You can imagine: the bell rings, the curtains open, the Buddhas cheer you: 'Welcome in!', and here you are after who knows how many decades or lifetimes grinding away! But it doesn't happen like that. Something that can be progressively developed is our ability to *nibbāna* things: the stilling of *saṅkhāras*, the relinquishment of 'I am. I have to be. I shouldn't be. I wish I was. When will I ever? I have never managed. I won't. I will ...'. Although I can verbalize it, this goes much deeper than verbalization. This relinquishment implies the destruction of craving – 'destruction' is a very fierce word, isn't it?

What is it that keeps sticking it all together? The second of the Four Noble Truths is that suffering has a cause, and that cause is *taṇhā* (craving). *Taṇhā* is not quite the same as desire. Desire can be a motivated sense. When we have initiative or the motivation to practise, that's not *taṇhā*, that's called *chanda*. We're eager, we're motivated. That's a form of skilful desire, and we can direct it. We have some say over it, we can bring it up. *Taṇhā* is something we don't have say over; it has say over us. It's a pathology and an instinctive quality. The word literally means 'thirst'. You can't say, 'Let me be thirsty' or 'Let me not be thirsty.' *Taṇhā* is a gut level, instinctive, feeling sense of 'I don't have enough, I need to take something in' (*kāma-taṇhā*) or 'I am not enough, I need to be something' (*bhava-taṇhā*). This is where, at some level, human beings seek status, recognition, being something. This is not criminal, sinful or defiled in a gross way. We could think, 'Surely this is what life is about, isn't it? We need to become something useful.' It's as basic as that.

But this means that sometimes you may think, 'I haven't done much at all, have I? I have tried a few things, but ...'. When we want to be useful, when that underlying drive is not really understood as finite, there's only so much you can do. *Bhava-taṇhā* brings along the shadow of failure: 'I haven't saved the world. I haven't ... I haven't ...'. It keeps pushing to become something more. We can see it in a grosser way, in terms of people who seek performance, prizes and so on. They can get pushed to the place where they break up. But it's there in all of us, and this is what has to be destroyed. How is that? We recognize that *taṇhā*, which assumes that 'we are', is some kind of grab system that can accumulate all that is mine, beloved and pleasing. This doesn't mean just beads and trinkets, but also prowess, status and accomplishments – things of that nature. We'll become separated from that. 'I too will be forgotten.' That's why it's a rap on the knuckles. That doesn't mean we don't do things: there is a doing which has no particular need for acclaim; it doesn't have the shadow effect of self. The Buddha certainly

did a lot, and you could say he became a very influential person, but I don't think that perception entered his mind.

Of course, in many ways, the Sangha was a constant failure. There were always people breaking up and quarrelling. When you look in the suttas they all look good, but when you look in the Vinaya (the books of discipline) they are all a bunch of rascals! I'm sure they are both true. The Buddha didn't say, 'I have told these people so many times and there he is, storing honey again, eating in the evening, hankering after new robes, cajoling lay people, wheeling and dealing and scheming. After all I've done! Why did I bother?', but he just said, 'This foolish, misguided person has not understood the teaching.' There is no expectation. The intentionality can remain, but there is no longer the sense of needing to be fulfilled by some result. This is *nibbāna*: the mind changes from having that grab mechanism to being a very open palm. There's an open bestowing.

Buddha-images often express different qualities with their hands: blessing, protection, collectedness, etc. One of the beautiful ones you see sometimes is the right hand down with the palm outstretched. It is called 'the bestowing *mudrā*'. There's no grabbing there. It's just here; you don't even have to pick it up. It's like that. This too is *nibbāna*. It doesn't mean that the mind has a new, subtle mental state; it means that it has radically changed in how it operates. It now has the ability to be completely open, with no boundaries to attention. Whatever can be seen, whether it's subtle or nothing much, noise, people or things, attention does not contract and vibrate; it is stilled. There's a stilling of *saṅkhāra*, of intentionality. There isn't that urging drive and restlessness. Yet it's not killed: it can rise up when it's needed and it can still when it's needed. Attention can firm up when it's needed and release when it's needed. That's the way enlightened beings operate because there's no attachment to *saṅkhāra*. *Nibbāna* is the stilling of *saṅkhāras*, the relinquishment of the basis of attachment, the destruction of craving.

When we look at the Second Noble Truth, it says: *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā*. *Vibhava-taṇhā* is the craving to contract altogether: you don't want to feel anything, you don't want to be anything. It's like a shrinking of being, perhaps to get out of here and find safety. But *nibbāna* is not the 'eradication of being'. In brief, craving is the fundamental instinct to clench, to contract, either to get hold of or to get away from. Attention can be open but peaceful. The Third Noble Truth refers to the relinquishment of craving: there are no strings attached. The Fourth Noble Truth is the path that makes it possible: the exercises and practices that bring us into correct alignment with the way to *nibbāna*, the way to realize, the way to open. This must, therefore, be our ongoing practice.

Samatha is really a fundamental requirement. We need to learn how to still. We need to learn how our attention can be less trembly, more quiet, subtle and pliable; it can then be a beautiful experience. You can firm it up and relax it by using meditation systems that encourage that. Work it thoroughly. Don't imagine that calm means sitting there and going numb. It means you work with *vitakka-vicāra*. It's not frantic; it's a steady enquiry, 'How is this?' until things become quieter. This is an enormous thing to be doing. You feel better. You gain faith in yourself. You realize you do have some say over how your life is, how you feel things. You have a good amount of say in increasing your well-being. Everybody needs that.

To gain confidence, to have the confidence that something works, really makes us feel better. From there, insight becomes possible. I don't think insight is possible without some calming, steadying process. Insight is the ability to see or to review experience itself. Even a steady, calm experience is essentially constantly subtly shifting and changing. There's nothing there to really be held, and none of it is finally consequential. You don't get better and better experiences and then ... Ta-da! The doors of the Deathless fling open and the

Buddhas usher you in! No, it's not like that. It gets quite good until you get used to it. Then you may think, 'OK, this is pretty nice. My mind does get calm ... So? This too is something that has arisen through intention, interest and attention, in terms of contact. It feels a certain way: it's pleasant. Being mindful of that, being wise about that, I can see that this too is being constructed, fabricated, made. That which is fabricated must pass.' That's as good as you can do, therefore ask yourself, 'Is there another movement here?' You're not rejecting the experience of calm but enquiring: 'Who has this happened to anyway? Who has this experience?' It's just one set of forms that the mind takes when it's given the optimal circumstances – which are dependent upon conditions.

If the *citta* really acknowledges that and softens around that, then the release can occur. It's described as *virāga* (dispassion). In the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* you see the same thing: dispassion, ceasing (a certain ceasing of the need to go further) and relinquishment (*paṭinissagga*). You're giving up the view of 'this I am', 'this belongs to me', 'this is for me', 'this is what I have become'. This is *nibbāna*, the completed. According to the Buddha, the process of it seems to occur in different stages. The first stage is more on the cognitive level. You don't believe in belief any more, and you don't believe there's this person living behind your eyes, up there in a control box with wheels, levers, buttons and things. You know that this chattering voice isn't really who you are at all. That whole way of conceiving an identity blows out. This is called 'stream-entry' and it's a big turn-around. You begin to really get a sense of what the *citta* is: not this personal self, but something more primary and perhaps more mysterious. Then you can have the direct experience that something has shifted profoundly. And it doesn't go back; you can't go back to believing in it any more. This is an enormous blessing; it takes a weight off life.

Most of your practice is still going to be about calming and steadying the places where you get reactive. If you're becoming reactive, at least you're not getting guilty about it: acknowledge that and start anew – it's a new day, a new moment. Constantly use loving-kindness and compassion to keep wiping the slate clean. Then enquire, 'How did that happen? What was the triggering for that?' Note, really get to know something, be wise. If you understand what the triggers are, the practice is certainly going to extend for much longer than the retreat. Keep cultivating!

Luang Por Sumedho Open Retreat

THE FOLLOWING TWO REFLECTIONS WERE OFFERED IN THE COURSE OF A WEEK-LONG RETREAT AT AMARAVATI MONASTERY (12-19 MAY 2017), DURING WHICH LUANG POR SUMEDHO AND SEVERAL SENIOR MONASTICS WERE TEACHING. THERE WERE UP TO 400 PEOPLE SITTING IN THE TEMPLE, INCLUDING 80 MONASTICS. OVER 100 PEOPLE WERE CAMPING IN THE FIELD AND ABOUT 60 WERE STAYING IN SMALL PORT-A-CABINS.

Transformation

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED
ON THE EVENING OF 17 MAY 2017.

My greetings to the assembly! I hope those of you who are camping out in the field are managing to find a comfortable enough abiding. It's great to see so many people doing some serious renunciation. You have left your home comforts for a piece of nylon over your head and a sleeping bag stuffed in a corner; the rain is pattering down ... This is great! I'm inspired! (Because I have a nice, warm room!) This in itself is already practice, isn't it? And you realize you can do it: 'All right, here I am. I have this body, I have this mind – breathing in, breathing out.' It's actually quite a relief not to have so much stuff to look after.

Also, this situation of being a group of 350 or 400 people trying to operate together requires a tremendous cultivation. Everybody is going to get their meal at the same time – that's challenging. You have to queue up and receive what's offered. You have to wait. But you don't have to see it as an inconvenience; you can use this context as a training, a practice to restrain, to check and to think of the welfare of the group. There is a handful of people who have offered to steward things, and they're not trying to lay some trip on anybody, they're just trying to make it work, so you practise cooperating. And you realize it's OK, even if you can't get your own way immediately. There is a bigger thing than having our own way, and it's the welfare of the group.

When we practise like this, we become a true Sangha. This is how it is for the bhikkhus, the *sīladharā* and the novices. We all come in the Temple and we sit on our seat. We don't decide where to sit, what cushion we want and who is sitting next to us. Whether we like it or not, we just sit on our seat. When someone rings the bell, we get up and queue up.

Some of us have been doing it for years so we've got used to it. At first there is a distinct challenge because we are attached to *me* and *my way*: 'I see things this way and I don't see why I should have to follow your way!' There is a friction when we feel our normal inclinations checked. Certainly, it's uncomfortable, but it does not get in the way of practice: it *is* practice. Practice is to meet that discomfort, that checking, that having to wait, and instead of feeling frustrated by it, we relax around it. We're OK, we're all respected; our welfare is considered. When we tune into that, we get a tremendous sense of freedom. This is why monastics do it this way. We're not necessarily into being obedient just for the sake of it, I assure you. We are surly and rebellious at heart! And we have found out the hard way.

It's important to remember this attitude, because generally when people come on retreat, their motivation is to get their mind sorted out and to find some calm. Here, the practice is being with 350 other people, because that's chaos. You never know when you will need to go to the toilet; you can't tell your body to wait until it's convenient. You make mistakes, you forget where you put your hat, you put your shoes in the wrong place and so on ... And all this is multiplied by 350! So what do we have here? We have a tremendous place to keep letting go, to take our time, pay attention and remember what we need to remember. This is practice. Living like this in itself is already considered meditation.

You can use the sitting in silence to help understand what has occurred: where you've met friction, where you've held on – whether you've felt annoyed or bullied, whether you've felt somebody was making too much noise and so forth. You notice the things your mind complains about and what's happening in your body. Just sit with that and keep opening and releasing. Right there, at that place, you're turning something around. That is transformation. Don't think, 'I want to have an experience, so then I'll go home having had a wonderful experience.' No, if you're into this, then you've come for transformation. You don't

go home again. The person who goes home is not the person who arrived. If that happens, great! If something has shifted, something has dropped, something has become less intense, pushy or intimidated, or something has become less obsessed with the sense of ‘everybody dislikes me’, then our practice has been fruitful.

‘This is peaceful, this is sublime: the stilling of *saṅkhāra*, the relinquishment of acquisition, the destruction of craving, dispassion leading to cessation ...’.⁵⁷ Little bits of you cease – little bits of struggle, grasping, tightness, fearfulness, ill-will towards yourself, snappiness, moodiness. These bits seem to be *me* because they are so built-in, but they stop firing when you hold them with dispassion. Maybe something you’ve tried to push away – and hoped nobody would notice – suddenly came up right in your face. You had to sit with it and bear with it, and find the skills to step back from it without repression or fascination, but with dispassion, by holding a frame of reference: ‘This is body. This is mind. This is feeling. This is not self. It’s just *this*.’ When you give it time, it starts to release.

Suffering is an action; it requires energy to keep it going. Eventually you get too tired to suffer. You get tired of fighting, complaining and bad-mouthing yourself. You just let it be. Then something drops; a little bit of your landscape changes. There’s no longer this inner chatter, this inner tightness, pushiness and self-obsession. Instead, there is light, space and openness. You start to feel strangely happy: ‘That’s strange! I’m not happy because of *something*. I’m happy because a bit more *nothing* has occurred.’ That’s transformation. It turns the mind around because you turn your attitudes around. You begin to see that maybe this life isn’t about having some experience. Maybe this life is about letting go of experience, and realizing what is always here.

57. Majjhima Nikāya 64 and Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.32, 9.36, 10.6 and 10.60.

There is a passage from the suttas that runs through my mind occasionally like a mantra, especially when I'm at Amaravati – 'The Deathless Realm'.⁵⁸ It starts with: 'He turns his *citta* away from form (*rūpa*).'⁵⁸ Luang Por Sumedho translates *citta* as 'consciousness'. Often there can be confusion between that and the sense-consciousness, so I call it 'awareness'. *Citta* is also often translated as 'heart' or 'mind'. Language can be a problem, but basically the *citta* is your sense of 'I' before the adjectives start. Then the passage continues: 'He turns his *citta* away from feeling,' which is either pleasure or pain. 'He turns his *citta* away from perception,' from all those immediate recognitions or impressions of pleasant/unpleasant, friendly/unfriendly, right/wrong and so forth.

'He turns his *citta* away from *saṅkhāra*,' from the activations, the programs that start running in your mind when something hits you. There are three kinds of programs: verbal programs, emotional programs and bodily programs. Bodily programs can manifest as tension, passion, heat in the system – the blood boils and pulses, the face tightens up, the neck stiffens, the chest sinks, the shoulders collapse. These activations become us; we become the program. There we are in our program, running it once again: 'He's always like this! She's never like that! I always get this! I never get that! I'm like this. People don't think this of me; they think that of me ...'. These amazing programs become our world. What triggers these activations? When the perception 'Somebody looked at me the wrong way!' or 'Somebody said something unpleasant to me!' arises, a whole world appears. For example, we think, 'Somebody didn't say something to me!' and the 'victim program' gets activated: 'I got left out! Nobody respects me after all the work I've done! I work damn hard for this ... poor me!' There's also the 'responsibility/martyr program': 'I've got to do all this. I have to make it work. It's all up to me!' You hear these things in your

58. The following three paragraphs repeatedly refer to Majjhima Nikāya 64 and Aṅguttara Nikāya 9.36.

mind and you think, 'Oh dear, here it is again!' The fashion of feeling floods the body and mind, and you turn away from that program.

'He turns his *citta* away from consciousness.' There are six sense-consciousnesses: the eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness and mentality-consciousness. 'He turns his *citta*,' that awareness, that knowingness, 'away from these aggregates and directs it to the Deathless. This is beyond the sphere of reasoning. This is sublime, this is peaceful: the stilling of *saṅkhāra*, the relinquishment of acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, ceasing, *nibbāna*.'

Worthwhile? Worth doing a bit of turning for? How much is it worth? How much are you willing to pay for deathlessness? A bit of discomfort? ... 'Yeah, OK.' A bit of not getting your way? ... 'OK.' A bit of having to wait? ... 'OK.' A bit of being treated unfairly? ... 'OK.' A bit of not being heard? ... 'OK.' A bit of things being too slow? ... 'OK.' A bit of your mind misbehaving? ... 'OK.' A bit of violent passion arising in your mind? ... 'OK.' Feeling humiliated? ... 'OK.' Feeling you can't make it? ... 'OK.' How much is it worth? How many of these things are you going to react to? How many of your programs are you going to buy into? Turning away – how much is it worth? What does it take? Realizing deathlessness is not a small thing, not just a matter of calming your mind down a little bit. The stilling of *saṅkhāra* – all those passions and tenacious habits of jealousy, greed, compulsiveness, impatience, restlessness, moaning, justifications, defensiveness, fear and anxiety – takes some doing!

What support is there for that? Being together supports it. It's important to bear in mind that everybody gets this; everybody is going through some difficulty or struggle – it could be physical pain, painful memories, hurt feelings or difficult lifestyles – so a little more compassion, patience and openness for others is helpful. We definitely need to

encourage these qualities in ourselves. We need to open that quality of goodwill and compassion to the conditioned world as it appears around us. People you see are not what you see. What they're experiencing is not what you see. They're experiencing kamma, struggle, aspirations, difficulties and efforts. Some generosity of heart is definitely needed. If you cultivate that towards others, there's a strong likelihood it might direct itself towards you: you might be able to be a little more generous and compassionate to yourself, because it's the same experience, the same set of programs occurring. So there's a big pay-off when we begin to turn things around. Compassion is one way of turning them around.

There must be a better response to suffering than moaning! It takes a few years to get that one. When I was a little lad I used to have temper tantrums. By age sixty, I think I just got over it. I learned how to not show it so much, but there was still a little bit of reaction when things weren't going my way or weren't quick enough. I consider that to be pretty good. I was grinding down that tendency, realizing: 'This is not getting me anywhere. Getting my own way isn't getting me anywhere useful. It's getting me to the next traffic jam.' Have you ever seen that when you're driving? Everybody is rushing in their cars ... just to get to the next traffic jam! 'All right, I'll put my foot down, cut this guy off, barge in front of this guy, break the speed limit, jump the lights, hurry up!' You saved twelve seconds and you got to the next traffic jam quicker. That's what getting your own way is like. Yes, you get a little bit, but then you get to the next traffic jam, because the traffic jam is created by *your refusal to flow* with the change of conditions. When they're slow, you go slow; when they're fast, you go fast. You flow, therefore there are no traffic jams – things are flowing. And sometimes it's time to park and wait, so you're breathing in and breathing out. You can always do some of that. That's the way you start to challenge those tenacious *saṅkhāras*; that's the way you begin to turn them around.

There are three bases of *saṅkhāra*. The *vacī-saṅkhāra* is the verbal activation, the verbalization: all the thought programs bubbling away, the inner chatter, and of course the outer chatter – the two go together. You can rejoice in interesting thoughts, wonderful ideas, visions, funny thoughts and great jokes. When you rejoice in them and make much of them, you end up getting enmeshed in them, so be cautious, restraint is helpful. I made a practice of not thinking about what I don't need to think about and of not having an opinion about things if I don't need to. That takes some doing because I can think a lot and I can easily have an opinion. If we don't need to have an opinion, why put energy into it?

Of course, the thinking that we often confront in meditation is just the tip of the iceberg; it's just the froth on the surface of the sea. What's more important is the *citta-saṅkhāra*, because it's what gives rise to so much thinking. The *citta-saṅkhāra* is the quality of impulse, intentionality, volition, inclination, push, wish, aspiration, craving, desire, ill-will, goodwill ... everything that streams out. Because of the constant bubbling, it urges and begins to speak and chat. Sometimes it's confusing, so you wonder, 'Why is so much thinking going on? It's not even that much fun; some of it's just twaddle.' It's going on because beneath that there's this bubbling, this heaving – like when the sea is heaving, there are suds and froth coming up.

When you have a train of thought, one way to check what's really going on underneath is to find one word that sums up the mood of that train of thought. Is it 'happy', 'complaining', 'excited', 'nervous', 'anxious', 'frightened'? Is it 'craving for something'? What's the one word that sums it up? Through this process called 'deep attention' or 'proper attention', you're pruning a thought down to the emotion that's causing it to rise: 'This is anxiety. That's why I'm always planning the future! That's why I'm trying to figure out what I'm doing in May 2019. That's why I always wonder what would happen if ...!' Anxiety is the feeling of, 'I've got to keep everything sorted out, controlled, nice

and steady!' There is this underlying insecurity, uncertainty, doubt, lack of groundedness and trust. These are not accusations. It's not that you decided to do that. This is the virus we've all been infected by, which is called 'ignorance'.

Ignorance does weird things to a human being. One of the weird things it does is that it causes this mechanism called 'clinging'. We cling to the future, to the past, to impressions of ourselves and others. We try to get it all sorted, to get it under control, and, as you know, it doesn't. Life keeps wiggling like a snake. You can't pin it down; it keeps shifting. When the mind can't cling to external things, it clings back and says: 'It's because you're not trying hard enough! There's something wrong with you! You're not controlling your life! It must be something you're not doing right! You must be an ineffective person!' The clinging whips round like a snake; it starts to bite you. This is what we are infected by.

You need to see life as a natural process. Can you tell a tree, 'I want you to grow this much today and this much tomorrow. I want one leaf to come out of there, and I don't want those leaves to droop - nice and straight!?' It's not going to happen, is it? And yet we expect the organic experience of our body-mind to come out nice, straight, clean, tidy and exactly the right type. It's not going to happen! Can you live with the chaos without feeling rattled by it? Can you find a balance by taking it just a moment at a time? Try to behave ethically, morally, truthfully, kindly towards yourself and others. That's the best it's going to be. There is no such thing as a secure job. There's no secure house. Nothing is secure! Can you get it? Is that devastating? It's not that there is something wrong with you; it just *is* that way. The best thing you can do is learn to surf the chaos, rather than go under it or freeze, and this in itself takes some doing.

Why is there so much thinking? Why so much planning, complaining and criticism of yourself and others? 'You failed at the game of life.

You can't get it together!' It's because you try to hold it and make it a certain way. Not only do we all have that virus, but mainstream society believes in it: 'Be happy! Be successful! Look, she's great: she's on the billboard, looking happy and successful. *She's* sorted out! The successful people are sorted out!' But they don't exist, they're just images. Then you find out that some high-flying, successful, smooth, effective, businesslike person has a substance abuse problem or beats his kids up or ends up cracking up and jumping out of a window. The amount of gripping and control they needed to try and make it steady has caused their system to malfunction. That's what happens. People crack up. But they don't put that on the billboards! 'Learn how to be a nervous wreck!' It's always, 'Get yourself a new Lexus!' ... and zoom, zoom, zoom ... to the next traffic jam!

You need to recognize that how you are is exactly how you are. Can you be with that? You can, actually. That's the beauty. I'm not trying to make it miserable, I'm just saying it straight. You can be with that, you can open around that, you can release around that. But generally we only do it when we don't have any other options, when we can't wriggle around it. We let go to a certain extent, but we finally let go because we have no other choice. That's also one of the realities of training: we make vows and decide to live under a discipline because they hold us. At first, you might think, 'Oh no! I can't go on like this!', but after a while you realize, 'That was worth it! It can happen.' So we're tackling the *citta-saṅkhāra* until it stops that reckless push and pull, that grasping. Then we begin to enter the sphere, the domain of letting go, which is the gate to the Deathless.

What is the relationship between the *kāya* (body) and the *citta*? They have a partnership. They both feel. They are affected by feeling. What is 'feeling'? It flashes, doesn't it? There's a push that comes out of feeling. When it's pleasant, we think, 'Oh, that's lovely!' When it's painful, we immediately react: 'Oh, no!' Feeling does that. It pushes, it nudges. Then

saṅkhāra picks up that nudge and runs with it. With pleasure, it goes: 'I'm going to go and get some more of that!' With displeasure, it goes: 'I can't! ... I'm not going to stand this another moment! ... You can't do this to me! ... I have rights! ...'. Feeling lights the blue touch paper and *saṅkhāra* gets running.

When you contemplate, you look at the different sense-consciousnesses: the eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness and mind-consciousness. They are always lined up in this order. When you run through that list, do you see what's happening? That sequence represents an increasing intensity. With the eye-consciousness, you can see things, but they don't necessarily see you. You can sit back and watch things. You're distant from them. You can be uninvolved. The eye-consciousness is relatively cool. When you look around, there's always a distance. You have the impression: 'I'm separate from it.' It's not very intense at all. The ear-consciousness is 'around me', isn't it? The world I'm hearing could be near or far. I'm in the middle of it. It's a little more emotional. I'm more affected because I'm surrounded by what I hear, and it can hear me.

What happens with the nose-consciousness? Something *enters* me. 'You get up my nose!', as we say. It jumps in. It's not around me, it's coming in – even if it's only for a few moments. It's a very reactive sense, isn't it? We smell the fragrance of flowers: 'Nice!' ... or the foulness of stench – and we quickly recoil! It's getting more intense. Then, there's the tongue-consciousness. What you taste is going to go down your throat; it's really going to get into you! Then, the body-consciousness: when you touch something, there's no distance at all. What you touch touches you. You'd better be careful! This is becoming rather intense! There is no distance any more. You can't touch something and not have it touch you. It could be a nice, warm blanket on a cold day. It could be a sweaty duvet. It could be a menacing grip around your throat. It could be a hug. Whatever it is, you jump; there is no distance. This is getting pretty intense!

Finally, there's the mind-consciousness. Whatever occurs in your mind, not only does it touch you, but you become it. It's completely merged. You experience yourself primarily as your mind. That's very intense because any thought, any impression, any emotion feels like *me*. It doesn't feel like something happening to me; it feels definitely like 'me getting upset!' It rushes, it's chaotic.

This is the increasing line the Buddha is pointing to. It starts off with the soft stuff: 'Oh, yeah, visual phenomena, I can let go of that. I can close my eyes. I can also plug some wax in my ears when somebody is doing yoga in the room above my head because I can't stand the noise.' OK, you can get away with that. What about when it gets cold? You sit there, shivering. Where are you going to go? You may be able to put another coat on or turn the heater on – all right! But what about when it gets to your mind? Where are you going to go? Where are you going to run to? It doesn't shut off, does it? Day or night, 24/7, it's on; it's playing those old programs. At any time, those programs can come up, and there you are, in them again. This is very intense. It really feels like *me!* That's the issue.

The eye doesn't feel, but the mind interprets the eye's impression and gets delighted or irritated by a sight. It's the mind that does that. Only the mind and the body feel. The effect of feeling is this constant flash and push going on, popping round in your mind and body. Often it's not too difficult, but it's still churning. Sometimes things are challenging: you're hurt by the words of another, you experience painful memories and so on. That feeling is pushing into your mind and the *saṅkhāras* – the weeping, the grief, the agitation, the resentment, the feeling of fear or anxiety – are there. You're pinned. Where are you going to go to then? That's the problem with sense-consciousness. The Buddha said it's like being stabbed with spears or shot with arrows.⁵⁹ But you can come out of this, you can turn away from this; you can

59. Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.63.

steady *saṅkhāra* through the development of mind and the development of body. This is how you do it, and you do it because you have to – you have to, because there’s nowhere to run. In situations of restraint where there’s less wiggle room, you can’t just go for a walk, have a cup of coffee or switch something on: you’re stuck with this body-mind. Sometimes it’s fine and pleasant; sometimes it’s dull and boring, and you’re fed up. Sometimes you’re elated by plans and visions: ‘Oh, I’m really going to do that! I’ll save the world! Why sit there and meditate and waste my time?’ It’s constantly churning.

Why do we need to cultivate body when the problem lies in the mind? If it’s properly cultivated, the body can provide a mooring post: it’s the ground, the stabilizer. It also knows how to discharge energy. All that push of the mind sends a lot of energy into the system. Sometimes you can get quite heated or feel very heavy, tense, tight or disoriented. What’s happening is that all the *vedanā* and the *saṅkhāras* are pushing and driving, churning up energy. Eventually you feel bunged up in your head or fidgety and restless; you’re twitching all the time. For example, if you’re thinking, ‘Oh, watching that dang breath again! I’m going to go nuts!’, gently breathe out within that experience. The body knows how to discharge; the mind doesn’t – not by itself. This is how you allow the discharge to happen: relax, open the palms of the hands, open the soles of the feet, relax the jaw, open the temples of the head, the sockets of the eyes and the forehead, drop your shoulders, loosen your belly – breathing out, releasing. You begin to see that those mental, emotional or psychological patterns have a body correlative, and you work on their bodily aspect. It may not give you clear solutions as to why you feel this way, what you’re going to do with the rest of your life, how you’re going to sort out this person and so forth, but it will tell you how to stop suffering. For right now, you take some intensity out. Then you may see things more clearly.

This is the development of body, and you need to do that, otherwise there's this kind of psychological tennis match happening in your mind. You're constantly trying to correct yourself: 'Stop thinking that! Stop that silly thought! ... No, you stop! ... I must stop thinking that I must stop thinking that silly thought; I should be more accepting! ... Well, how do you do acceptance? ... I don't know how to do acceptance ... Ah, that's doubt! I shouldn't have doubt either ... Just let go! ... Let go of what? What should I do? ... I'm thinking too much! ... How do I stop all this thinking? ... Perhaps thinking is OK? ... It's a good way of looking at it! I better write that down actually: "Be happy, thinking is good for you!" I could even develop a new spiritual programme: "Thinking is good for you" ... Oops! That's another ten minutes gone! ... Oh well, only another forty to go!' Do you want to spend your life doing that – playing tennis matches in your head? Or is it better to say, 'This is restlessness; this is ill-will. It feels like this. And when I feel like that, there's tension in my chest and a gripping in my face. Why don't I relax that, soften my gaze and loosen my belly?' You downshift the energy that keeps that process going. Then things change. That's the development of body.

What about the development of mind? One of the ways you develop the mind is by cultivating this sense of acceptance. In a way, it's very similar to the development of body. As you widen your mind, you widen your focus. Whatever arises, it arises: here it is. You develop acceptance and also a sense of self-respect by recognizing, 'I am making the effort to accept difficult conditions; this is worthy. I could be projecting it onto somebody else, but I'm accepting it. This in itself is worthy. Let's have a little bit of self-respect with this acceptance.' You widen and stabilize the mind. Then you start to recognize the difference between the mind as container and the mind as content.

The mind as content is this constant churning of emotions and thoughts – the psychology. The mind as container is the knowing,

the space within which things occur. If you can properly and fully give attention to the quality of that space, opening to it, praising it, valuing it, your attention shifts from the content to the container and the content begins to fade because you're not giving it any energy. Wherever you put your attention, you give energy, so the more intensely you attend to your difficulties in that way, strangely enough, you give them more power. It doesn't mean you should repress or neglect the difficulties. Instead, you are opening, sensing the emotional stuff, the psychological stuff within a space of acceptance. It's not spacing out. There's a careful balance there, holding your stuff with a patient, accepting heart, and valuing that: 'This is what I have to be with now.' You develop tremendous, deep patience and gut-level compassion – a sense of 'Wow! Everybody gets this!'

Remember, there is nothing wrong with you. We all caught the infection, and we all have the cure: turning away, giving less attention, being less fixated, frazzled and infatuated with the content of the mind, looking at it with dispassion. That leads to the stilling of *saṅkhāras* and the destruction of craving – the craving to be somebody who's got it together or the craving to be the 'model person' or the 'normal person' who nobody is. You might wish, 'If only I was normal!', but there are no 'normal' people. The normal person is *you* – in other words, a container with a lot of content that churns around: that's the norm. And to attain that norm, a certain powerful quality of craving is being broken up – the craving to be something or to form an image. The container doesn't have an image – it's just *that*.

By and large, the unawakened, untrained mind copes with this chaos of *saṅkhāras* by establishing a kind of 'super-*saṅkhāra*' to patrol the mind. You can imagine the mental content as being like plasma or jelly, churning, gurgling away. You squeeze it and a little thing pops up into a protuberance that looks at the rest of it. This protuberance is called *me*. And *me* in there is going to sort my mind out. *Me* – this little thing that's emerged – watches my mind and says, 'You behave yourself! You

shouldn't be that way! Don't! Shut that one up! ... That didn't happen! It does a lot of that. It's a spin doctor. This protuberance thinks it's separate from the mind, but it's actually something that the mind forms to try to manage this rather chaotic experience of feeling, perceptions, sensations, *saṅkhāras*, choices and so forth. Somebody has to manage it, so this thing pops up.

It's pretty busy because it feels it should be effective and good at its job. And other people confirm that. They say, 'You should behave yourself! You shouldn't have those nasty thoughts! You should be happy!', so you think, 'All right! OK!' and you force a fake smile. That expectation then goes into that little *me* thing: 'OK, shut up! Stop that! You're supposed to be this. Come on, go and get one of those. If you can't get one, fake one!' So everybody is saying, 'I'm fine, you're fine. Yeah, we're all fine. We're all happy here, everything's fine. I'm cool, I'm all right, having a good day ...'. Liars! But that's the currency, isn't it? Most of the time, you can manage; you're keeping stuff down, pushing it aside and getting a little bit of the 'feel goods' to keep the troops happy in there. But once that *me* thing has arisen, it starts to need an identity; it assumes it is something, it wants to *be* something. It's called the self-image. We place a lot of hope on that. And we expect a lot out of it, but it really is just a system that is trying to make the mind manageable.

Most people do good most of the time, but sometimes we just can't. The self can't manage the pressure, stress, grief, bereavement, panic or chaos, and it breaks down. This isn't just chit-chat that's happening in your mind; this is major floods of emotions – and often they're not even verbal. Some of it comes from shock or trauma, and gets very intense. It can be so intense that the mind basically blacks out, cuts off. When people have breakdowns, sometimes they don't even know where they are or what's happened. This is deeper than just a bit of mental chit-chat. I've talked with people who've been raped and they never feel safe; they have this constant sense of nervousness and threat. Many

people who have been abused as children never feel safe. They never feel they're right; something is wrong with them all the time. There's nothing verbal going on. This is the stuff that doesn't speak. It becomes you. We become the unloved, and we believe in it. We so believe in it that we don't even know that we're loved. That's tragic.

You can see people living in a cloud of gloom and self-hatred, thinking that other people don't like them. It's not necessarily verbalized, but there's a certain crushedness of the heart. It's not anybody's fault; we just got a big dose of ignorance. Maybe somebody else's ignorance was dumped on us. Maybe we had to face a tragedy that we weren't capable of managing, such as a suicide or bereavement. The mind just collapsed. The self couldn't handle it, so it shut down. Then you have these patterns that get stuck in the body: fear patterns, guilt patterns, shame patterns. Some things can't be dealt with through listening to the noises in your head, because they don't speak. They freeze you in your throat. They grip you in the belly, and you wonder: 'What's that?' But you don't know, because they have no voice.

This is why you cultivate body. In your body you can feel pressure and closing: the skin closes, the face withdraws, the shoulders hunch – you know something has happened. When you come back to the sitting posture, sense your spine, open up and feel what you feel. Then that thing begins to speak. It might speak in strange moods and feelings; that's how it works out. You realize that in a generation of people infected with ignorance, on fire with craving – the political situation, bombs being dropped, racial discrimination, violence towards other people – there's a lot of damage. You can't think your way out of it. It goes deeper than that. It gets under your skin and becomes you. Because it becomes your mind, it becomes you. And as it becomes you, you start doing the same thing to other people – you transmit the disease. You don't want to, but if your dad beat you up, the likelihood is that you're going to beat your kids up, because you haven't been able

to handle rage and frustration; nobody showed you how to. If your dad and your mum weren't able to handle their stuff, the likelihood is that you got infected with that. And it goes on and on, from generation to generation.

But there is an end to this, otherwise it would be cruel to point it out. In fact, to *not* point it out makes the practice seem a bit facile. There's something to be deeply changed and transformed here. Although the words 'dispassion' or 'destruction of craving' may sound ethereal, the transformation they refer to actually comes down to the particular details of what our desperation or hunger is around – the personal details of what *saṅkhāras* are firing. Then it suddenly becomes very real, personal and intense. This is what we live in, and restraint – the ability to hold your stuff – is a big part of that. If you can't hold it, you have to find a way to expand your space. If you can't hold it while sitting, try to do it while walking. The propulsion to move forward or to get away, the propulsion to blame somebody, the endless rehearsal of our wounds and blemishes, the endless fantasizing, the endless self-criticism, the feeling there's something wrong with me that could be made right if I got something – what does it take to turn those *saṅkhāras* around?

Stop, restrain it. This is not self, this is a *saṅkhāra*. No *saṅkhāra* arrives at nibbāna – they do not go that way! You're not going to get off the hook until that has dropped, and when that drops, you will feel joyful, full, free, happy – not empty! Those who are tethered by restraint have broken the shackles of craving. Those who are not restrained, seemingly free agents, are driven by craving. That turns it upside down, doesn't it? All the people who are keeping precepts are the ones whose craving is going to break; there is freedom in that. All the people running around, making lots of money are the people who have the hook of craving down their gullet, and it's pulling them around. What you see is not people, what you see is *saṅkhāras* pulled around by craving. There's nothing to envy about people who are getting their own way. You

think, 'Uh-oh! She's getting her own way: there's going to be a bill to pay in a little while!' There's death for a start. Contemplate these things, develop that restraint – remember it. Restraint is painful to desire and humiliating to *saṅkhāras*, but if liberation is what matters most in your life, you think, 'Oh, thank you! You helped to get that hook out of my jaw.' You feel that sense of release from these pressures in your body and in your mind. You're turning away, losing interest, not buying into the glow messages, the passion messages and the insidious messages of the aggregates of form, feeling, perception and *saṅkhāras*. You've had enough; you're fed up with them! This is *nibbidā*. You're turning away. This is peaceful. This is sublime. This is the stilling of *saṅkhāra*. This is the entry into the Deathless. No one who has entered the Deathless ever regretted it and said, 'Oh, dang it! I was having such a good time! Now that I've gone on to this Deathless stuff, I can no longer go and party like I used to!' They never say that. They say, 'This is a relief! This is peaceful, this is sublime!'

Therefore, please make use of this special time. How special it is! It's made special because of the number of you, and the commitments, the purposes, the intentions and the experiences you're bringing in here – and also because of the challenges you meet just by being in a group. The rough stuff is as valuable as the smooth stuff. If it's getting rough, it's good: you must be getting somewhere, so keep going! Learn the message: turn it around. This is for your long-lasting welfare and happiness.

Here, Now – Meeting in the Blessing

THIS REFLECTION WAS OFFERED

ON THE LAST MORNING OF THE RETREAT – 19 MAY 2017.

We're tuning into the flow of events and taking that pause moment. We're conscious of the flow of external events and how the mind grabs it – planning, packing bags, cleaning the room, catching the six o'clock train ... tomorrow ... tidying up, sorting that out, getting ready for this and that ... 'Ajahn so-and-so is coming over', 'I have to speak to Sister so-and-so' ... Just take a pause. There'll always be time for that. There's the flow of events, and there's the pause. It's not that difficult to do, but it's difficult to remember – the pause button. There can be a softening from that rush forward or flutter. What's here now? What's *always* here now? We're opening to the Deathless by directing the *citta* away from the *khandhas*, from the world that we construct so effortlessly, yet exhaust ourselves with. We turn away from these compulsive constructions – which we barely decide to do: they just happen – and hit the pause button on them.

Constructing the world and the future is a reflex: 'It's important ... You have to ... It's necessary ... Don't wait!' Pause, open and direct the mind to here, now. Feel the warmth of your body, the rhythm of your breathing; listen to the flutter and scurry of thoughts. We call them 'the unbalanced spin dryer'. When you put wet clothes in a spin dryer and they're not centred, the spin dryer starts going: 'klunka, klunka, klunka ...'. Then you switch it off and it goes: 'klunk ... klunk ... klunk ... hhhiiioooou!' This is called 'the five aggregates'. Pause, switch the spin dryer off ... breathing in, breathing out.

It's not that we desperately want to be calm or that we expect life to be steady, peaceful, harmonious and have no edges in it. It doesn't have to be externally calm. If you remember where that pause button is and you know the opening that can occur just with that, then it's all right for life to be busy. But in my opinion, we have to get our finger on that pause button many times a day. If you do it ten times a day for fifteen seconds, is that difficult? Simply ask: 'Where am I now?' You feel the push through the mind, the energy rushing in your body, the tightening in your belly, the scurry of thought ... and there they are. You're turning away from that, and behind that, here, now, there's the unconstructed, the unconstructing, the non-constructed.

'This is peaceful, this is sublime: the stilling of *saṅkhāras*, the relinquishment of all attachments, the destruction of craving ...'⁶⁰ – the craving to get it finished, to get it done, to go to the next thing, to make sure we get it right ... the craving to become clear and complete *in the future*. We hope we will be clear and complete in that wonderful future ... that never happens! We wait for things to be settled, finished, tidied and just sweetly cruising along – the golden future that never happens! Do you see the hook? 'Just run a little bit faster, and you'll get there!', 'Shrug that thing off and you'll get there!' That's craving. Nobody gets there; everybody's there already. Don't buy into the powerful messages of the constructed world, the messages you see around you. Everybody's playing that game. The media is playing it, advertisements are playing it big time, really revving up that golden future ... at the end of a contract: 'Free access for only £39 a month!' That sounds believable, doesn't it? Just pause: 'What is this?' Pause ... here, now.

Leaving Amaravati – what leaves Amaravati? The *khandhas* (aggregates) – sensations, feeling, perceptions, energies and sense-

60. Majjhima Nikāya 64 and Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.32, 9.36, 10.6 and 10.60.

consciousness – leave Amaravati. They arrived, they have to go. That’s the message of the aggregates. There can only be separation, regret, things unfinished, parting from friends, separation and death. In brief, that’s the journey of aggregates: to death, to the sense of separateness and leaving things unfinished, incomplete. Everybody dies incomplete, in terms of the aggregates. ‘There are things I haven’t done, things I wish I’d said ...’. It’s never finished.

These reflections are little slogans or images that you can bear in mind, if you like. *Saṅkhāras* are these onward propellants, energies, activations, formative tendencies, the constructions that say, ‘Move on, and you’ll get this completed’ – but it doesn’t! *Saṅkhāras* don’t finish until you stop them. They only end when you stop believing in them. If you follow them, they don’t end. They go from this to that, to this, to that, on and on ... that’s the dream journey, isn’t it? There’s always another thing to do, another thing to sort out, another thing to acquire, another thing to check, another thing to clean and tidy up, something to prepare for the next thing ... that also leads to the next thing ... That’s the way it is. We got into that by being born.

There’s also the *citta*, but it’s often obscured, not apparent, not traceable; we can’t see it. All we see are the aggregates. Everything we detect with our senses – our thoughts, energies and feelings – is the movement of the aggregates, so we need to turn away from that, and bring the mind back to *here, now*. Try to remember these two words and practise them. It can be a little slogan: ‘Practise here, now.’ This is something you can do for ten seconds, but do it often. Do it after breakfast and after the washing-up. Do it when you park your car, then when you close the door ... when you open the door and sit down ... Here ... Here. This is the way through the body.

Here is the sense of location. You have this *rūpa* (bodily form), which you can see with your eyes and feel with sensations, but you also have

this embodied aspect of *citta*, which is the sense of *here*. When you contemplate that, you ask yourself, 'Where is *here*?' Is it Amaravati? Is it my house? Is it my feet? No, it's behind all that. The *here* is a kind of locational quality that has no particular manifestation, because wherever you are, you're *here*, right? It has no specific location in terms of the manifest world, yet there's a sense that you come into it. You experience groundedness, balance and the ability to step back from the momentum of the aggregates: 'Oh, it's like this. And *here* is where it always was.' Practise that *here*.

Turn away from the form-body, the *rūpa-kāya*. Remember death. This is something to reflect upon at least once a day, perhaps in the evening: there might not be a tomorrow. Things aren't finished, are they? Now is the time to 'finish' them. Now is the time to say, 'Oops ... Sorry! ... Finished.' The regrets, the grudges, the momentum – now is the time to finish them, to let them go. Now is the time to take your blessings with you. Reflect on the death of the body, its breaking up. When you see a corpse, at first it looks very similar to a living body, but it's dead: it's *not* the same. The *citta* has left; the body is no longer vibrant. That very quality that we thought was a body with its glow, its vibrancy and its potential, is gone. It's just meat. Bring up an image like that. It's not so easy these days because people like to hide them.

When I was in Tibet a few years ago, I went to a sky burial. They don't have enough earth to bury bodies and not enough wood to burn them, so they have to drag them out in the open and let the vultures eat them. When you go to a sky burial, you stand in a stone precinct and there are a couple of guys with butcher's aprons on and big hooks in their hands – like meat hooks. Then a little cart with two bags on it comes up the hill. They push the bags off the cart onto the ground and rip them open: two bodies. You look at one of them and it looks like a naked person sleeping. It's fresh, not deteriorated at all. The butcher walks up to it and puts a meat hook in it and pulls it around. He pulls out a

big knife – about fourteen inches long – and starts slashing it ... and you're going: 'Ahh!' Something hits your guts. 'It could have been my aunt or my cousin.' Slash! Slash! You look around and there's a man up on the hillside waving little flags, which are trying to keep the birds back, trying to restrain them. Eventually the birds get so tumultuous that they put the flags down. Then a wave of vultures comes down the hill, like a tsunami, and these two bodies are buried under this huge, pulsating wave of feathers and beaks. Occasionally you see a little bit of a foot flying through the air ... There's an incredible tumult ... and then they're gone! You look ... There's nobody there – in just ten minutes!

Wow! Look at this body here ... it's vulture food! What was all that? How many times do people look in the mirror and think, 'Oh! Look at my double chin, oh dear! Look at these wrinkles! My hair is going grey ... I need to put some powder on my nose ...'. How much energy goes into that? People try to push against the relentless tide of age. Age is waving its influence: the wrinkle, the greying, the sagging. And there are all the social things that we infer: too fat, too tall, too short, too spotty, nose wrong, ears wrong, eyes wrong ... all that kind of stuff ... for vulture food! Don't worry, the vultures won't mind! With the perspective of a sky burial you think, 'Oh wow! What was all this about?'

Remember death. Now, it seems impossible. Death is a theory; it happens to other people. You don't *really* get it ... until perhaps you stand next to a dead body and suddenly your body gets it. You feel your body getting it in the guts. It knows, something knows: this *rūpa-kāya* is just a shell. Use it wisely. Use it for grounding, use it for establishing *here*. Use it to bring forth your intentions into skilful actions: that's using it wisely. That's keeping it tidy. That's how you fashion your body. You don't bother with other things. You have a body that fashions skilful intention and deep presence. You can sit in it and it can discharge stress. You feel grounded and present, and you can get some perspective on the mind.

This is one of our daily recollections: ‘The body is of the nature to die.’ It’s of the nature to undergo this profound change, so it’s something to reflect upon many times. It’s inevitable. Those who have reflected on it repeatedly have no fear. That is what this reflection does: it ends the fear and nervousness. You got born – that was a struggle; you’ll die – that’s a struggle. But you can do it, you can get through. Have no fear.

When we were reading the dedications for the chanting yesterday, we heard that somebody died at four years old. Living in a monastery, we hear this every day. Every day the notes are coming: ‘My son, twenty-five ... My wife, together for thirty-five years ... My dear father ... My mother ...’. A baby died in the womb, so the mother has to give birth to a dead baby. Death doesn’t have a time: it happens any time, any day. There’s no age on it. It’s not on the other side of the golden sunset. We need to bear this in mind, and it’s not to create misery. If you bring it to your *citta* time and time again, if you pause and reflect, you will come through the wanting to dismiss it or shrug it off: ‘Oh well, I’ll deal with it when it happens.’ You first come through the disorientation of ‘What am I going to do about tomorrow? What about my dog?’ Then you come to a place of surrender and peace. You get a sense of the real value of what you have been cultivating. When the tumult of the aggregates settles, you begin to sense, ‘Oh, here is openness, here is radiance, here is peacefulness, here is strength.’ It was always shrouded by this world of appearances, but when the appearances are dropped, we are able to see more clearly.

There is another interesting reflection that I picked up from Luang Por Paññāvaddho: ‘The *citta* is real, but it doesn’t exist. The *khandhas* exist, but they’re not real.’ The aggregates are insubstantial, they’re smoke and mirrors – powerful, dazzling, stinging, poignant, cloudy, overwhelming – and yet, where did they go? They shift suddenly: we’re happy one moment, miserable the next; healthy, then sick; praised, loved, adored, offended, insulted ... Nothing shifts

as fast as that. It's called 'existence' (*bhava*), the realm of becoming. What's 'real' is that which is always unchanging, here, now. That's called *citta*. You can't quite find it, but it can know existence as what it is. There's tremendous fearlessness in that.

There is another reflection we are called upon to bring to mind. I'll go through it fairly quickly. I'll try to lob on one or two impressions and you can turn them over. *Kamma* means action: intended action or action that the *citta* has been activated by – when the *citta* has been jumped into. It can happen either through your own choice or through the choice of others, so it's not necessarily you who did it all. It could be through social influences. Something pushed a button and the *citta* jumped in. Somebody told you to do something and you jumped into it. Still, the *citta* made a decisive jump; the *saṅkhāra* rushed out. This is *kamma*, action. The story of action is that we become it, we're filled with it. Something drags us into it, pushes us into it, rushes us through it and proliferates into it. That's the result, which is called 'the acquisition' (*vipāka*). That which has been acquired becomes our space, our 'self': 'I am one of these ... This is my nature ... This is my character ... This is my life ... I'm only this ... I'm always this ... I never will be this ...'. That's the acquisition and it's dog-eared, fixed and believable.

You might believe: 'Because I'm just this, I can never really be awakened. I'm just living in Neasden. Who got enlightened in Neasden?' Well, it could be a niche for you! Even the Buddha Gotama comes from some dumpy, little place. They try to make it sound like a big deal, but I think it was a bit like Shropshire, Calabria or Nebraska (if you're American): somewhere out of the way, a little nook, some nowhere place. The Buddha's father was elected head of this nowhere dump. They called him '*Mahārāja*', but it was in the Neasden of India – another no-account, a little, petty princeling. Fortunately the Buddha didn't stay with that impression! He ended up dying under a tree in some other little dump: Kusinara. Ānanda said, 'Oh, please, don't die here! There are great

towns you could die in. Don't die under a tree in this dump!' But the Buddha replied, 'That's fine ...'.⁶¹

So the Buddha was a nobody who wasted his entire life – only in terms of the aggregates of course! He was shuffling around India, sometimes without food, living in rags, sleeping on the ground ... In terms of the aggregates, what a waste! But he didn't believe in it. What do you believe in? Who do you think you are? You associate with your town, your country, your parents, your body, your job, your marriage – that's acquisition. You don't have to fight with acquisitions to relinquish them; you just need to recognize: here, now. The relinquishment of acquisitions certainly needs pause. Then you ask: 'What action is appropriate?' You bring forth your faith, your purity. There's a chance in this lifetime to bring forth skill for your welfare and for the welfare of others. Bring forth the good, the generous, the loving, the peaceful, the steady. This is not a vision of big things; it's a matter of handling your body and speech, let them go forth, and hold your energies clearly. It's called 'the kamma that leads to the end of kamma' – and it leads to the end of acquisitions.

We're not doing things in order to become somebody. We don't do things in order to be a success. We're doing things for the purity of handling the doing energy – the *saṅkhāra* energy. We're bringing it forth steadily, clearly, honestly and patiently, because this is what we acquired in coming into birth. Whether it's just opening a door, pausing, waiting or offering a service, when you hold it clearly, that's the purity of kamma. There's no sense of what I will be, what other people will think, whether I'll become known or I'm just a nobody: it's just pure action. We're asked to remember this possibility. Do your action – whether it's the movement of your body or the forming of a speech – at the right time and the right place. Say what is necessary.

61. *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, *Dīgha Nikāya* 16.

That's the kamma that leads to the end of kamma because there isn't the acquisition. Instead there's space and the feeling of beauty. It's not the annihilation of *saṅkhāra*, but a careful stilling. There's a certain beauty, a blessing that is given to the world. So handle your actions, however small or great – a thought, physical movement, a project. Stay with it, and remember: it's never exactly right. There's always a way you could imagine it could be better, but don't do that. Then you get the result or the 'non-result', the sense that something beautiful has occurred.

This is why the Buddha is called 'the Blessed One'. Although we can say that the Blessed One abides in deathlessness, in stillness, he lived a pretty busy life in some respects. They say he slept two hours a night. Maybe that's an exaggeration, but he slept minimally. The rest of the time he was walking, teaching *devas* in the evening, teaching the brahma gods, presenting Dhamma verbally and non-verbally: through actions, gestures, space, silence ... He was always manifesting for the welfare of the *devas* and humans. He offered his blessings through handling these kamma-forming actions, these *saṅkhāras* carefully and selflessly. So stay with your blessing, with your capacity to bless. This is a special kind of kamma in a world that believes in frantic action: development, progress, results, promotion, performance, more, quicker, faster ... This is the kamma that leads to more and more acquisition ... until the mind cracks up! But the kamma that leads to the end of kamma is the Eightfold Path: right action, right speech ... right now.

Reflect on this, consider this, because we're not going to be sitting still for much longer. We will act. Don't neglect the actions of tidying your room, getting in your car, taking a moment to pause, expressing goodwill ... Give it quality. Deepen the quality. Then you'll find that your mind isn't rushing on, because you're satisfied where you are. This is the blessing. And the more we all act in that way, the more we pick it up. That's why it's such a blessing to abide in the presence of

people who've trained and experienced that – such as all of you. We pick up something through our skin, through our nerve endings, about composure, grace, deference, pausing and gentleness. You begin to pick it up and you feel better as a result. You don't experience a rushing on, push, shove, grab or blur, but a sense of steadying. Then you're holding the Dhamma. I personally feel that, when we have received so much, it's a natural duty to give, and there's one thing we can give all the time: presence. It's probably the most important thing, because people pick it up. 'How come he's not getting wired up? How come he's not angry? How come she's softer, steadier, not flustered, not reactive? Hmm, what's that?' You're teaching. You're teachers. That's a responsibility to live it, and it's for your own welfare, isn't it?

There's a lovely saying from the Christian saint St Francis to his disciples. He said, 'Teach the Gospels ceaselessly. If necessary, use words.' By your deeds, people will know the teachings. Be someone who abides in the skilfulness of their *pāramī* and their deeds – for your welfare and the welfare of others. This is something to remember, to reflect upon, to purify. Then the door to the Deathless remains open. As conditions change and the aggregates move on their ways, take the blessing with you, and be someone who can offer it. It's so needed: the steady heart, the kind touch, the blessing quality ... more important than many things.

Let's close with another image. When I was in Tibet, I was on my way to a pilgrimage on Mount Kailash, which is an amazing place because it's dedicated to the sacred; nothing happens there except that. En route we pull up at some nowhere place – most of Tibet is nowhere. We get out of the land cruiser and sit by the side of the road to eat our little bit of food. Then we notice a little line of people coming down the hill. They look like a ball of rags with a head sticking on the top of it – an incredible sackcloth, layers and layers of grey, brown, ragged, greasy rags moving down the hill. They're coming down and they look at us.

They look at me and their eyes light up. Then one by one, they come forward, bend over and touch their shoulder: they just want a touch, just a touch on their shoulder. OK! When I touch the shoulder there's this kind of dust coming off the rag. They look up and their eyes light with joy. One by one, they're coming down ... And they bring the babies down ... OK, touch the baby. Take it away. Another one coming down ... A whole line of villagers coming down ... And every time I bend up, they look up with their eyes lit up with joy.

After a while, the person I was with started crying. He couldn't handle any more – such vulnerability! People at the end of the material world ... and they weren't asking for money or food, they just wanted a blessing! Their eyes lit up to have a blessing. And where is the blessing? The blessing is when we fully acknowledge our own vulnerability, our own death, our mortality, our pain, uncertainty ... We acknowledge it purely, without wavering. And we acknowledge it in another, purely, without wavering. Then the boundaries disappear, and the sense of *citta* comes forth. The boundaries of the manifest – the skin, the clothes, the hair, the status, the name, the position – are seen to be just rags, of no real value, of no real worth. When those are seen through the *citta*, it rises up. That's where you meet. The meeting is the blessing, and something rejoices in that.

There's this whole dream-world of appearances, of comings and goings, friends, confusions, disappointments, struggles and so on. Yet the moment that drops, the comparisons drop and the blessing comes forth. This is really what we need, in my opinion. This is what the *citta* needs. We keep our requisites minimal. It's always a responsibility to handle that stuff so that it doesn't take over. Don't let it create fever and confusion. Handle it so that it's just enough – just enough rags to wear. And meet in the blessing.

Who knows when my eyes will see you again. We can come and go, but we meet in the blessing and we stay in the blessing every time we pause, drop and open. That's something to take with you.

Glossary

OF PALI AND THAI WORDS

<i>abhaya</i>	fearless, free from fear or danger, safe
<i>abhisankhāra</i>	accumulation, preparation; a deeply constructed condition
<i>adhiṭṭhāna</i>	resolution, resolve
Ajahn (Thai word)	teacher; from the Sanskrit <i>ācārya</i> ; in the Amaravati community, a bhikkhu or siladharā who has completed ten Rains Retreats (<i>vassas</i>)
<i>anagārika/ā</i>	lay male/female novice, postulant
<i>ānāpānasati</i>	mindfulness of breathing
<i>aniccatā</i>	impermanence
<i>anukampati</i>	to sympathize with, to resonate with
<i>anumodanā!</i>	expression of appreciation for the generosity that has been generated
<i>anussati</i>	recollection
<i>arahant</i>	a fully enlightened being
<i>arati</i>	dislike, discontent, aversion, resentment
<i>ātāpī</i>	ardent
<i>ātappa</i>	ardour, eagerness
<i>avijjā</i>	ignorance, obscuration
<i>bhante</i>	sir (honorific for addressing monks)

<i>bhava</i>	becoming, being
<i>bhava-taṇhā</i>	desire to become, achieve or obtain something
<i>bhāvanā</i>	cultivation of mind
<i>bhikkhu</i>	Buddhist monk
<i>Bhikkhu Pāṭimokkha</i>	The 227 training rules for a Buddhist monk
<i>bhikkhuni</i>	Buddhist nun
<i>bodhi</i>	enlightenment
<i>bodhisattva</i>	a person, or a mind, that is resolved on awakening and awakening others
<i>bojjhaṅga</i>	factor of awakening
<i>brahma</i>	highest gods
<i>brahmacariya</i>	holy/spiritual life (specifically monastic), celibacy
<i>brahmavihāra</i>	sublime state of mind; there are four: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.
Buddha	One awakened without a teacher, who teaches others
Buddha-rūpa	Buddha-image
<i>chanda</i>	motivation, desire, interest
<i>citta</i>	heart, mind, active aspect of awareness

<i>citta-saṅkhāra</i>	heart activation, mental program
<i>dāna</i>	generosity; a donated meal
<i>desanā</i>	discourse, instruction
<i>devadūta</i>	literally ‘heavenly messenger’. There are four such messengers: old age, sickness, death and a <i>samaṇa</i> , those which causes one to wake up or question life.
<i>devaloka</i>	heavenly realms
Dhamma	natural law; the teaching of the Buddha
<i>dhamma</i>	phenomenon; mental object
<i>Dhamma-desanā</i>	exposition of the Dhamma
<i>dhammakathā</i>	discussion on Dhamma, suitable conversation (in accordance with the Dhamma)
<i>dhammavicaya</i>	investigation of mental states
<i>diṭṭhi</i>	view(s), opinion
<i>dukkha</i>	literally ‘hard to bear’. Suffering, stress, dis-ease, unsatisfactoriness; one of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena.
<i>farang</i> (Thai word)	foreigner
<i>indriya</i>	spiritual faculties
<i>jhāna</i>	state of absorption
<i>kalyāṇamitta</i>	spiritual friend

<i>kalyāṇamittatā</i>	spiritual friendship
<i>kāma</i>	sense-pleasure
<i>kāma-taṇhā</i>	sense desire, desire for sense-pleasure
<i>kamma</i>	(intentional) action
<i>karuṇā</i>	compassion
<i>kāya</i>	body
<i>kāya-saṅkhāra</i>	bodily activation, bodily programming
<i>Kāyena vācāya va cetasā vā. Buddhē kukammaṃ pakataṃ mayā yaṃ. Buddhō paṭiggaṇhatu accayantaṃ. Kālantare saṃvaritum va buddhe.</i>	By body, speech or mind, for whatever wrong action I have committed towards the Buddha, may my acknowledgement of fault be accepted, that in the future there may be restraint regarding the Buddha.
<i>Kāyena vācāya va cetasā vā. Dhamme kukammaṃ pakataṃ mayā yaṃ. Dhammo paṭiggaṇhatu accayantaṃ. Kālantare saṃvaritum va dhamme.</i>	By body, speech or mind, for whatever wrong action I have committed towards the Dhamma, may my acknowledgement of fault be accepted, that in the future there may be restraint regarding the Dhamma.
<i>khandha</i>	aggregate. There are five aggregates by which the Buddha summarized how existence is experienced (see <i>rūpa, vedanā, saññā, saṅkhāra, viññāṇa</i>).
<i>kuti</i>	a secluded and simple dwelling for a monk or nun

<i>loka</i>	world
Luang Por (Thai word)	Venerable Father
maechee (Thai word)	eight-precept nun
Māgha Pūjā	festival day commemorating the Sangha in the month of Māgha.
Mahārāja	great king
<i>mano</i>	mind organ, mind
<i>mano-viññāṇa</i>	mind-consciousness
Māra	the personification of evil and temptation; death personified
<i>mettā</i>	loving-kindness, goodwill, friendliness
<i>muditā</i>	sympathetic joy, joy at others' welfare, appreciative joy
<i>mudrā</i>	hand gesture on a Buddha-image that conveys a spiritual meaning
nibbāna	literally 'the extinguishing of a fire'; freedom from attachments, quenching, coolness (equivalent to Sanskrit nirvana)
<i>nibbidā</i>	disenchantment, world-weariness
<i>nirāmisā</i>	'having no meat'; free from sensual desires, non-material
<i>nirodha</i>	ceasing, cessation

<i>pabbajjā</i>	going-forth as a novice monk or a <i>śīladharā</i>
<i>pañānāti</i>	to know clearly, to find out, to understand, to distinguish
Pali	the ancient Indian language of the Theravada Pali Canon, akin to Sanskrit
<i>paññā</i>	discernment, wisdom
<i>papañca</i>	conceptual proliferation
<i>pāramī</i>	perfections; skills and virtues that deepen the mind. In the Theravada tradition there are ten: giving, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness and equanimity.
<i>parinibbāna</i>	the decease of an enlightened one
<i>paritta</i>	protection
<i>passaddhi</i>	tranquillity
<i>passambhayaṃ</i>	calming down, quietening, allaying
<i>Pāṭimokkha</i>	Monastic Rule
<i>paṭinissagga</i>	giving up, relinquishment, renunciation
<i>paṭisaṃvedī</i>	one who feels, experiences
<i>piṇḍapāta</i>	alms-round, alms-food
<i>pīti</i>	rapture, joy

<i>pūjā</i>	literally ‘act of honouring’; the ritual of making offerings and chanting to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.
<i>rūpa</i>	form (or bodily form)
<i>rūpa-kāya</i>	form-body
<i>sabai</i> (Thai word)	comfortable, relaxed, happy
<i>sabba</i>	all
<i>saddhā</i>	confidence, faith
<i>sādhana</i>	spiritual exertion towards an intended goal
<i>samādhi</i>	meditative concentration, unification of mind, collectedness
<i>samaṇa</i>	renunciant, contemplative (term for ordained monks and nuns)
<i>samaṇa-saññā</i>	the perception and mind-set of a renunciant who is dependent on alms
<i>sāmaṇera</i>	novice monk
<i>samatha</i>	calm, tranquillity, steadying
<i>sāmisa</i>	fleshy, carnal, worldly
<i>sammā-samādhi</i>	right concentration
<i>sampajāna</i>	fully aware

<i>sampajañña</i>	clear comprehension, full awareness, clear knowing
<i>saṃsāra</i>	endless wandering, unenlightened existence
<i>saṃvara</i>	restraint
<i>saṃvega</i>	sense of urgency
Sangha	1) international community of renunciant disciples (monks and nuns); 2) collective of those who have experienced some degree of realization (ariyan Sangha). As a Refuge, ‘Sangha’ refers to the second meaning.
sangha	local monastic community
<i>sanghāṭī</i>	one of the three robes of a fully ordained monk; one of the five robes of a fully ordained nun
<i>sankhāra</i>	activity, formation, program (by analogy with computer program)
<i>saññā</i>	perception, recognition
<i>sati</i>	mindfulness
<i>sati-sampajañña</i>	mindfulness and full awareness
<i>satimā</i>	mindful
<i>satipaṭṭhāna</i>	foundation(s) for mindfulness, establishment(s) of mindfulness
<i>sekhiyavatta</i>	training rule

<i>sīla</i>	morality, virtue, precept
<i>sīladharā</i>	‘one who upholds virtue’; a term used for Buddhist ten-precept nuns in communities established by Ajahn Sumedho
<i>sīmā</i>	ordination area
<i>siṃsapā</i>	a strong and large tree
<i>sukha</i>	happiness, ease
<i>sutta</i>	discourse of the Buddha or one of his disciples
<i>taṇhā</i>	craving, thirst
<i>Tort Pha Pa</i> (Thai word)	alms-giving ceremony
<i>tudong</i> (Thai word)	the practice of walking in remote places with no guarantees of food or lodgings
<i>upādāna</i>	attachment, clinging, grasping
<i>upadhi</i>	basis of attachment
<i>upajjhāya</i>	preceptor
<i>upekkhā</i>	equanimity
<i>Uposatha</i>	Observance Day: sacred day occurring every lunar fortnight. On this day, Buddhists reaffirm their Dhamma practice in terms of Precepts and meditation. The Sangha will also recite their training rules on this day.

<i>vacī-saṅkhāra</i>	antecedent for speech, verbalization, thought programs
<i>vāsanā</i>	traces; that which remains in the mind, tendencies of the past
<i>Vassa</i>	Rains Retreat
<i>vassa</i>	someone's years in the Sangha
<i>Vaya-dhammā saṅkhārā. Appamādena sampādettha.</i>	All conditioned things are impermanent. Strive on with mindfulness.
<i>vedanā</i>	feeling (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral)
<i>Vesak</i>	commemoration of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and <i>parinibbāna</i> .
<i>vibhava</i>	getting rid of, getting away from, denial, self-abnegation
<i>vibhava-taṇhā</i>	desire to get rid of something, annihilationism
<i>vicāra</i>	the act of considering and assessing; evaluation
<i>vihāra</i>	abode, dwelling place
<i>Vinaya</i>	monastic discipline
<i>viññāṇa</i>	sense-consciousness, discriminative consciousness
<i>vipāka</i>	results (of intentional action)
<i>vipassanā</i>	insight

<i>virāga</i>	dispassion
<i>virīya</i>	energy
<i>vitakka</i>	conceiving
<i>vitakka-vicāra</i>	conceiving and evaluating
<i>viveka</i>	disengagement, detachment
<i>vossagga</i>	relinquishment of any position of self
<i>Wan Phra</i> (Thai word)	Moon Day (full, new or half)
<i>yoniso manasikāra</i>	proper consideration, wise attention, deep attention, 'going to the roots'

Definition of Technical Terms

BY AJAHN SUCITTO

Absorption (*jhāna*)

Absorptions are degrees of meditative concentration. They are states of mind characterized by what is missing (such as hindrances, sense-contact or thinking) and what is present (such as ease). There are four levels of absorption. The first of these *jhānas* has the presence of bringing to mind, evaluation, rapture, ease and one-pointedness (these are defined below). At this level, the mind is removed from the hindrances (for as long as the absorption lasts). This *jhāna* may be developed to give rise to the sequentially deeper absorptions of second, third and fourth *jhāna*. Second *jhāna* leaves bringing to mind and evaluation behind and is supported by confidence, rapture and ease. Third *jhāna* cools the mind so that the rapture disappears and is replaced by equanimity and mindfulness. Ease is still apparent. In the fourth *jhāna*, the mind is so still that only equanimity and mindfulness are discernable.

There are also four successively more subtle mental states that can be accessed from the fourth *jhāna*: ‘the sphere of boundless space’, ‘the sphere of boundless consciousness’, ‘the sphere of nothingness’ and ‘the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception’. These are sometimes classified as the fifth to eighth *jhāna*.

It should be noted that absorptions (especially third and fourth) are comparatively rare among all but experienced meditators.

Affect

The conscious subjective aspect of feeling or emotion; the first resonance of the mind (*citta*) as it registers experience.

Aggregates (*khandhā*)

The five aspects of existence, which are affected by clinging:

Form (*rūpa*): an object that consciousness brings to awareness; often, but not exclusively, a visual object.

Feeling (*vedanā*): an affect in terms of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral tones.

Perception (*saññā*): the act of recognition, and the felt impression or image that this act establishes in the mind.

Activities/programs (*sāṅkhāra*): intention and impulse, the response of the affected mind, both immediate and irrational, and reasoned – see definition: ‘Programs’.

Consciousness (*viññāṇa*): see definition: ‘Consciousness’.

Appreciative joy (*muditā*)

The uplift that occurs when the mind takes pleasure in the welfare, happiness and goodness in oneself or others.

Ardour (*ātappa*)

A sense of focused aspiration; one of the three factors that are essential for establishing mindfulness in a purposeful way. (The others are mindfulness and clear comprehension.)

Becoming (*bhava*)

One of the three ‘influxes’ (*āsavā*) – sensuality, becoming and ignorance. Becoming is the involuntary action of forming a solid identity out of changeable and impersonal aggregates – perception, intention, feeling, form and consciousness. In the analysis of the Four Noble Truths, becoming (and its twin, non-becoming, *vibhava*) is also listed along with sense-desire as the source of suffering and stress.

Birth (*jāti*)

The arising of a three-dimensional, self-recognizing entity. This can be in the sensual or immaterial domains, as a human, animal or spirit. The term can also be extended metaphorically to include a psychological ‘birth’ as ‘my identity as an ice skater was born in 1998’ or ‘This idea was born out of a group discussion.’ Also, see definition: ‘Dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*)’.

Bringing to mind (*vitakka*)

Also rendered as ‘conceiving’, ‘initial thought’ or ‘initial application.’ This act of ‘naming’ an object is how the thinking mind forms a conceivable object to focus on.

Clear comprehension (*sampajañña*)

An attention that, like deep attention and direct knowing, supports a wise apprehension of phenomena. It comprehends whether a mind-state is skilful or not, whether a hindrance or an enlightenment factor is present or not, and what causes either of these to arise or decline. Clear comprehension is one of the three factors that are essential for establishing mindfulness in a purposeful way, the others being ardour and mindfulness. It is supported by evaluation so that rather than just holding something in mind, it is alert and enquiring.

Clinging (*upādāna*)

Also rendered as ‘grasping,’ ‘feeding on’ or ‘taking as a support.’ Although the word is stark and graphic, it refers to the mind’s dependency on sights, sounds and ideas (as well as on becoming, systems and customs, and assumptions of self-hood), even when these are not ethically blameworthy.

Compassion (*karuṇā*)

The mind’s inclination to ward off pain and suffering in a clear and empathic way.

Consciousness (*viññāṇa*)

The activity that brings an object into awareness through a sense-door. This includes mind-consciousness, which brings thoughts, emotions, intentions and perceptions – collectively called *dhammas* – into awareness. Consciousness is then said to ‘cling’ to that object and take it as a support. An ‘unsupported’ or ‘unestablished’ consciousness (i.e. one that isn’t dependent on the senses or on any mind-state) is an attribute of an arahant.

Deathless (the)

The mind's liberation from all bases of clinging. Also, see definition: 'Nibbāna'.

Deep attention (*yoniso manasikāra*)

Also translated as 'wise attention,' 'systematic attention' or 'appropriate attention.' It's the attention that focuses on the causes and consequences of phenomena (*dhammā*) – whether they arise from or are conducive to skilful or unskilful states, for example. It helps to select a suitable object or theme for meditation, and an enquiry into cause and effect and the Four Noble Truths. Along with wise advice from another person, the Buddha considered deep attention to be a fundamental support for awakening.

Defilements (*kilesa*)

Unskilful factors such as greed, hate, delusion, opinionatedness and lack of moral concern. Whereas the term 'hindrance' refers to five sticking points, 'defilement' is often used without any definite list, but to refer to any function of the mind that is led by unskilful factors.

Dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*)

A description of the conditioned processes that support suffering and stress. As a map these are laid out as:

When there is non-seeing (or 'ignorance') (*avijjā*), this supports the programs (*saṅkhāra*) that infest consciousness (*viññāṇa*); thus consciousness operates in terms of designing (*nāma*) an object (*rūpa*) which occurs in one of six sense-fields (*saḷāyatana*); these fields are filled dependent on contact impressions (*phassa*); these contact impressions are registered in terms of feeling (*vedanā*), which arouse degrees of inclination (*taṇhā*), which in turn stimulates clinging (*upādāna*); this clinging binds phenomena into patterns that becoming (*bhava*) solidifies into the basis for phenomenal existence; this basis then supports further arising or birth (*jāti*), which must be followed

by the process of ageing and death (*jarā-maraṇa*); this is the basis for sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair (*soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassa-upāyāsā*). But with the complete and dispassionate stopping of wrong-seeing, the programs stop ... thus there is the stopping of sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

Eightfold Path

The Fourth Noble Truth exposed by the Buddha – the way leading to the cessation of suffering (*dukkha*):

Right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*): direct knowledge of the Four Noble Truths (definition below).

Right attitude (*sammā-saṅkappa*): the motivating attitude of non-ill-will, non-cruelty and renunciation.

Right speech (*sammā-vācā*): refraining from lying, from harsh or abusive speech, from divisive or malicious speech and from idle chatter.

Right action (*sammā-kammanta*): refraining from intentionally harming any living creature, from stealing and from sexual misconduct.

Right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*): abstaining from dishonest and harmful means of livelihood.

Right effort (*sammā-vāyāma*): the effort of avoiding and overcoming unskillful qualities, and of developing and maintaining skillful qualities.

Right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*): the four establishments of mindfulness (see definition: ‘Establishments of mindfulness’).

Right concentration (or unification) (*sammā-samādhi*): the first four *jhānas* (see definition: ‘Absorption’) and culmination of all these eight factors.

Enlightenment factors (*bojjhaṅgā*):

The seven factors that need to be developed for awakening. These are:

Mindfulness (*sati*)

Investigation of phenomena (*dhamma-vicaya*)

Energy (*virīya*)

Rapture (*pīti*)

Calm, tranquillity (*passaddhi*)

Concentration (*samādhi*)

Equanimity (*upekkhā*)

Equanimity (*upekkhā*)

The ability to be on-looking and receptive without adding emotional bias.

Establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*)

Also known as ‘the four foundations of mindfulness’. These present an overview of how mindfulness should be brought to bear on four aspects of experience: the experience of **body**, of **feeling**, of **how the mind is affected** and of the **mental processes** (*dhammā*) that are relevant to awakening. This latter category comprises positive factors (such as the enlightenment factors) and negative ones (such as the hindrances). By bringing mindfulness and clear comprehension to bear on these, one learns how to support and further the positive and eliminate the grounds for the negative. Furthermore, the view of insight that mindfulness and clear comprehension provide reveals that neither the positive nor the negative are attributable to, or comprise, a self.

Evaluation (*vicāra*)

Also translated as ‘pondering’, ‘sustained thought’ and ‘consideration’. It is the factor that pairs with ‘bringing to mind’ to give the thinking mind a reading of an object of attention. While *vitakka* names and points the mind to an object, *vicāra* handles, feels and assesses the object in terms of perceptions and feelings. This evaluation supports clear comprehension.

Felt sense

The preliminary affect of a perception as it arises. It is felt in an embodied way, as a ‘gut sense’; it is not clear, not verbal, and intuitive. It is a compound of subtle physical sensations and emotional tones, which underlie and often give rise to more clearly recognizable moods and hunches. It is detected by deep attention within the embodied process, and if lingered on and listened to can give expression (often as metaphors, images or memories) to unresolved issues or traumatic material that are stored out of reach of the thinking mind. Giving wise attention to this can assist the resolution of such phenomena.

Four Noble Truths

The Buddha’s teachings can be summarized in terms of the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth is that ‘There is *dukkha*.’ This truth points to ageing, sickness and death, as well as to birth, in order to highlight the sense of vulnerability that all sentient beings must experience. It also details the state of clinging to or depending on the five aggregates to be ‘*dukkha*.’ This gives us an idea of the range of meanings that ‘*dukkha*’ can cover – pain, sorrow, vulnerability, uncertainty, stress and unsatisfactoriness.

The Second Noble Truth – that ‘*dukkha* has a source or origin’ – names the origin of suffering not as the factors of the first truth (which seem to be unavoidable) but as sense-craving, craving to be something and craving to be nothing. The last two (*bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā*) are the pressures that cause the mind to build up an identity in terms of time – ‘I was, I am, I will be’ – or by negating personal habits and history – as in, ‘It’s nothing to do with me, it’s just the way things are.’ The latter has a negative attitude towards life and is also the grounds for moral nihilism and irresponsibility. With this truth we are instructed that the root of the problem is the craving bound up with the five aggregates, a craving for a solid self.

The Third Noble Truth is that there is a ceasing of *dukkha*. This is through the complete and dispassionate relinquishment of craving. So with this truth, we are given a realistic way of freeing the mind. Although old age, sickness and death cannot be avoided, the fear and distress around identifying with them can be cut off. This cutting off is the experience of *nibbāna*, a term which is rendered as ‘blown out’ or ‘unbinding’ and refers to the force of craving.

The Fourth Noble Truth is of the Path that encompasses all the skilful means (of which meditation forms an essential part) that contribute to the ending of *dukkha*. It should be borne in mind that: a) meditation is only a part of the Path (and needs to be established on the ethical aspects of the Path) and: b) that Buddhist meditation is only for the elimination of *dukkha* – not for psychic powers of any kind.

Goodwill (*mettā*)

Also rendered as ‘kindness’ or ‘loving-kindness.’ This is the mind’s inclination to provide support or nourishment for others or oneself in a clear and empathic way.

Hindrances (*nīvaraṇā*)

They are obstacles to mental cultivation. They comprise:

Sense-desire (*kāmacchanda*)

Aversion and ill-will (*vyāpāda*)

Mental dullness, indolence and sluggishness (*thīna-middha*)

Restlessness, worry, anxiety (*uddhacca-kukkucca*)

Sceptical doubt (*vicikicchā*)

Ignorance (*avijjā*)

Also ‘unknowing’ or ‘obscuration.’ Generally, ignorance is of the Four Noble Truths. It is an energy that pushes attention away from the clarity of awareness. Ignorance is also the sense of ‘missing the point’ that angles the mind to the aspect of the pleasure (rather than

skilfulness) of an object or process, and towards becoming and non-becoming (rather than to changeability). The dispelling of ignorance is the main aim of Dhamma practice.

Mind (*citta*)

Also rendered as ‘heart’, ‘psyche’ or ‘awareness’ – which gives an idea of the breadth of the reference. ‘Mind’ in Buddhist parlance is the affective-responsive system, an intelligence that receives perceptions from the external senses, feelings from the body as well as its own perceptions and programs. As it receives these it formulates affects, in terms of pleasure or displeasure. Thus we can feel pleased by a sight, not because of the eye, which is neutral, but because of the derived mental perception. Mind also has its own ‘organ’: *mano* (translated as ‘mind-organ,’ ‘intellect’ or ‘mind’), which, through attention, formulates concepts out of sense-perceptions. Mind-organ has no feeling and serves to classify, structure or give detailed information to the mind – future, past, self and others are examples of the mind-objects that it creates.

Mind is affected and feels various forms of happiness and grief, expressing this with images, moods and thoughts. Its evolved responses are our mental behaviour, ranging from compassion to aversion, from depression to elation, from patience and mindfulness to deceitfulness and delusion. The breadth and non-rational source of these justifies the use of the words ‘heart’ and ‘psyche.’

‘Awareness’ refers to the most fundamental property of mind, which is the ability to receive an impression. It is because of this that we can directly know an impression rather than add responses and interpretations to it. It is on this property of mind that mindfulness and liberation are based. Liberation can be understood as the freedom from negative, afflictive behaviour. More profoundly it can mean liberation from *dukkha*.

It should be understood that the Buddha did not postulate a liberated mind as having an immaterial, eternal existence (as a soul), but rather that this affective responsive experience can be laid to rest.

Nibbāna

Variouly translated as ‘blowing out’, ‘extinguishing’ (as of a fire) or ‘unbinding’ (as of clinging). So it is not a state, but awareness with no basis for greed, hatred and delusion. The two common ways in which the term nibbāna is used are first as the extinguishing of defilements – so that the mind can operate in a pure and unfettered way – and second, as the ceasing of the aggregates. The appreciation of the latter rests on the understanding that the aggregates have no lasting or real existence; they are the framework compounded by the mind as a basis from which it weaves an insecure reality. The removal of defilements will bring dispassion and release in terms of how we function. Then, with the ceasing of the substructure of the aggregates, at the end of a lifespan, there is no ground for further birth.

One-pointedness (*ekaggatā*)

The factor of absorption that arises dependent on bringing to mind, non-involvement and evaluation. It occurs in meditation when the quality of ease has calmed rapture and the mental energy; the energy of focusing and the bodily energy are in harmony. The resultant merging of mind and body is experienced as a firmness in awareness, which is hence not penetrated by sense-impressions.

Programs (*saṅkhārā*)

The collective, formative and energetic intelligences that rise up in response when the mind is affected. The first response is called ‘contact’ (*phassa*); it registers an impression and formulates it into a ‘knowable’ felt perception such as ‘smooth’, ‘hot’, ‘agreeable’, ‘irrelevant’. This contact then activates ‘intention’ (*cetana*) and ‘attention’ (*manasikāra*). Together these focus on the perception and feeling, derive a ‘felt sense’,

interpret it in personal and linguistic terms and respond to it. These programs operate through three intelligences:

Emotional, intuitive and wish-forming (*citta-saṅkhārā*)

Verbal (i.e. thought and speech) (*vacī-saṅkhārā*)

Bodily (i.e. somatic and internal ‘gut’ responses) (*kāya-saṅkhārā*)

Rapture (*pīti*) (also ‘uplift’, ‘joy’)

The positive state of a gladdened mind that is accompanied by a bodily energy such as a flush or a tingling. It can be based on beauty, or on powerful uplifted emotions. In meditation, rapture is based on the removal of the five hindrances and is said to be born of non-involvement. One of the factors of absorption and of awakening, it gives confidence and energy to the mind.

Spiritual faculties (*indriya*)

‘Authorities’ that support the mind’s spiritual inclination. These are listed as:

Faith (*saddhā*)

Energy (*virīya*)

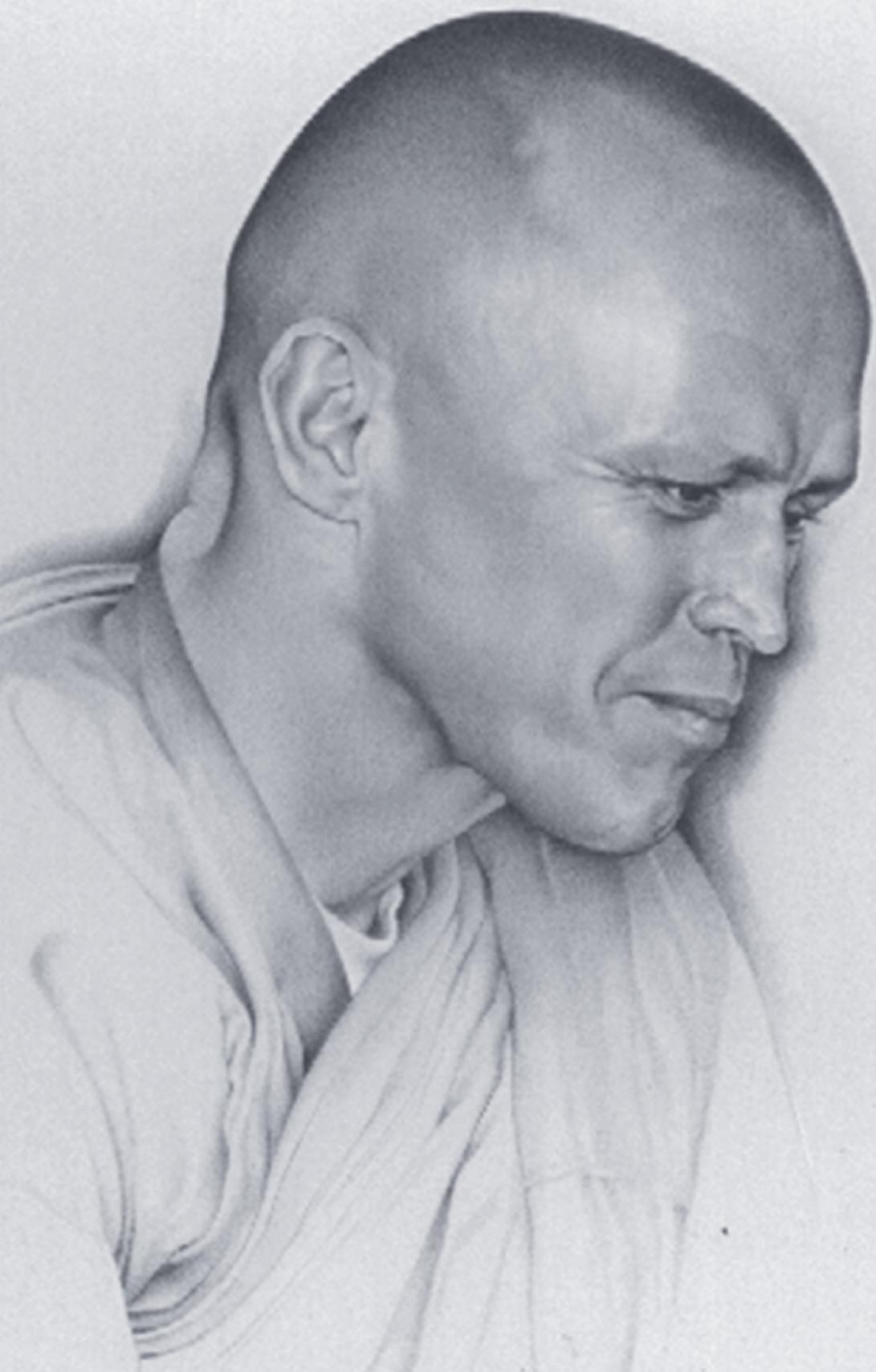
Mindfulness (*sati*)

Concentration (*samādhi*)

Wisdom (*paññā*)

When fully developed, this same list is entitled ‘powers’ (*bala*).

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THE MOST PRECIOUS GIFT

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