

AJAHN SUMEDHO

# “Nothing is more joyless than selfishness”

Five talks to the  
monastic community  
at Wat Pah Nanachat  
in May 1989

transcribed by Gavesako Bhikkhu

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# Foreword

These teachings were originally talks given by Venerable Ajahn Sumedho during his stay at Wat Pah Nanachat, the International Forest Monastery in the North-East of Thailand, in May 1989. The talks were usually given during the evening meetings, when the Sangha would come together for chanting, meditation and listening to the Dhamma. Venerable Ajahn Sumedho is the senior Western disciple of Venerable Ajahn Chah, a well-known and highly respected meditation master of the Forest Tradition. Venerable Ajahn Sumedho was the first abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat, which was established in 1975 to teach and train Westerners. In 1977 he was sent to England by Venerable Ajahn Chah. He established Chithurst and Amaravati Buddhist Monastery as well as several branches, spreading the particular lifestyle and teachings that he had taken on as a Buddhist monk with Venerable Ajahn Chah in Thailand, to the West. After living and teaching based in England for over thirty years, he is now coming back to quietly live in Thailand again. The community of Wat Pah Nanachat feels very fortunate to be able to welcome him soon, and this little booklet of his teachings is meant to remind specifically the monastic community of the timeless and priceless teachings he has offered to young men leading the life of a forest monk over all those years. May he now be retiring happily and peacefully from all the burdens of being a true pioneer both in Thailand and in the West, and peacefully partake in the fruits of all the hard practices he has patiently undertaken for all our benefit. We wish him a peaceful retirement.

*The Sangha of Wat Pah Nanachat,  
Ubon Rachathani, September 2010.*

# “Nothing is more joyless than selfishness”

...A community is as good as its members. One person can't make it good. The goodness of a community depends on all of its members, each one reflecting wisely on how to use his or her position for the welfare and happiness of the whole community...

(May 23rd , 1989)

During the last week we have had the opportunity to practise together here at the International Forest Monastery. We met together in the mornings and evenings, at teatime, on Vesakha Puja Day and for Patimokkha – all of this within a brief ten days. There were times for listening, for talking and for discussing Dhamma, a wonderful occasion to contemplate and reflect on our practice.

“Mindfulness” is an interesting word for most of us. We think it is something or other that we have to try and get. Actually, it is just a very natural way of being receptive. When we are driving a car we have to be mindful, unless we are drunk or really in a terrible state. We don't think: “I've got to try to be mindful.” If we are not a very disturbed, heedless and foolish kind of person, we just are mindful. Why is that? Because while driving a car it is quite apparent that we have a dangerous machine under our control. If we are not mindful we are going to hit somebody or kill ourselves or do some damage. So just that sense of self-preservation, respect for life and not wanting to hurt others while driving a car makes us mindful. We don't practise mindfulness while driving – we are mindful. As for monastic life, if we think of mindfulness as

something we must practise, then we form an opinion about it as being something that we've got to develop. If we are mindful, we are aware of the whole way of thinking: "I've got to be more mindful – I must develop mindfulness in order to get out of the deathbound state and become an enlightened person." We are aware of the forces, the intentions and habits that are affecting us at this moment.

If I am thinking right now, "I've got to be mindful," if I am being mindful I can see and I am aware that I've got this idea: "I've got to be mindful" – that's mindfulness. If I just follow the view that I've got to be mindful, I can be quite heedless. One example of this is when I was at Wat Pah Pong. I would go on almsround to Bahn Gor, which is a three kilometer walk. One day it looked like it was going to rain and we thought it advisable to take our umbrellas. So I took my umbrella and started off. But then it didn't rain and so we put our umbrellas outside the village so we wouldn't have to take them into the village. I said to myself: "You must be mindful, Sumedho, and when you come back from your almsround you must remember your umbrella. Remember where it is so that you can take it back to the monastery." So I went on almsround being very mindful of each step, got back to the monastery and realized I'd forgotten my umbrella. I had concentrated and maybe was very composed while on my almsround, but was not terribly mindful about other things. In other words, if one concentrated on walking in a certain way or in just doing something or other, then one is not necessarily mindful. We need to take into our minds the way it is, what it all implies and the things that are involved. It does not mean just to have an idea that one has to be mindful of each step while walking on an almsround, as a kind of fixed view of mindfulness. Because that can be merely concentration. Mindfulness allows us to really notice the way it is, where we are, the time and the place.

Another time I was walking on almsround at Tam Saeng Pet. I was trying to be very mindful, walking barefoot and I had this very sensitive right leg. I had to be most careful of it. It was very bumpy and rocky and rooty up at Tam Saeng Pet and I said to myself: “You must be mindful while walking, Sumedho!” So I was trying to be incredibly mindful, being ever so careful – and I stubbed my toe. It was so painful and I said to myself: “You’re not being mindful, Sumedho!” And while I was saying this I stubbed my toe again. And it was absolutely excruciating. So I heard myself saying: “You’re not mindful at all! You’re just a hopeless case!” – and I stubbed my toe for the third time. I was about ready to faint. And here I was: “You’ve got to be mindful; be mindful; try to be more mindful; I wasn’t mindful.” I was so caught up with my ideas about being mindful and my poor toe was suffering along with the rest of me.

Another occasion was my first year as a novice in Nong Khai. I spent a year at this meditation monastery where they did a certain method, which is to develop mindfulness by doing everything incredibly slowly. There was another Thai monk there who had arrived many months before me. He was their star meditator. I used to see him and think: “This monk is really a wonderful meditator.” I was in a kuti right across from his. Everything he did was extremely slow. So I thought: “This is what I should be doing. Mindfulness is being very slow about everything.” This was the idea of what mindfulness and good practice was. Well, for eleven months the monk did this practice. Then he was rushed off to hospital. Because if one does things very slowly for a long period of time, something goes wrong with the internal organs. He was in a state of quite serious illness. Not having defecated properly, everything had become impacted with constipation. If one

doesn't exercise the body the bowels don't move and just get clogged up. But he managed to be very mindful of all this.

There is a lot of silliness and foolishness in meditation. People don't wisely consider the limits they are under, and what mindfulness and wisdom really amount to. They get fixed ideas about doing certain techniques and practices and do not take into account the nature of the human body, with its limitations, and the time and the place. At that monastery they once asked us to attend an important meeting. Everyone was to congregate at two o'clock in the sala. I arrived on time. But then we had to wait for forty-five minutes while these slow walkers moved ever so slowly into the sala. Forty-five minutes we were waiting so that they could walk from their kutis into the sala to attend this meeting. It was "good practice" as we say euphemistically – good practice, yes – to sit there and just wait for these people to walk very slowly. But somehow one didn't feel it was very wise or considerate. It's not very mindful to arrive late at a meeting when one is asked to be there at a certain time. One keeps everybody waiting for oneself, while performing this method that one has become so bound to. Or, if one wants to do it that way, one should have set off long before, instead of waiting for the bell, which implies one walks a normal pace to arrive at the sala. This is reflection, isn't it? If one is really determined to keep to slow walking, then one needs to consider the time and the place and how to arrive in time. Or maybe one can walk faster that day in order to arrive in time. Whatever one decides, one should consider and contemplate time and place, what is appropriate, what is beautiful, what is kind. This takes wisdom rather than just mere will power or blind grasping of conditions.

Here in Wat Pah Nanachat, contemplate this monastery as a place to practise, as a community, where we share our lives

together, being mindful of our Vinaya, the customs and traditions. What is the way things are done here? One doesn't make up one's own rules or go one's own way in a community. In Sangha we determine to agree to live in a certain way. If we don't want to live in this certain way, then we shouldn't be here. We should go where we can do what we want. The advantages of community life lie in our ability to be sensitive and caring; to be considerate and thoughtful of other human beings. A life without generosity and respect and giving to others is joyless life. Nothing is more joyless than selfishness. Thinking of myself first – what I want and what I can get out of this place – means that I might live here, but I am not going to have any joy living here. I might because of my seniority be able to intimidate, and because of my size be able to push my weight around and get my way – but I am not going to be joyful by doing that. Just asserting myself and getting my way is not the way to peacefulness, equanimity and serenity of the heart. As we get seniority in the Sangha, we have to think about other people more. We need to consider how to train and look after the junior ones – and how to help the senior ones. Nothing is more depressing than to be in a community of bhikkhus who don't really bother and just want to do what they want. They are so blind or self-centred, they don't look and see, they don't ask, they don't notice – you have to tell them everything. It is very frustrating to have to live with people who are not willing to put forth the effort to try to notice, and to take on responsibility. We have to grow up in other words. Maybe some of you came to be monks so you could get out of marriages and having children. Getting out of that responsibility of having to take care of somebody else. Maybe you weren't Prince Siddhartha leaving your beautiful wife and child – those whom you loved the most in the world – in order to realize the ultimate truth and be enlightened. Maybe you came here because you couldn't stand the idea of having to

work and make money to be able to support a wife and kids. Does that ring true for any of you? It can be pretty dreary to have to go around taking care of someone. You can't go your own way if you're married. You have to think of somebody else, don't you? You have to include somebody else in your life – the one you marry – and not many people do that, even when they get married these days. Then when you start having children, you have to open up your heart even more to include them too. Babies are pretty helpless, they can't do anything, so you have to do everything for them. You have to give up your freedom and independence, your rights and privileges, in order to look after a little baby with stinking nappies and a wife and maybe a mother-in-law... We have to open our hearts wide to be able to look after and meet the needs of a situation like that.

As Buddhist monks here in Thailand it's easy to just go off and find oneself a nice cave and live there. The lay people are so generous in this country, they love to feed monks. They think it is wonderful and will give one nice robes and build lovely kutis for one. If a monk is a fairly decent and pleasant type of person, they will send him to the best doctors in Bangkok for any treatment he might need. So one can work it in Thailand to be a very selfish kind of person, based on the idea: "I must get enlightened and nobody else matters but me." But this is a very joyless and dry way to live. It becomes increasingly dreary operating in this narrow-minded way.

I was pushed into a more responsible kind of position by Ajahn Chah. I didn't want to do it either. I didn't want to have to teach or be responsible for anything. I had all kinds of romantic ideas of being a monk. Going off to an island, living in a cave in the Himalayan Mountains, developing magical powers, living in a state of bliss for months at a time. I had all kinds of hopes in that direction. Having to think about

somebody else was somehow not something I found very attractive. I was married once before – I didn't like that – what a drag that was. And then, being a monk in Thailand they even praised me for being totally selfish: “He's really a good monk, very strict, doesn't speak to anyone, likes to be alone, practises hard” – one gets praised for that. But then life forces us sometimes to look in different directions. That's obviously what Ajahn Chah was doing to me. He was putting the pressure on me, so I began to see and actually realize that if I just kept going the way I was, I would be just a miserable, unhappy, selfish person. I began to think in terms of: “How can I help? What can I do?” When I went to India in 1974 I had this strong experience of what is called “kataññu katavedi.” Gratitude to Gotama the Buddha, to Ajahn Chah, to Thailand and to all the lay people who had been supporting me and helping me. This sense of gratitude and gratefulness was very strong. At that time I had really wonderful opportunities. After five months in India I had a lot of adventures. I had gone tudong, just wandered and begged for food. I met some wealthy people who wanted me to spend the vassa at some marvellous place down in Southern India. There was another invitation to go to Sri Lanka. All kinds of places in rather nice setting and idyllic environments were suddenly made available to me. But all I could think of was I must go back to Thailand. I must find a way of serving Ajahn Chah.

So I thought: “What is the best way I can help and serve Ajahn Chah?” I had left Thailand to go to India and get away from all those Westerners who were piling up at Wat Pah Pong at that time. I was the only one who could speak Thai then. So they depended a lot on me for translating. Well, the least I could do is to go back and help translate for Ajahn Chah. So I left India, came back to Thailand, went to Wat Pah Pong and offered my services. I decided to be a non-complaining monk and just do

what Ajahn Chah wanted me to do and no longer ask for anything for myself. I determined that if he wanted me to stay at Wat Pah Pong, I'd stay at Wat Pah Pong; or if he wanted to send me off to the worst, most horrible branch monastery I'd go there. Wherever I could help I would do that, without asking for any special privileges. I thought of the worst branch monastery of Ajahn Chah. At that time it was called Suan Gluay. I remember going there one time and I was taller than all the trees there. It is called "Banana Garden Monastery," but I don't think there's a banana tree in the whole place. It was a hot, unattractive, and difficult place, with rather coarse villagers and terrible food. So, still hoping to do some kind of ascetic practice, I thought: "I know, I'll help Ajahn Chah by volunteering to go to Wat Suan Gluay, because nobody wants to go there. He always has difficulty keeping monks there." I went to Ajahn Chah and said: "Luang Por, I volunteer to go to Wat Suan Gluay," and he said: "No, you can't go." I was quite disappointed. I was actually looking forward to it. But then, a year or so later we started this monastery here. "Wat Pah America" it was called as a joke, because most of the bhikkhus then were Americans. It was my responsibility to try and look after it.

In England then, one really has to give up any selfish desires for one's practice. Somehow in England Buddhist monasticism forces us to be selfless, where here in Thailand, as I've said before, we can feed our selfishness very much. The reason why is that there aren't many options. One can go to Amaravati, Chithurst, Devon or Harnham and that's about the only choice one has. So sometimes people start thinking of coming to Thailand. But very seldom do any of the bhikkhus in England ask for anything. This is quite impressive. Hardly anyone ever asks to go to any of the branch monasteries. They will just go to wherever they're needed. If they get tired of one

place, saying: “I’m tired of Amaravati, I want to go to Chithurst, or I’m tired of Chithurst, I want to go to Amaravati,” they just don’t think like that. So generally the attitude is one of “how can I best help and how can I serve the Sangha?” This is the advantage of living in England as a Buddhist monk: one can’t be selfish there! Selfishness stands out like a sore thumb, like a big foot. It’s just an inappropriate attitude and way of behaving. Now here in Thailand, whether we want to be selfish or not is up to us. We want to think of ourselves first and do our own thing – that’s our privilege. I mean we have the opportunities to do that here in this country. But we should also recognize how we can help each other. Do we really care or take an interest in serving and trying to help in various ways? In, say, taking on a responsible position, that maybe junior monks are not yet ready for. Perhaps it is good practice for the senior monk to do everything and not have any help. But for us it is not – so I want to encourage everyone. A community is as good as the members of the community. One person can’t make this community good himself. The goodness of this community depends on all of its members. This is for your consideration. If we want to have a really good monastery and a place that is worth living in and practising in, then we all have to give to it something. We all have to give ourselves to it by opening our hearts and taking on responsibilities. Being sensitive to the needs and the type of people we are with, the time and the place and the kind of culture we are in – all of this is part of our practice, of being mindful.

To offer our services and to be eager to help is really praiseworthy. It is something I appreciate very much. It is not always what one wants to do, but it is a very lovely gesture and very important. Many of you are new monks. Without elder monks who are willing to help out, there would be no way

possible for you to be trained. In a monastery we are working together – each member reflecting wisely on how to support and help the whole community in the position one finds oneself in. At Amaravati, for example, I am the abbot and the teacher. So I reflect on how to use this position for the welfare of the whole community, rather than: “I am the abbot; I am the teacher; I have many rights and privileges; I am senior to you; I can do this and you can’t; you better obey me because I’m the powerful figure here: Let’s see what I can get out of this for myself.” That’s not a wise reflection, is it? A tyrant is like that but not an abbot. If we want to be a proper bhikkhu and we happen to be abbot or teacher or senior monk, then we reflect on how to use that position for the prosperity of the Sangha. This also applies to the most junior member, the last anagarika or the guests. Whoever is living here they can reflect: “In my position, what can I do for the welfare and happiness of the community?” As a new bhikkhu, as a majjhima bhikkhu or as a thera bhikkhu, as a samanera, as an anagarika or as a visitor, we consider: “With my talents and abilities and the limitations I have, how can I best serve this community?” Then we have a very harmonious community because everybody is reflecting in a way that is supporting it. We are willing to give according to our abilities and our position within it. We are not trying to get something for ourselves anymore. Or if we are, we can see that as an inferior attitude not to be grasped or followed. We often tend to think in terms of our rights. Now that I have ten vassas, what are my rights? What are the advantages? What perks do I get now for having ten vassas? But if we cultivate a more mature attitude in the spirit of Dhamma, we no longer demand rights and privileges, but offer our services. How can I best help and serve this community? Ask yourselves that.

Here in Thailand after five vassas one gets the inevitable five-vassa-tudong-itch. One thinks: “I’ve got my five vassas now;

I can go tudong. Whoopee!” This can become not a very nice tradition actually, where one is encouraged to think in that way. I used to be concerned about training monks in England, because Thailand always seemed to be the ideal place to be a monk. I’ve had to establish monasteries one right after another. Always being in the process of building things and trying to set up situations for monks and nuns to train. And so for the past fourteen years since Wat Pah Nanachat, I have been put in this position of always having to start and initiate things; to set up everything. But then the results of, say, twelve years in England are very good. The quality of the monks and nuns is very worthy. Their practice and understanding of Dhamma doesn’t seem to be damaged, or in any way inferior on account of the kind of conditions they’re under. So one has more confidence in just loving Dhamma and determining to realize the truth. One learns to do the best one can with the conditions around one. One doesn’t have to have ideal conditions, the best of everything or long periods of time to practise, tudong experiences or this or that. All this is all right – there’s nothing wrong with it. But to grasp those ideas and expect and demand all of that is really a hindrance to the understanding of Dhamma. It’s not that one shouldn’t go on tudong after five vassas. I’m not saying that. But to hold on to that view without seeing it for what it is, can be a great obstacle to one’s practice. To be dishonest with oneself, to demand rights and to follow one’s own views and opinions is not the way to Nibbana. If we really look at these mental states of selfishness and self-concern and grasping, we see that they are painful – dukkha. They don’t lead to peace and clarity, to letting go, to cessation, to “desirelessness” or to Nibbana – and that is what we are here for, isn’t it, to realize Nibbana.

Now it is quite wonderful to see so many new monks here. I haven’t been to Thailand for two years and now there is an

impressive line of inspired and aspiring bhikkhus. This is something to really treasure, to encourage and protect for all of us. I try to do everything I can to help and support this monastery because one wants to encourage this and make offerings that will benefit you in your training and your understanding of Dhamma, in your aspiration to realize truth.

# “Life is quite sad, isn’t it?”

...The effort has to come from ourselves. For the Holy Life we have to develop that effort from the heart. There is no way that somebody else can make us enlightened...

(May 24th, 1989)

Reflecting on this moment we can see the interconnectedness between meeting and separation. Everyone here that comes together must separate. This is one reflection on travelling. We always leave some place and move on to meet someone else. Being invited to some place we go flying from airport to airport. When it’s time to leave there is always this feeling of sadness. Especially with people we like being with. There is always a gladness of meeting people who are Buddhist, or people who are pleased to have us with them, or interested in what we are doing. We can watch this in the mind. Like going to a Buddhist group: the happiness of people receiving us and then the sadness of separation from people who have treated us well and have been very respectful. This is the way things are. We don’t need to make anything out of it, but by reflecting on Dhamma it helps to understand what it means to be human. We’re not trying to feel nothing and to be able to go to some place and just be totally blank. Everyone says: “Oh, Ajahn Sumedho, how wonderful that you’ve come” (blank, stone-faced expression). And then, when it’s time to go: “Oh, we’ve enjoyed having you so much” (blank, stone-faced expression). Not feeling anything, just being totally indifferent. Not daring to feel any gladness or sadness or any emotional state but being indifferent and insensitive is not the Middle Way at all. Sensitivity requires that we feel these things, that we know what they are. We’re not afraid to feel likes and we’re unafraid

at feeling pain. We can see it as Dhamma rather than taking it all in a personal way. Trying to avoid forming any attachments and kind of cutting our hearts out is having very callous ideas about practice. Having been born into this form means that we are very sensitive and we have emotions. That's just the way it is – the way we feel, and we're going to feel it until we die. When we're dead we don't feel anything. So being human is like this. We have these human attractions and aversions. Male and female, there it is, human attractions on the human plane with its sensory consciousness. We feel hot or cold and we feel well or sick. We enjoy people who have common interests. We get angry or annoyed with people that do things we don't like. This is the way it is, but as a meditator we are reflecting on the whole process, seeing and understanding it with wisdom and knowledge; not just trying to cut our heart out so we don't have to feel anything whatsoever.

Before my mother died she told me about this scene that she was part of. My mother wasn't an emotional person at all. She never cried. She couldn't cry. She didn't play emotional games with anyone. She was quite an honest and a very good person. Sometimes, because she wasn't an emotional person people tended to think she didn't feel things. When my father was dying in hospital, he was very emotional. He was crying and felt terrible about dying and leaving her. She would stand there, and she wouldn't be crying. And he yelled at her: "You don't care, do you?!" She quietly said: "I feel just the same as you do, but I can't cry. I'd like to be able to cry for you, but I just can't do it." Not that she was trying to hold back or trying to resist it, but it was her manner, her way. Later on, when she was eighty-seven, I asked her: "Life is quite sad, isn't it?" And she said: "Yes, very sad." And she said it not in a complaining or bitter way but simply a woman at the end of her life, who had lived quite well and wisely and realized that there's a

pathos and sadness to our life. It's just the way it is. There is always this dying. This is the death-realm. The sense-world and the conditioned realm is a realm of death. And we are always trying to find life in it. We're always trying to hang on to that which is dying, changing. And because of that there is always this sense of desperation, anxiety and worry. It pursues and haunts us. Like a spectre walking behind us, we can't quite see it but we can feel it.

Sadness is actually not depressing. We can become depressed by wanting it to be otherwise, thinking: "There must be something wrong with me." But this realm is a realm of death, of sadness, of separation: having to separate from the loved. We give our hearts and have great feelings of love for each other, and then the separation which is part of it, the sadness that comes from separation. Now this we can see in our own everyday experiences. We can contemplate this in our life, just noticing it in little ways. Children, before they become egos and personalities, are very immediate and spontaneous about their feelings. A young child, when her father leaves to go to work, cries: "Don't leave, daddy!" And he says: "I'll be back in a couple of hours." A couple of hours doesn't mean anything to a young child. It will mean something later on, but for a young child there is only that feeling of separation. Daddy's leaving and the immediate response is crying. Not wanting to separate. Then we have: "I'll be back in a tiny little while," and everything is well. Dad's only going away for a little while and he'll be back. So we have ways of dealing with it.

I used to notice it is difficult to say good-bye when we are not going to see each other again. It's always: "See you again." "When will you come again?" This idea of meeting again in the mind. Because even if there is not a lot of attachment,

there's something in us that doesn't want to say: "Good-bye forever." A very sad feeling. I had lived away for so many years, but there was always this: "See you again," in my mind. When I attended my father's funeral in August I took leave during the vassa in England. And then my mother said: "I'll see you again in March. Welcome back in March." She was very happy I would be back in March. And when I went back in March she was there and then she died. Now I can't say "I'll see you again." I'll never see her again. I was thinking at the funeral when they took her coffin to the cemetery: "I'll never see you again." It was a very sad feeling. And so we can witness this as a characteristic of our humanity. If we're taking it personally, we might think: "Well, if we're really mindful we won't feel anything. We won't feel any sadness. It's just anicca, dukkha, anatta. That's it. Mother is only a perception anyway. Death is the end of something that's not self, so why make a problem about it. You know, just dismiss the whole thing as anicca, dukkha, anatta." This is an intellectual kind of business in our head, isn't it? But it's not looking into the nature of things. We are not penetrating. We're just applying a nice theory to simply dismiss life and not feel anything. We needn't be frightened or resist feeling, but rather contemplate it. Because this is very much the realm we have to put up with and be with for a lifetime. Emotions, feelings and intuition are an inseparable part of it all. If these are not recognized, witnessed and understood we become callous and insensitive rationalists. We just shut everything down because we don't want to be bothered with sadness, gladness and other feelings. That's the realm we sometimes feel quite frightened of and resist.

For men there is a very strong resistance to emotional experience. Sometimes we get very irritated with women because they're so emotional. Take the movies for example.

There was movie on the aeroplane – a real melodrama. A saga of just solid tears from beginning to end. We can see that all that can become an indulgence; if we are constantly seeking this heartfelt emotional state, can also become a bit sickening and silly. But to understand the nature of sensitivity is not being morbid or foolish or indulgent. It means to be really willing to allow our senses to be what they are, to learn from this realm of perception, feeling, emotion and consciousness. In a monastery we use the situation to observe things.

One thing that is really moving here in Thailand is the dana aspect. Thai people are so generous. It really touches me and it means a lot to me. I didn't expect anything like that. Being a foreigner, why should anyone bother feeding and looking after me? And they don't really ask for very much in return. When I was a junior monk they didn't expect me to do anything. I'd just sit there like a bump on a log. In fact, they often want to give you too many things. They really love to support people living the Holy Life. It made me feel I really wanted to be worthy of that. I had the intention of being worthy of that kind of generosity. Something we can try is to be as good a monk as possible. To practise and keep the Vinaya. Trying our best to be a proper monk and practise the Dhamma. We can quite deliberately bring to mind the generosity of this country. It's probably one of the most generous countries we could ever live in, or at least have ever lived in. The level of giving to people living the Holy Life is amazing. We can get used to it of course. If we've never lived as a monk in any other country we can take it for granted, but it's really outstanding. The way they take foreigners in, give us everything and support us in every way for us to fulfil our spiritual aspirations. And they expect hardly anything from us; maybe a smile now and then or a friendly gesture. So this is something that touches the heart. It touches my heart. I'm not

just sitting there saying: “Well, generosity is anicca, dukkha, anatta! Don’t get attached to it!” It’s using feeling in a kind of way that’s uplifting. When I contemplate the goodness, generosity and compassion of Ajahn Chah, this has an elevating influence on my heart. It helps in our practice and in developing samadhi. This sense of devotion and gratitude is a powerful foundation on which to build up samatha and vipassana.

In the community itself we can learn from each other. This is where we also have to forgive each other. And as a reminder we perform this ceremony of asking for forgiveness. We learn from the way we don’t understand each other very well. We see each other in fixed ways and so we feel threatened by certain types of character. We have to work through this. And that is where we need to allow each other that space of forgiveness for not being perfect, totally wise and without flaws all the time. Even monks like myself, having been ordained much longer than others, still ask forgiveness for wrongdoing. Anything said or done, intentionally or unintentionally, that may have offended or upset anyone, or caused some kind of unhappiness. This is a way of clearing and cleaning, of setting things right in ourselves, and in our relationship with each other. Fourteen years ago, when I first came here and began to teach, I wasn’t very confident as an abbot at all. I had never done it before, so I was petrified. Western monks are full of ideas and all kinds of different views and opinions. And I was supposed to be the abbot – sitting there with all these monks giving me a piece of their minds and throwing opinions at me. They would always conflict with each other until it got really awful. One morning I remember I got really heavy and I laid it down to them saying: “I’m the abbot here; you follow me and shut up! I can’t operate in this position if you’re going to do this to me. One person wants to

do it this way, another wants to do it that way. How am I supposed to function as an abbot?” Westerners believe in their own views a lot. They strongly follow their opinions: “This is the way it’s got to be done! It can’t be done any other way!” Then we also have our own views about Ajahn Chah: “Ajahn Chah said. Ajahn Chah would do it this way. Ajahn Chah would never do that.” One gets that thrown at one. Always being compared to the top man. It was my first year as an abbot and everyone was already comparing me with the best. This is not fair. So then I would react with things like “Shut up” and “Obey.” I tried just being heavy and domineering. That helped actually in the beginning. I think everyone appreciated it, because it did somehow clarify the situation. They were good monks so they stopped those habits. But then, as a way of life one doesn’t like to live in that style: “You shut up! Just follow and obey!” We keep learning – everybody learns. So eventually we find a way of living that is truly beautiful and sensitive and fair. Yes, it can even be fair.

If at one time any of us gets into this position, we’ll find out what happens. If we’re insecure we tend to revert to certain patterns that we’ve seen before. I tried to copy Ajahn Chah or Ajahn Jun. I’d spent a vassa with Ajahn Jun. He was really quite fierce. If one got up during an all night sitting he would follow one to one’s kuti. All the time he was on one’s back. That’s a way too. Just keeping control over everything and not letting everyone get away with anything. As soon as one sees a little sign of weakness, one tiny mistake – one jumps on them: “Stop that! Shameless monk!” But my character is just not like that at all. I began to hate the idea and just tried not to look at things, developing a way of not seeing, squinting my eyes so that there was a haze. I don’t like to go around, always feeling obliged to tell people off and set them straight – a really awful way to live one’s life. And that isn’t what Ajahn Jun

does anyway. We might pick up that particular thing, because he is willing to admonish continually. So then we think maybe that's what we should do. But with Ajahn Jun I found it very helpful. He's actually a very kind monk. It wasn't coming from a nasty place. But as for myself, I used to get pretty nasty, you know, because I resented being in that position. I would be quite unpleasant, but this is how we learn. We learn from all this by reflecting on the results. More and more I realized that I was just trying to copy someone else. I could never be like Ajahn Chah. I could never be like anyone else. I had to trust my own quality and character and develop that from there. We're not trying to copy someone we very highly respect, like Ajahn Chah, a "Xerox copy" of Ajahn Chah.

Here at Wat Pah Nanachat there are senior monks, junior monks, novices, eight precept men and women. We can all use our reflective mind more instead of creating problems. And slowly we develop a sense of supporting and helping each other rather than forming factions or just becoming very insensitive and demanding, feeling disappointed because someone doesn't live up to our expectations. We can really suffer a lot by wanting the senior monk to be perfect, never doing anything wrong and always understanding things properly. Sometimes others don't so we feel very disillusioned and disappointed. But I recommend using such situations as Dhamma. Even if we've been treated unfairly we watch that. We can learn a lot from being treated unfairly, actually. There is much resentment when we've been accused of something we haven't done, or when we are treated badly for no reason that we can see. We feel bitterness and anger. But we can try and use that as Dhamma in our lives. When I hear people's gossip, or when I hear stories about myself that aren't true and people blaming me for things I haven't done – now I can sit back and just watch my mind. If my mind starts: "It's not fair!" I try to

use life for reflection. So I am not bitter about the injustices and unfairness that we might experience.

I remember the first winter at Amaravati. It was a cold winter, very snowy and we were having a winter retreat. The heating system wasn't very good then. We had a fireplace in the meeting hall and they put me right in front of this lovely fireplace. Being the head monk I had the best and warmest position. Of course everybody else was freezing at the back. We were doing an hour's sitting and then an hour's walking. The bell would go and it was time to go out and walk. Sitting in front of a warm fire while it's freezing outside, I could see in my mind this strong resistance to going out into the cold. Thoughts would come up like: "What about my health? I'm not getting any younger." The kind of way the mind starts operating to justify comfort. So I got out there to walk in the snow. It was very bleak and cold and I just started meditating on that. After some time I realized that this was all right. There is nothing bad or even uncomfortable about it. We had warm things to wear, so it wasn't painful or dangerous to one's health. It's just that warmth is so attractive. If it's cold there is always this kind of aversion to the cold, wanting to get to the warmest place. I just contemplated this: the bare trees, the bleak landscape and the grey sky in the colourless winter light. And I began to quite enjoy being out in the cold. It was really nice and peaceful. I could see the desire in one of wanting the warmth again. Like having a mother to protect one. Something nice to hold one, to feed and nurse one and to keep one warm. But out in the cold we have to be aware of what we're doing. There is something strengthening and ennobling about being out there. Being mindful and not complaining or running away. Because in itself there is nothing wrong, bad or dangerous about it. We learn to let go of that tendency to

choose. It's like growing up a little bit more. Just through that reflection I felt a sense of growing confidence.

What are the worst things that could happen to a human being? Starving, being ostracised and thrown out into the cold, being humiliated and misunderstood by the community, being accused of a thing one hasn't done, getting old and sick with wild animals howling in the distance and no hope of anyone ever coming to rescue. Total deprivation of anything comfortable or reassuring and nurturing; or even being tortured and persecuted. I realized that one can cope with all that in life if it happens. That even the worst is somehow all right. When I really thought about that more, I realized how much of life we live on this level of a kind of cowardice and laziness. We're afraid to take any risks because we might suffer just a bit. Or something might go wrong and we might be a little uncomfortable. Or we might lose something that we really think we must have. How easily we compromise for just mediocrity and comfort and a false sense of security. We don't really bring this attentiveness to our ordinary life. Most of my life it was very unlikely I would be tortured or thrown out of the Sangha. I don't expect that to happen. But at the same time I don't really care if it does. I don't mind. I can see now how to work with those kind of situations. How to use the misfortunes of life with wisdom. That allows us a sense of courage. We don't have to waffle about all the time, holding on to this or that and being worried. Because even the worst possible thing that might happen to a human being – it's all right. If those things happen I know how to practise with them. It's the way life flows.

Anything I've said during this time is for reflection. It's important for us to understand Dhamma ourselves. I'm not trying to tell anyone how they should practise or what they

should do. It is for our consideration on how to cultivate our own reflective mind. Because in this life the effort has to come from ourselves. In the Holy Life we have to develop that effort from the heart. There is no way that somebody else can make us enlightened. I can push and intimidate everyone by using fear and fierceness, keeping everyone awake through making them frightened. That just tends to condition us again to be a kind of frightened creature who is obedient and does all the right things because we're afraid of being punished and beaten up if we don't. But this life as a monk or as a nun is a matter of rising up and growing up and developing effort from there. We need to cultivate this right effort (samma-vayama), right mindfulness (samma-sati) and right concentration (samma-samadhi). It is part of the Noble Eightfold Path. I encourage everyone in doing that and using the situation here for practice. It's a good situation: something to treasure, to respect and to use properly.

# “We can’t attain it – we realize it”

...As we move into different situations, if we exercise our reflective capacities, then we keep learning from life’s experiences. All kinds of strengths and abilities develop to cope with exotic or strange, difficult or uncertain situations that before we would have been absolutely overwhelmed by...

(May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1989)

In Buddhist meditation we distinguish between samatha and vipassana, and these are both important to develop. Samatha is to learn how to concentrate the mind on an object like the breath, or whatever sign we are using. Now that has to be developed to where we contain the mind and keep it from wandering. We sustain and hold our attention on the object we have chosen. It’s a mental exercise that gives the mind a kind of sharpness. But as an end in itself it cannot enlighten us. We can’t be enlightened through just concentrating our mind even to a very refined level, like the arupa-jhanas, the formless states of absorption. The insight into the true nature of things is not possible until we start reflecting and looking into, examining and investigating the way things are. Samatha is actually a very simple practice. We tend to complicate it by analyzing and thinking about it – and then, of course it becomes an impossibility. It’s merely that ability to choose an object and hold our attention there, a way of training the mind. Most of our minds have not been trained in that way before we became Buddhist monks. We’re from a society that uses discursive and associative thoughts. Our minds are conditioned to think in rational ways. This sharpens our critical faculties, but also our ability to doubt increases. The more we think about life, the more we experience doubt, uncertainty and anxiety. Our critical faculties are definitely sharpened through modern

attitudes, like competition. We're always busy comparing: "This is better than that. This is good. That is bad. Bad, worse, worst – good, better, best." Samatha is often easier for people who are even illiterate, their critical faculties not highly developed yet. The mind tends not to wander or doubt so much. People with a lot of confidence, faith and conviction find it much easier than those being caught in anxiety, insecurity, worry and despair. Which is very much the result of a self, created out of desires and fear. We tend to introspect and analyze ourselves. We evaluate and criticize. These kinds of mental habits make concentration increasingly difficult.

Here in Thailand, the Thai monks already have a tremendous amount of faith in and devotion to the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. They have a foundation of trust and confidence, of saddha. This is not so common to find amongst the Westerners, because most of us come to Buddhism out of intellectual interest. Sometimes we can appreciate it on that level, but our hearts are completely cold. We can be quite impressed by the brilliance of the teaching, and still not feel very much devotion and gratitude, or any of these more heartfelt qualities, which are definitely helpful and supportive in practising samatha meditation.

Conditions around us are also important. We can't very well do samatha in a place where there is a lot of sensory impingement and demands. The less there is impinging on us, the easier it is to concentrate our minds. We could go off to a sensory deprivation tank, a cave or some isolated place where we could stay and not have demands and expectations placed on us; where there are no harsh, aggravating and annoying impingements. We can get quite naturally calm with no sounds and nothing to look at. After the initial restlessness and

resistance, we go into a concentrated state of mind quite naturally.

Vipassana then is where we use wisdom. The surrounding conditions are not the important issue any more. We're looking into the nature of things without seeking ideal conditions for that, but just observing the way things are. We use the three characteristics of anicca, dukkha, anatta, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the paticcasamuppada.... All these different teachings are part of vipassana. They are ways of contemplating, reflecting and observing the way things are. The five khandhas for example. How do we use that particular sequence? Those five concepts of rupa, vedana, sañña, sankhara, viññana are conventions in themselves, and not to be considered from a doctrinal position. They're perceptions to use and to work with. What is being conscious, anyway? Even though we're conscious we may not investigate consciousness. Obviously everyone here is conscious, but how many of us really know what that is? What is the difference between perception, volition and feeling? These are just ways of examining and looking at the way things are. All of us have the five khandhas. So this is something we can examine and investigate. Let's say we investigate the eye and the object. We really examine that in a practical way, looking at something with our own eyes and then the eye-consciousness arises through the contact with the object. The same with sound, smell, taste, touch or thought. All of this we can observe and investigate. Even though there is sound going on all the time, we're not always conscious of it, are we? When we're looking at something, we're conscious through the eye, but we're not conscious through the ear. Consciousness can move very rapidly. So it seems we can be conscious through all the senses at the same moment. If we examine it more carefully we begin to see that whatever we're looking at, at that

time we're no longer conscious of a sound. When we're eating food, notice the consciousness of taste. We can be thinking about something while we're eating and not be aware of eating. How many of us really taste our food? We often are in a rush, or talking or busy in some other way while eating. We like to have snacks every now and then while reading or watching the television. There is an initial taste of something and then we tend to just eat out of habit. We might be thinking, watching or listening and so no longer aware of tasting.

When the eye is concentrated on an object of sight, we're no longer conscious through the body. Hot and cold, pleasure and pain don't exist at that time. So in dealing with physical sensation we can distract ourselves by looking or listening or turning to something else to get away maybe from physical discomfort. That's one way of dealing with it. Another way is the investigation of physical pain where we go right to the actual sensation of pain. Looking into the pain itself. Getting to know the difference between the sensation and the aversion that we mentally develop around a sensation. For example we have the pain in our legs. If we go to the actual sensation and concentrate our attention on it, we stop thinking about it. We're with the sensation, but we're not creating mental aversion to its seemingly unpleasant appearance. Generally we are not that refined and aware. We tend to just be averse to physical pain and discomfort and try to suppress it, or we use will-power to endure it. When we go to the sensation itself, then there is body-consciousness. We're not adding aversion on to the pain: "I can't stand it! I don't want it!" These are emotional reactions to physical discomfort and pain of any sort. This is to be investigated and observed. When we're bringing attention to the sensations of the body, whether it's pleasant, painful or neutral – more and more the body will relax. When we feel tension or stress, if we concentrate right on that spot

with an attitude of just bare attention, without aversion to it, then the condition for pain can diminish. What we can't stand really, is the emotional reaction. Most pain we can bear; it's when we think: "I can't stand any more of this," that we give up and try to get away from it. If we're caught in that emotional realm of: "I can't bear it!", then we can even be thinking that before there is any actual pain. "What if pain arises? I won't be able to stand it." We can already be suffering by the possibilities of experiencing pain we don't yet have. Because of our ability to remember pain we've had before and couldn't stand.

So we investigate just how the mind works. The way things are. If our body is giving us pain – that's the way it is. It's not something we've created. We're not deliberately, intentionally trying to make pain arise in our body. But the reaction out of ignorance, desire and fear is having aversion, wanting not to have or to get rid of. Notice how lust and sexual desire make us kind of dull and we lose our ability to discriminate. We can get caught in lustful fantasies, seeking sensual pleasures with mind and body and lose our sense of perspective. We become so eager to get what we want, and to experience the pleasure that we anticipate, that our ability to discriminate becomes inoperative. Aversion and anger tend to make us very critical. Lust does just the opposite. The idea is to get what we are craving for – that is the sole aim and purpose. We can lose our sense of propriety and integrity and a lot of virtuous qualities when we get caught in that lustful tendency of the mind. Now don't believe me, but watch, examine and investigate how these things affect us: because we all experience these conditions.

In Thailand, I remember, there were hardly any sweets or sweet drinks at Wat Pah Pong. So whenever there was the possibility

of anything sweet we would become obsessed with the idea. One time someone gave me a bag of sugar. I took it back to my kuti and took a taste of it. Then suddenly that taste of sweetness created such greed in my mind that I consumed the whole bag of sugar in a very few minutes. Completely out of control, which is surprising, because I wasn't into sweets very much as a layperson. I would have thought it was disgusting to eat a whole bag of sugar in five minutes. But the conditions were supportive. The fact that I was alone, nobody was watching and no one would know. Also sweetness is a very attractive taste for us. Especially if we're eating one meal a day and we're celibate. Usually for a layperson greed is spread out, scattered over quite a range of things so that we don't notice so much. Thought doesn't collect on anything as simple and ridiculous as a bag of sugar. But in the homeless life we might find ourselves lusting after a bag of sugar, which we should not have been interested in at all as lay people. Who would ever eat just sugar granules if one can get pralines and fudge and all kinds of much more pleasurable sweets to indulge in? But one thing that this allowed me to see and contemplate was the sweet taste of sugar and that creates in the mind the desire for more. One spoon, we taste it, and then we want more. If we follow that impulse and get caught in that desire for more, then we start satiating ourselves until we have had so much, we can't handle any more. That's what lust and greed are like. An experience we all have as human beings. Now with mindfulness then we can taste sweetness and be aware of its pleasant qualities. Through investigation and understanding we no longer create lust around it. It's as it is. We're not following, seeking to have it again and again and again until we're absolutely satiated. Mindfulness allows us to know and be aware of time and place, appropriateness and suitability. It allows us to have integrity, to be considerate and thoughtful in our lives.

The generation of Americans that I was brought up in never admitted that they were afraid of anything. To be a man one had to put on this act – what they call “macho”. Strutting around wanting to give that impression of fearlessness. So fear sometimes is not recognized. Strangely enough, some of the most aggressive types of men are often the most frightened. In meditation these masculine and aggressive types of men have to deal with tremendous fear and terror. Now there is a natural fear that arises, like the instinctual fear if a tiger is chasing us. That’s a protective device in nature. It’s not personal and it’s not a fault; it doesn’t make us heedless. That kind of instinctual fear when we see a tiger that looks like he’s ready to attack us makes us act very swiftly in order to protect our life. Then there is also the kind of fear of things that haven’t yet occurred, of possibilities in the future. All the anxieties and worries we create in our lives about the possibility of being hurt or damaged, ostracised or humiliated and insulted; of being deprived and without what we want. There’s the fear of the unknown. We can look into the black night and become frightened, because our eyes can’t see in the darkness of the night. Or being in a closed room with no light – anything could be there. Our sense of security, of knowing isn’t present. We could imagine ghosts, monsters, or there might be scorpions, tarantulas or cobras. In this country it’s quite possible to go into a room where there is a cobra that we can’t see. When we turn the lights on we can look around and know that in this room there isn’t anything dangerous. There’s a lot to be afraid of in this life as human beings. Things can happen to us that we know are quite possible. We can be hit by a car, or be attacked by somebody. Think of what kind of fear and anxiety women have to bear with of being an attractive force to men. They have to be careful not to put themselves in positions where they can be sexually attacked. It’s a possibility

of which they're very much aware of. These are natural kinds of fears and anxieties that our human condition gives us. Being born in this state, then this is the way it is. But then fear becomes neurotic and obsessive and unreasonable. We can be driven by fear that we've never really looked at – we're just suppressing or repressing it out of consciousness. We can be concerned about what people think of us. We're the kind of creature that cares about what other people think about us. We can be anxious and worried that others don't like us or don't want us. We can become quite obsessed reading this into every situation. Fear of being unwanted or despised or looked down on.

Anxiety, worry and doubt – all these imply dealing with unknown things. Instinctive fears deal with the known, with a definite situation. But because we think and imagine, we create a self, a personality, a person. So this person can always be hurt or insulted or offended in some way or another. It's so fragile, isn't it? We worry about the future and we feel guilty about the past. We're anxious about some situation we're in, that something might go wrong, that something bad might happen. Note this state of mind. Uncertainty, insecurity and worry are so ordinary to our daily life experience and yet we do not understand and merely try to get rid of these. How can I get rid of my worries? What I found helpful is to really notice and to be aware of what it's like not to know, to be uncertain about things, to be in a state of doubt. Investigating not knowing rather than always trying to know or to dismiss our uncertainty and insecurity. What does it feel like to be worried and uncertain? We look at these different mind states of unknown possibilities. The desire to know and to have security is very strong. To feel that we're practising in the right way. This is really the best monastery in the whole world. This is definitely our path. It's the right religion, the right philosophy

and psychology. Yes, we're definitely doing the right thing. Maybe we want somebody to affirm that what we're doing is right. To have affirmation from teachers or other monks or people around us. To be told: "Yes, you're on the right path. Yes, this is the perfect place." What happens if somebody comes here and says: "Oh, this monastery isn't very good – you should go somewhere else and take somebody's retreat." Then what does our mind do? If we're not really investigating the way things are, then we get caught up in doubt and uncertainty about what we're doing. Then we go to one of the senior monks and say: "Is this the right way?" and I say: "Yes, it is. This is the right place for you." "Oh, thank goodness. Somebody said it wasn't, so I was a bit worried that maybe I was in the wrong place."

Like Fundamentalist Christianity. Everything is affirmed over and over again. If one goes to a born-again Christian meeting, it's a continuous affirmation of: "This is the only way. Jesus is our Saviour. This is right. All the others are wrong. It's the only way." "Do the Buddhists...?" "No, no! They're totally wrong. It's wrong, wrong! Jesus didn't teach Buddhism: he taught Christianity." "What about Roman Catholics?" "No, No! Popery and all that." Endless prejudices except for one particular form of Fundamentalist Christianity, which is the only way. So I might say: "Venerable Sir, please give me a testimonial about your experience with this particular religion and how the Lord came and saved you." The Venerable Sir gets up and says: "I used to be a sinner and drink liquor. Then I discovered Jesus and now I am saved. My whole life has changed. I used to be an alcoholic and gamble and be totally immoral. Now I've given it all up." Everybody is weeping and crying and everybody is affirming: "Praise the Lord."

In Buddhism we're looking at doubt, rather than trying to convince ourselves that Buddhism is the right way. We want to investigate and look into the nature of things. It's not a matter of trying to tell everyone that this is the best way, Buddhism is the only way, that's for certain.

In vipassana we're looking at the way things are. So when there's doubt we investigate what it is to be wobbly, anxious and worried. Real confidence comes with Stream Entry (the first stage of awakening). It's when we're not affirming the Eightfold Path as a belief, but we're actually getting through the doubt by understanding its nature. To enter the Stream we have to really know sakkaya-ditthi, silabbata-paramasa and vicikiccha (personality view, attachment to practices and conventions, doubt) – those three fetters. They're not to be rejected but to be investigated. Often times we just want affirmation like: "Am I a Stream Enterer yet, Ajahn Sumedho?" People love to speculate about who's a Stream Enterer or who's an arahant. But it's not a matter of somebody becoming a Stream Enterer, but of recognizing those fetters for what they are and no longer being deluded by them. Because as long as we are caught in doubt and uncertainty, and keep following it, we're definitely not going to see the Path, the way out of suffering. To get affirmation isn't the way out of suffering either, because it always needs to be reinforced. People have to agree with us: "Yes, this is the way." "Yes, you have attained." "Yes, yes, yes." "All the great Ajahns have agreed that I am a full fledged Stream Enterer. I have a certificate. Here, see, it has the signature of important bhikkhus on it. There's a seal and even the Sangharaja signed." This is being preposterous of course. It's not affirmation that we are anything, but recognizing the nature of doubt and the attachment to self-view and to conventions.

Now what is more preposterous than wanting to become a sotapanna. If we ask: “Am I a sotapanna yet?” there’s still doubt in our mind, isn’t there? That’s vicikiccha. Or if we say: “I am a sotapanna,” that’s self-view, sakkaya-ditthi. So we investigate: “I am, I should be, I am not, am I? have I?” – this way of thinking. The value of teachings like sotapanna, anagami, arahant is that they’re not attainments but used as reflections. Then more and more a relinquishment and letting go can take place, rather than achieving or attaining something. We can’t attain it – we realize it through letting go and understanding the nature of things. On the personal level we want to attain it. Once we appreciate these teachings as ways for reflecting on attachments, there’s no need to hold on to a view of having become something or having not become anything. We can equally hold the view that we haven’t attained anything, even though we might have been a monk for all those years. Or being super modest: “Oh, I couldn’t possibly... little old me. Dare to assume that I’ve entered the Stream? Someone might condemn me as being uttarimanussadhamma-parajika.” So we use our reflective capacity instead of judging that there are certain things we have to get rid of in order to become a Stream Enterer. We investigate Vinaya and tradition. Now some people take the idea of not being attached to the opposite extreme and say we shouldn’t have rules and tradition. Ceremonies and celibacy: it’s all rubbish. One just gets attached to it and one shouldn’t be attached to anything. That kind of thinking is still sakkaya-ditthi, isn’t it? Other people really hang on to Vinaya and tradition, trying to protect it by all means in order to make sure that everything is going to be all right. We have to get rid of, kill, annihilate and burn at the stake any blasphemers or heretics that threaten the purity of our tradition. “Got to keep my Vinaya pure, and if some woman comes along and touches me – dares to touch me – am I pure or not? How do I know I

didn't set myself up? Maybe latent sexual tendencies are there lurking and I'm placing myself in a position very convenient for a woman to come along and touch me. Then I'll have an offence." We can make the whole Vinaya structure incredibly burdensome through foolish and blind attachment to it and strange views about purity and impurity rather than using Vinaya for restraint and as a way of reflecting, limits we can use and standards to work from.

I remember I spent a vassa at Wat Khao Chalahk. The Vinaya there is very strict and the monks are quite obsessed about it. I thought: "I'm from Wat Pah Pong. We have good Vinaya," and so I announced myself. They said: "Oh yes, the Wat Pah Pong Vinaya is not so good. Ours is much better." So I got intimidated. Their Vinaya is better than ours. I want to keep the best Vinaya and I got really interested. Then I went to a small island where one of these monks was living as a kind of hermit. I stayed with him for a while and then left. Later he told the other monks that I didn't have a very good understanding of Vinaya. When I heard that I was really angry. I was ready to go right back to that island and punch him in the nose. I thought my Vinaya was really good and then he said it wasn't. That's an insult to me. But that's also sakkaya-ditthi. Is that a skilful use of Vinaya? This kind of comparing: "My Vinaya is better than yours. How dare you accuse me of not keeping good Vinaya?" It's not because Vinaya is the problem – the danger lies with sakkaya-ditthi, silabbata-paramasa and vicikiccha. I talk about my own experiences, so others don't have to be ashamed about having foolish thoughts and attachments – as long as we are willing to learn from them and see them clearly, rather than to suppress or believe them.

Another aspect to reflect on is the two sects of Dhammayut and Mahanikay. If we go to a Dhammayut forest temple thinking we're very strict and pure (not touching money, practising like good kammattana forest monks), they look at us suspiciously, once they find out we're Mahanikay. They put us at the end of the line and treat us like we're not really proper monks sometimes. In such situation we might see sakkaya-ditthi arising: "How dare they!" kind of self-views. To me it seems much better to watch that than to make much of it and be carried away by indignation, because we're treated in a way we think we shouldn't be treated. When we're practising Dhamma we're taking life as it is. We're not trying to make everything fair and just – straighten out the world and make everything as it should be. We're willing to use life's unfairness and each experience for practising Dhamma: To recognize the way things are. If we feel angry for being looked down on and regarded as something inferior, not as good, but we think we are quite as good or even better, then that's an opportunity to see sakkaya-ditthi. We investigate and learn to use life's experiences wisely.

Western women who come to Thailand get easily offended by the fact that monks, the men, get all the attention. Women are always in the back, tyre-flat against the wall in the furthest part of the room. They're always supposed to lower themselves and be respectful in the presence of monks. So Western women can be quite upset about this. They even write articles about how unfair and wrong it is. How women can become enlightened just like men. There's no difference at all. They become quite indignant. But if we're really serious about understanding Dhamma (not that I'm justifying this as an ideal form for women), if we want to get beyond suffering, it's good to use the situation for watching our minds, rather than stomping away in a huff thinking it's not fair and we're being

looked down on or something even worse. Much more benefit comes from just observing and using such experiences through reflection. We're not going around asking life to be fair anymore. In England that's the whining pommy-cry, isn't it? "It's not fair. It shouldn't be like this!" A kind of a wimpy cry. I'm all for fairness actually, but so much of life is unfair anyway. As Dhamma we can use the unfairness of life with wisdom rather than being offended and upset; thereby missing the opportunity for enlightenment.

I remember Chithurst when we first moved there ten years ago. I could observe how the mind, if one would let it, would get involved with wanting this monastery to be successful, or doubting whether it was the right decision to move there. More and more we start working with the flow of life. We see what we are doing and the things that are happening to us, how they affect the mind. The "I am," the self-view, the doubts that arise. Having very set views about how things should be done in a monastery, and then feeling threatened when we can't force the situations into being exactly as we think they should be. In Thailand the monasteries are so much integrated and part of society but moving to a country like England, we are on the fringes; we're the odd-balls. There we can't make the monasteries exactly as they are in Thailand. We observe the mental and emotional reaction. I could see things like fear of everything falling apart and going wrong. Once I would give in to something, then the whole thing would just degenerate and fall apart. A kind of panic and hysteria of: "You got to hang on and hold it up! Make it and force it and push it into exactly what it should be." A terrible kind of mental state to have to live with. So more and more in our life as we move into situations that are different, if we develop our reflective capacities then we keep learning from life's experiences. All kinds of strengths and abilities develop to cope with exotic or

strange, difficult or uncertain situations, that before we would have been absolutely overwhelmed by. If we practise in order to observe the way things are, then there's a fearlessness in the mind. We get beyond the fear of life and the possibilities of humiliations, things going wrong and falling apart or losing control. All that, having been investigated, is no longer a problem in the mind. There's this willingness to look at life honestly and courageously rather than being a wimpy monk hiding away because we might lose our purity if we step out of our cave. If we're frightened, worried and anxious and we don't investigate, confront and learn from these mental states, then we always will be worried and anxious about things. Becoming obsessed with states of mind we make cowards of ourselves. We can't rise up to life at all, always having to make sure everything is going to be all right: nothing to threaten us. We settle for mediocrity and comfort, for security and safety because going to the unknown, looking into the dark, the possibilities that await us in the future, may be threatening situations – that completely overwhelms our minds. We want to have a guarantee that we're going to be safe. Monastic life, the life of a samana, is one of uncertainty. One meal a day, not hoarding up things, not having security, like money in the bank and food stored away in our kutis – always living on the edge. Possibilities of having to go without a meal, of not getting what we want. So in the situation we're in now, at this moment, we have the opportunity to use the tradition, the Vinaya, the practice of Dhamma. We use the form as a criterion and a standard to observe with rather than as an attachment or forming opinions about it as being useless.

This monastery here, this is the way it is. Wat Pah Nanachat, it's like this. We can think: "I want a more remote monastery without a lot of visitors coming." We can be very offended by

a coach-load of tourists coming to watch “phra farang” and take pictures of them. We can be caught up in sakkaya-ditthi, silabbata-paramasa and vicikiccha over something like that. But if we’re turning towards Dhamma, we can use the situation for watching our minds and observing the way things are.

There was this one phra farang (Western monk) years ago who was always looking for the perfect monastery. I went to visit him once but he wasn’t there. A beautiful place with caves, absolutely ideal. Then a few months later I met this monk in Bangkok and I said: “You aren’t at that monastery any more?” And he said: “No, it wasn’t the right place.” “Why? It seemed like a wonderful place to me.” He said: “Oh, I couldn’t bear it. They gave me this kuti which was too close to the next one. Every time I walked to the meeting hall I had to pass right in front of this other monk’s kuti. That disrupted my practice, so I left.” Then he said: “But I found this really fantastic place in the South and I’m going there.” A few months later I met him again so I asked how his super-duper place in the South was. He said: “Well, I thought it was really going to be the ideal place. But you see, every time on almsround these dogs would start chasing and biting me. So I had to leave.” He ended up disrobing. Endlessly looking for the ideal place is still being bound to the three fetters. Now here at Wat Pah Nanachat, can we accept the way it is without judging it? I’m not asking anyone to approve or like the way it is, and I’m not dwelling on the things we dislike about it – but I’m asking people to observe: it’s like this; this is the way it is here; it’s this kind of a place. Then we can be aware of our own: I like it; I don’t like it; I want to find a better and more quiet place; I want to be alone, I don’t want to be in a community with a lot of monks – and so on and so forth.

I remember years ago visiting a monastery. The farang monks there were saying: “Oh, this is the best monastery. There’s hardly any monks here. Tan Ajahn will only accept eighteen monks at the most at any time. Most of the time there are less. It’s a really good place for practice.” A few years later they were complaining: “Oh, now we have about twenty-five monks. It’s not like what it used to be. We can’t practise any more. We’ve got to find another place.” Endless measuring, thinking there’s a perfect place in this world to meditate – all we have to do is to find it. The perfect forest monastery with just the right number of monks, an enlightened teacher, the ideal kuti and walking path, everything just super-duper perfect. Remote, without tourist coaches coming in, no noise from the highway and no low-flying aircraft or transistor radios from the rice paddies. The food is adequate, vegetarian, whole-grain, organically grown and the abbot is a certified arahant – it’s the perfect place. I keep looking for it. Somewhere it exists, maybe? But rather than spending our life trying to find that, the way of Buddha-Dhamma is to see the way things are. Nothing is preventing us from looking at the way it is, is it?

Touring coaches, noise from the highway, low-flying aircraft, any kind of food – all of this. There is nothing that isn’t Dhamma about it. It may not be what we want and so sakkaya-ditthi arises because we don’t like it. In order to develop we need to really penetrate this. We use the situation, the frustrations, the injustices, the unfairness, the mosquitoes, the hot weather, the interruptions and distractions to observe. Allowing ourselves to witness greed, hatred and delusion, and the whole range of fetters that affect us if we’re ignorant and heedless.

# “Innocence is corruptible; wisdom is incorruptible”

...This life isn't meant for just a certain type or certain kind of character – suitable only for some and not for others. We always have to keep in mind that the priority of this life is to see the Dhamma here and now...

(May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1989)

In our practice we need to learn what right effort is in contrast to just will power. In Thailand the attitude is always to sleep little, speak little, eat little. This has quite a strong influence on one's mind. It sets in motion the idea of pushing and striving. But it also tends to create a kind of mental state that is very suppressive. One isn't really aware of what one is doing. A lot of people get so tired and exhausted, their reflective capacities don't operate any more. In a group there's a lot of pressure to conform and to keep up. People don't always notice and observe these things. I once gave a very strict retreat: getting up at three in the morning, dismissing at eleven at night and so forth. The results of that retreat were not very good actually. Some of the people were very diligent at doing all that, but others just couldn't keep up with it. So then I contemplated: “What are we in this for anyway? What is the purpose of what we're doing?” A lot of illness comes from that suppressive tendency just to hold everything down and to drive oneself. Or perhaps trying to keep up with the very strong and healthy type of people. One might consider it a weakness, but in England I have found it much more helpful not to emphasize trying to become a super diligent kind of monk. Or to think that strictness somehow is the way that everything should be. The mind tends to be very much impressed by things like

asceticism and the use of will power. But I remember in my early years when I was a samanera (novice), the most insight I had was when I had enough rest and my mind and body were relaxed. I then had some powerful insights. I wasn't just pushing and striving against sleepiness, or trying to keep up with others.

In the Western world, the people who commit themselves to monastic life usually are already quite determined in their own way. So one is not carrying a lot of dead weight, having to teach monks who are just following a tradition as part of a cultural pattern. This of course is a lovely thing, to have people one can have confidence in, so that they can begin to trust and motivate themselves. One needs to learn how to motivate oneself rather than to depend on someone else to drive and push one. I noticed when we're put in teaching or leadership positions we tend to feel a sense of insecurity in that role. So often times one becomes almost kind of militaristic. This is quite common. I've seen it in England with monks who are for the first time in the position of being an abbot. It's almost like sitting over people and forcing them to conform. But then, contemplating the results of that is not terribly impressive. The beauty of the Holy Life doesn't lie in driving people. Instead we encourage people to rise up to things and to learn how to put effort into what they're doing.

We learn from experience what seems to be most useful and helpful and of value. It doesn't make it a kind of absolute position that one has to do it a certain way. The whole purpose of contemplation and reflection is to observe the results of what we do. I think we're quite used to using just will power alone as a kind of compulsive and obsessive tendency of the mind. We hold things back, we force and drive ourselves. Notice the European mentality that always has the idea of something we

should be doing or developing. It's very hard for us to just sit around and not feel guilty about just sitting around. There's always this compulsion of having to do something. Something more, to get better, or to get rid of some flaw, weakness or bad habit. What I'm saying is for reflection. It's not meant to be anything other than to encourage everyone to look at what's compelling us to do what we're doing. We begin to look at our motivations, what will power is and maybe the compelling tendencies of our mind. We start to become aware of them.

In a community then, there is a lot of intimidation. There are always those who sit straighter and are always on time. Those who never nod and always eat little – what we call the diligent ones. And then there is always somebody in the community who can't do any of it very well. Ranging from those who desperately try to conform and live up to an image, and those who just try to do the best they can. There's a tendency to look at somebody else and to copy, to idealize and to emulate. Then there are the feelings of guilt, remorse or inferiority in regard to the fact that we might not be able to live up to what we think the best ones can do. All this is to be witnessed and observed. Community life can be just a mass conformity, or it can be a very skilful way of understanding the nature of things. Nobody wants to live in a community for very long under a lot of pressure, feeling intimidated and put on by others. Life can become very dull or despairing. What appealed to me about Vinaya discipline was that it wasn't asceticism, but a reasonable way to live a life. I used to like to do ascetic practices and be very strict. I realized that one can do those things for periods of time, but not in the long run. As a way of life one didn't really want to have to do all that, or feel obliged to always to operate on that level. One felt that the Buddha had meant monastic life to be something simple and easy, relaxed and peaceful, rather than harsh and ascetic.

In England we've had to take care of sick people. Some monks have very poor health. Various back problems and knee problems and endless kinds of ailments needing consideration as to how to work through them: the monks themselves with their particular health problems, but also the community as a whole. Do we want just a community of healthy and tough young men? Or can a community perhaps also include and open up to a wider range of age, abilities and levels of health? I know for a lot of young men it's very important to prove that one is tough, and one can do all these things. This is also to be recognized – the masculine need for rites of passage into the adult male world that might be motivating us. Nevertheless, it is good to get to know our limits. What is it like to go without sleep or food? If we want to test ourselves, that's fair enough. It's good practice actually. But then we each have to know our limits. Some of us have to learn how to operate with the limits of poor health, having little physical reserve and a weak constitution. We need to apply mindfulness and wisdom when the body is not healthy and needs rest quite frequently, or certain kinds of nourishment. One of the monks has so much tension all the time, that he's been incredibly constipated most of his monastic life. These constipation problems arise because of the driving tension of willing oneself. Learning how to practise is finding a balance. Finding out how to balance things out, when to take it easy and when to tighten things up. This is something each one of us has to really observe in ourselves and in the community. We can be very idealistic, thinking a good monk should be like this: wearing rag robes, only eating what is offered, being able to live in whatever place is given, surviving just on fermented urine for medicine. Taking his ideal from our basic reflections: the ideal of not sleeping very much, not eating very much, not speaking very much. If we attach to those ideals without understanding what

we're doing, then the result is we lose our sense of humour and become very tense. All kinds of unpleasant results can occur. Maybe we can do it for a while but then we find ourselves falling apart. When the supportive conditions for such a practice aren't there, we lose our momentum. In observing this we can begin to see how to relax, how to apply more effort and how to let go. We learn when to push ourselves and create energy, but without taking or holding on to an idealistic position of how it should be permanently: "Good practice is being strict all the time!" Having the high ideals we believe in so firmly, quite suddenly we feel despair. Many people leave because they just cannot stand the idea of living that way and always feeling a sense of failure in regards to it.

When I talk about reflection, what we do is just look at what's driving us, what kind of ideals we have. It's not that we shouldn't have ideals. But what are our expectations and the results of our life so far? What is it we are attached to and holding on to? What are we doing that's causing a particular result? This is a way of self-knowledge, of looking into the way things are. We are not judging that we shouldn't be strict or push ourselves. I'm not taking a position for or against these things. But I emphasize the need to recognize what we are actually doing and the result of it. This is what practice is all about: what we're actually doing. We're not just trying to live up to an ideal of what a good monk should be, but we're observing the results of what we're doing. What would good results be? Well, if we're still suffering and full of anxiety, doubt, stress, fear and dullness, caught in restlessness, jealousy, envy, anger, greed and all that, then we're obviously doing something not quite right. Maybe we're trying to purify ourselves, getting rid of our defilements, killing our kilesas. Making ourselves into something else and trying to wipe out and annihilate the bad habits. Maybe we want to prove

ourselves or get approval from others; or maybe we're trying to be something we think we should be. Anything that comes from the self-view will always take us to some kind of negative result and despair. These go hand in hand. If we have a sense of self, we're also going to have disillusionment and a sense of despair.

When we read the Ajahn Mun biography, what does that do to us? People think they would really like to be like Ajahn Mun, and do all the things that he did. We seem to forget that this is an idealized biography of a great monk. What is it actually, when we want to become like that? That mental state of wanting to become something or thinking that one has to do all those things in order to become enlightened. This is a drawback with biographies. If I were to write my biography, there are a lot of things I just wouldn't tell you about to be honest. I'd prefer to talk about the time I nearly died under the tin roof with all the little flies going up my nose, my ears, my mouth; the terrible food, the heat, the infection and the utter despair.... But then I aroused myself to sit up straight and suddenly I saw the light. That's a very inspiring story. What I would write in my biography are things on that level. Interesting, inspiring examples of practice. But there are a lot of things I think others wouldn't be interested in; they are so ordinary and boring. One just wouldn't want to fill page after page about the monotony of monastic life that we've experienced most of the time in this form. We take the choice bits, the supreme challenges and maybe the failures and successes of this life. With that we might create a very fascinating biography. But don't get me wrong. I'm not condemning the biography of Ajahn Mun either. We can observe, though, how we can idealize monasticism, and try to live up to very high standards of asceticism and practice. We don't realize what we're actually doing because there's no

understanding of what's motivating us, and what we're grasping.

A problem that arises when there is any set form is that some seem to fit into the ideal form more than others. Those who feel that they don't quite fit into the ideal form might draw the conclusion that this isn't a suitable life for them. Maybe some of us can't chant very well, recite the Patimokkha, or maybe we're not very good at chatting with the lay people. Not everyone can be a gifted, charismatic teacher. Maybe we never learned to be really fluent in Thai or make the ladies laugh, be charming and witty and get all the praise. It's a strong attraction in this life here in Thailand. If we can say funny things and make people laugh and speak the language well, we get enormous amounts of praise. It's always nice to be appreciated. Then there is the old sour-grapes type of monk that says: "They're just superficial, not really serious practicers. I don't do that. I'm not going to sit up on that high seat and make the ladies laugh!" The sour-grapes type of mind which puts down the one who chants well and never makes a mistake in the Patimokkha; the one that is witty and charming, speaks perfect Thai and gets all the praise. If we're being negative, we can regard that as superficial and not the practice. We look down our nose at such a despicable, silly kind of monk – which is another kind of delusion, isn't it? We each have our own particular character to live with. This life isn't meant for just a certain kind of character, suitable only for some and not for others. We always have to keep in mind that the priority of this life is to see the Dhamma here and now.

It is not our purpose to become a teacher, or a missionary, or a popular and charismatic figure. Or to be able to do everything perfectly well, to have a lot of disciples, to ordain many monks and set up branch monasteries. All of this is not what we're

here for. At least that's not what I'm here for. If these things happen it's all right. One is willing to encourage and try to create suitable situations for teaching, practising and listening to Dhamma. But the priority always has to be with seeing the Dhamma in the present moment. Not being deluded and pushing aside the truth of the way it is now, because we are caught up in a mission or something important on the worldly plane.

In my position, for example, people have all kinds of expectations of me. Sometimes I used to find it really unbearable and began to feel a lot of resentment about this. But the priority was always to observe the way things are in the present moment. If I'd follow this resentment, of course then I'd be suffering. But in just looking at it, that tendency to create a problem about that particular thing, or any other thing, drops away. More and more a confidence and a space and a strength arises to be here and now without making comments. Neither being pulled in, nor intimidated, nor wanting to please and be an impeccable monk who fulfils the expectations of other people. So we keep learning from life's experiences. Always my reflection in daily life: this is the way it is; it's like this. If people leave, monks disrobe, anagarikas run away or nuns fall in love with swamis, we might feel quite disappointed. For instance, a monk for whom we had great expectations suddenly leaves. Life is up and down. Instead of creating a problem about it, we remember that the practice is about here and now, not about personalities, the expectations we have, the way we might be disappointed about somebody, the hurt feelings – they're just part of our human experience. They can always be seen here and now as Dhamma. All that arises, ceases; that is the way things are. We're not trying to make ourselves into an unfeeling, indifferent kind of person, to the point where we don't care what anybody thinks: if

everybody leaves, it wouldn't mean anything to us; the world can fall apart we'll just be totally indifferent – someone who is no longer sensitive and does not feel anything at all. Sometimes we may imagine that that's what an arahant is like. No matter what's happening he's completely indifferent and unimpressed. Is that really the way it is? From my experience, the way it is, is that this is a very sensitive world. Planetary life, consciousness and the human form – the whole realm is one of great sensitivity, feeling and emotion, psychic phenomena. So the reflection that all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing and is not self, isn't a dismissal of it or an insensitivity to the way it is, to its power or quality. But it's the ability to be patient and bear with the vicissitudes of life and to learn from them.

Qualities can vary. Some things can be very important and urgent, others might be totally trivial, silly and idiotic. In daily life some experiences have that quality of being very big and important. But a lot of daily life experiences are quite trivial and foolish and have no importance in their quality. Seeing that all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing, isn't dismissing the quality, but giving quality a perspective. Seeing it in the perspective of impermanence rather than judging and paying attention only to the important ones and not bothering with the trivial ones we begin to open to the fact that there is weakness, cowardice, wishy-washiness and wimpiness. All this is seen as “what arises, ceases” instead of judging the quality of it as being horrible and bad and something we don't want. It doesn't mean that we become weak and wishy-washy people, but we're willing to observe and note that these kind of qualities are impermanent – as well as the big, serious, grand and the urgent ones.

What is then being a human being – a manussa? If we reflect on it, we see we have a body and we have a mind. Just like this, without a judgement. I'm not saying it's good or bad in any absolute way. Or being masculine. What is the effect of being masculine on the mind? What is the effect for women of having a feminine body on the mind? Ways of reflecting. I try to encourage observing how things are affecting our minds. Like the body is obviously going to affect us. A male body, or a female body. Women's bodies with their wombs, their nourishing equipment, menstrual period and this whole functioning process of femininity. What effect does it have on the mind? Do the women here dismiss it or take it very personally, or what do they do with it? How do we reflect on that? What is the nature of masculinity? A male body doesn't have nurturing organs. It is not designed for nursing or for bearing children. That's why it's difficult for men to understand women in those aspects. Because we just don't have that kind of experience of life to understand it first-hand. So this is the way it is. It's not a failure or a fault – a man is better, or a woman is better than a man – or anything like that. These facile judgements and prejudices are not to be believed in, but to be observed. This whole psycho-physical process and how we experience it in this very individual way since birth.

Mindfulness is the way to the deathless. Mindfulness is a word often times used without really being understood. We can be concentrated on an object, or be caught in thoughts and mental patterns. But mindfulness is the reflective ability to witness, to observe and to let go so that the mind is open rather than concentrated and absorbed into an object. If we take this to its logical conclusion of, say, the Buddha being mindful of the Dhamma, then there is no person or personality that could be seen as an object. Male and female, all the seemingly very

personal differences, emotional tendencies and psychological quirks can be seen as arammana (mental states), rather than being judged and grasped as self. This is the meaning of not-self. Mindfulness is not a blank, vacuous or expressionless thing, but it's brightness, intelligence and clarity. And that's not personal. If I say: "I am that," then "that" becomes personal. But if there is "that" alone, it's not anybody. When there is no attachment to the arammana that arise out of delusion, then there is mental clarity. It's not stupidity or dullness, because we're not going towards annihilation or nihilistic views. For the whole of the lifespan of this form here, called Sumedho, this is where there is knowing. On this level of speech and convention I assume that when others are mindful it's the same thing. Then out of compassion for others we try to encourage, direct and teach people to look at this, to know that this is the way it is.

These sensitive forms are like radios or receptors and as long as there is avijja (ignorance) then they distort information. It becomes all blocked and deformed. But when the human form is released from defilements, and those blockages, then these receptors and transmitters can be a real blessing to planetary life. Someone like the Buddha, who was enlightened, therefore transmitted a wisdom teaching out of compassion. Gotama the Buddha, just one human being in history, had a tremendous effect, that we still appreciate two thousand five hundred and thirty three years later in different parts of this planet. We can begin to realize the human potential for enlightenment, our ability to be free from the distorted attachments and defilements of the mind which we create out of ignorance. When those are relinquished, then the human form is a transmitter of wisdom and compassion, of loving-kindness, of joy and serenity. What does the selfish human being manifest? When I am thinking about myself, being caught in selfish

attitudes, then I manifest to others greed, hatred and delusion. When we only think in terms of what I want, what I'm trying to get rid of and what I don't like about others, then the human being just becomes a kind of nuisance and an unpleasantness to the other creatures on this planet. We can see how ignorant humanity has created so many problems on planet earth! All the pollution, corruption, destruction of the forest, the diminishing of the numbers of whales and dolphins, the fish and the birds. If we just keep going on this level we're just public nuisances. Maybe the best thing to do would be to develop a kind of pesticide for human beings. We just spray it on and they melt away, so that it leaves the planet free of these pests. But also we can see the potential because there always have been those like a Buddha, the arahants and the bodhisattvas. Through selflessness, wisdom and enlightenment they manifest the brahmavihara (the four divine abidings of loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy and serenity). That would be our function on the planet, if we have one. To me that would be the most lovely thing to point to as a potential for humanity rather than just being negative and cynical about the nature of human beings as being selfish and greedy, the pervading attitude being: "Look out for yourself because no one else will!" There certainly are human beings who function in that way and believe in that pattern but we don't have to be like that. We can transcend that realm of survival of the fittest, the law of the jungle, the strong dominating the weak. This is the instinctual level of survival of the animal world. We can rise above that. We can rise above our own psychic realm of "me as a sensitive personality," to a transcendent understanding where these forms are then more like transmitters, rather than grasped as a person or me or mine. We need to be able to realize: this isn't mine.

Cultivating the Noble Eightfold Path is no longer making any demands or claims on the personal plane. We trust and develop this path in daily life, so that these forms can manifest compassion, kindness, joy and equanimity towards other beings. We have before us Gotama the Buddha and the compassion of his teaching. This form of a bhikkhu is a brilliant kind of transmission of his teaching for more than two and a half thousand years. It has been established in such a way that it can be carried onward through a long period of time. That's the effect of just one human being called a Buddha. Now we're disciples of the Buddha and in the conventional form we use Buddhist teaching. We're the inheritors and we have the Dhamma and Vinaya. We live in the restraint of Vinaya and in the spirit of Dhamma. As long as we surrender ourselves to this form, we become its inheritors. Allowing this particular form to be transmitted onward is not only for our own benefit, but also for future generations. What it's ultimately about on the macrocosmic level – in our puny human predicament, all we can do is wonder. We sense a kind of marvellousness and mystery in being this rather vulnerable and fragile little person – this tiny body on this planet. And yet, when we look up into the sky on a clear night, we have a sense of wonder about it. We can't pin it down into the limited ability of our perceptions, thoughts or views. But what the human mind can do is open to the mystery of it all: to where the mind is really mindful. We're not trying to fix and attach to ideas, trying to put the totality into a little perception. This is where human ignorance is so strong. Because we want to figure it all out with words and perceptions, rather than open our hearts to the Dhamma, the whole and the completeness of it. If we allow enough space, we can trust the mystery, the unknown, the vastness, the infinity. It's a strange predicament – I often contemplate it in my life. Why is it this way? Why are we like this? And what can we actually know beyond just

the conditioning process of our own mind? If we let the mind open up, we're able to wonder. When the mind is filled with wonder, or is wonderful, there is no perception, is there? It's not black or white, male or female, this or that. The mind stops. There is no need to grasp a perception or to force anything into a viewpoint. But it also is mysterious. It's what we can't know through the desire to know it. We can only open the mind with mindfulness, rather than trying to figure it all out with analysis, opinions and words.

In the cynical world that I grew up in, the tendency was to dwell on the faults and flaws, to be critical and picky always emphasizing what's wrong with everything. The critics of life, the cynics, the doomsday prophets. This kind of mind is very ugly and to be stuck in that realm is painful. When I was a young university student I really enjoyed being cynical, negative and critical. One seemed to be developing those faculties maybe at that time. It might have been an important thing to do, but to be stuck on that level is suffering.

The one thing we love about children is the innocence. Young children wonder about things. They don't have to have perceptions for everything. When there's still innocence there, they marvel at life, they're discovering nature and they reflect on things. Then, as they become more conditioned by our society, class, ancestry and all that, that drops away. They lose their innocence and become conditioned into being a member of the family and society, believing and doing all the kind of things we're expected to do in that position. But in the long run it's very painful just to be caught in duties, responsibilities or ideas of having rights and privileges and demanding them, being jealous of others and competitive – that whole realm becomes quite meaningless and distressing to us. So then there's the aspiration of Buddha-Dhamma. To become like a

child again but no longer innocent but wise. Innocence is corruptible. Wisdom is incorruptible. Wisdom also allows us to wonder again. To be open to the unknown and not to be frightened by it anymore, allowing this conditioned self we carry through ignorance to cease in the mind. Then the mind is a reflective mind and open to the mystery, the Dhamma and the way things are. It's not just an attachment to the view that everything that arises ceases – just another perception. It's a reflection, a way of teaching us to look at a pattern of the things, rather than a position we take and hold on to.

# “Everything around us is Dhamma”

...What is enlightenment? To me this term means to be able to see clearly the way things are. It's not the kind of light that blinds us. If we try to look at the midday sun it'll burn our eyes out. Is that enlightenment? Or is it knowing things as they are. Being able to learn the truth from very humbling and ordinary things of daily life...

(May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1989)

The purpose of our life as monks is to realize the ultimate truth, the truth of the way it is. The Buddha used the word “Nibbana”, which means “non-attachment”, not being attached through delusion and ignorance to the experiences we have from birth to death in this form as a human being. When we ordain as bhikkhus we do it for the realization of non-attachment (nibbana), for “desirelessness” and fading away (viraga), and for cessation (nirodha). These three terms – viraga, nirodha and nibbana – are quite significant. To realize viraga we have to first understand what raga or desire is. In the second Noble Truth we have the arising of desire and the attachment to it. We can divide desire into three types: kama-tanha, bhava-tanha and vibhava-tanha. Desire is this energy that's always looking for something or other. If there is attachment to desire, then one is never content. There is always this restlessness, trying to get something or do something or aiming at something or other. We might be picking up this or doing that or just saying anything. Desire, when it's not understood and seen for what it is, just pulls us around.

Kama-tanha is the desire for sense pleasures. We distract ourselves with the sense world. This can be done in so many ways, can't it? With just eating, drinking, smoking, taking drugs, sexual activities, watching television or other types of entertainment and on and on. The possibilities for distracting ourselves are endless. In the form of a bhikkhu, the life of celibacy very much restricts our ability for kama-tanha. But sometimes it definitely gathers around, let's say, food. We can feel tremendous desires for sweets or for listening to music; a chance to distract ourselves with sound, sight, smell, taste or touch.

Kama-tanha is still quite coarse and obvious, but bhava-tanha and vibhava-tanha can be quite subtle. Bhava-tanha is the desire to become and vibhava-tanha is the desire to get rid of. In this life, which can be very altruistic and based on high-minded ideas, we can still have a strong desire to become an arahant or an enlightened person. It seems like a good desire in fact, doesn't it? We try to become something better, or even to become the best. Or we try to get rid of the terrible things. The desire to get rid of greed, anger and delusion; of jealousy, weakness and fear. They seem righteous kinds of desires. It must be good to get rid of the bad, the obstacles, the hindrances. Our minds can support and defend bhava-tanha and vibhava-tanha on these levels of becoming and getting rid of. But we should remember that tanha is always connected to avijja (ignorance) – avijja and tanha, they go hand in hand. So, as long as there is avijja, there's going to be tanha, and the desire to become and to get rid of. This is where we really need to understand what desire is, and not just have an idea that we shouldn't have any desires. Because then we form the desire not to have any desires, or the desire to get rid of the desire to get rid of desires – and it gets complicated. It's not necessary to get rid of, but to understand. So the second Noble

Truth is the insight of letting go. Desires should be let go of. And to let go of something we have to know what we're holding on to. It has nothing to do with annihilation. Letting go isn't a kind of throwing away, since there's no aversion accompanying it. We're letting it be. It's not a matter of getting rid of desire, but of letting it cease. We contemplate this word "letting go", until we eventually realize that desire has been let go of. Then we know letting go.

So kama-tanha, bhava-tanha, vibhava-tanha are to be examined and investigated. Just observe the nature of desire. What does it feel to sit here and want to get rid of something? Or wanting to move or go away, or wanting to do or say something. How much of our formal practice is based on desires to become and desires to get rid of? We should ask ourselves that question.

So our aim and intention when ordaining is to realize Nibbana. But this is not a desire – there's a difference here. We make our decision not from desire, but from a deliberate choosing. The rational ability to turn towards the realization of complete understanding and freedom from delusion. Whether we think we can do it or not isn't the issue. Whether we think we're capable, or anyone is capable, isn't the point at all. We're learning how to use our minds, learning how to use what we have skilfully. So we ordain as bhikkhus to realize dispassionateness and non-attachment to the five khandhas, which takes us to the cessation of desire and ignorance. We're not just doing this when we're ecstatic and inspired and in a high mood: "I want to realize Nibbana – it's the most wonderful thing to do!" It's not that, but something quite deliberate from a very rational and clear place in our minds. We might ask: "Well, are there any arahants these days? Has anybody here realized Nibbana?" This is doubt and the self-view operating. But that's not the point, whether anybody here

has realized Nibbana or not. Our goal for the Holy Life is to be free from all delusion and free from grasping. To see and know the Dhamma and to realize the truth. What's the point of being a monk otherwise? The whole structure and form, the surrounding conditions support and encourage that. They help to remind us and to recollect. Now that's done, as mentioned above, from a deliberate, rational position of the mind, not from desire and ignorance, trying to become an enlightened person. But it is right intention if it is grounded in wisdom and clear understanding.

Our practice and mental cultivation in this life is to observe the way things are: suffering and the arising of suffering. We should understand and acknowledge what suffering is, not just react to it. In the second Noble Truth the insight is to let go of desire. The third Noble Truth is the realization of cessation. Cessation doesn't mean annihilation. It's not the end of everything, a kind of total destruction, but when we let go of desire it ceases. It's natural for whatever arises to cease. That's just Dhamma, the way of things. All conditions are impermanent, so whatever comes into being, falls away. The focus of the third Noble Truth is to realize the cessation of things. This is quite subtle and if we don't set our minds on practising for that realization, then we miss it all the time. Who notices how things end or cease? We're much more interested in the arising conditions of life. Like sexual activities, delicious flavours and beautiful sights. We want pleasurable experience, an exciting lifetime with romantic relationships and adventures. So the arising of desire is what we tend to become dazzled and fascinated with. But then it reaches its peak. We can't stay fascinated, inspired and interested forever, can we? We can only stay that way for a while: it reaches its peak and then we seek another exciting object to follow. This is what samsara is about. The endless

seeking after rebirth, some kind of new, absorbing condition to become. And then we get bored, disillusioned, depressed and uncertain. That's the cessation; what we don't notice and what we tend to ignore. How many of us, whenever we're bored, try to find something interesting to do to distract ourselves? We don't like to be bored, do we? Nobody wants to be bored. The thing is, when we live a life of just one exciting adventure after another, we get incredibly bored. We get bored with excitement. What was exciting yesterday is boring today, so we have to think of something even more exciting than that. There are endless experiments with sex and drugs and rock'n'roll. Just to be reborn into something fascinating, because yesterday's fascination is boring.

Monastic life is generally quite boring. What could be more boring than our chanting, or sitting for an hour? But it's through observing boredom that we realize the cessation of suffering. Willing to be bored and to look at our sense of despair, depression or disillusionment. It's easy to be a monk as long as we're inspired. We think: "I want to be a Buddhist monk. That's the most wonderful thing a human being can ever do. To realize the ultimate reality – that's terribly inspiring. And to dedicate one's whole life to the Dhamma – that's really inspiring. And to give up sexual desire – oh, that's very noble. And to be an alms mendicant, just eating whatever the faithful put into one's bowl. To wear a rag-robe, to live at the foot of a tree, sitting in the full lotus-posture. To go on tudong and be able to put up with mosquitoes, malaria and stifling heat. And to live out in charnel-grounds and graveyards." One can make a real adventure out of Buddhist monasticism as an ideal. But then the reality of it, like the reality of anything, is that one usually becomes a monk through some kind of inspiration. Inspiration is the arising side of our experience – and then it expires, or perspires (there's a lot of

perspiration in this place). If we want to be inspired all the time we have to keep going somewhere else. Coming to Wat Pah Nanachat we might be inspired, but we're not going to stay that way, because we get too much perspiration here. Or desperation. So then we think: "Oh, I'd like to go on tudong. Off to the cave, to the mountains, to the Burmese border, or the islands off in the gulf." Once the inspiration has worn off, any place looks more inspiring than the place we're in. Now this is where it's important not to move at that time – to really determine not just to follow that kind of restless desire for distractions and adventures or simply for a change. To be able just to put up with the desperation, perspiration and the expiration, until it doesn't matter any more whether we stay or go. Ajahn Chah was always saying: "When you want to go, don't go." Because we need to stay and observe our boredom, our disillusionment and our restlessness. Then we might have insight into the third Noble Truth – the cessation of desire.

If we tend to think of nirodha in black-and-white terms it sounds like annihilation. This is where we need to see what grasping is and letting go, and then the cessation that follows. Because it's not a rejection in consciousness of anything. It's a realization, where desire, based on ignorance, is let go of. We can actually see desire, then it ceases and there is the realization of the cessation of desire – when there is no more desire, what is our mind like? This we have to really observe. Mindfulness is the way to the deathless. We sit and watch, being able to observe desire – not suppressing or trying to get rid of it, not following it blindly and just believing our mind as being ultimately us. We turn towards that cool, calm position of "Buddho", knowing and seeing, witnessing and recognizing the way things are.

With anapanasati it's the same pattern. I've always contemplated that: there's inspiration with the inhalation and then there's the expiration with the exhalation. When we inhale there's this sense of the spirit rising up in a way. We tend to be drawing and pulling in the air and the body fills out. It's like inspiration. When we're really proud and full of life, we have that sense of being inspired, being full of breath of life. But we can only inhale to a certain degree, we can't just keep inhaling, even though it's a nice thing to do. Imagine yourself only inhaling and never exhaling. What would that be like? What is an exhalation then? The breath is leaving the body and we can observe, when we can't exhale any more, there's a real desire to inhale again. We can't stay exhaled for very long either and just stop there without a kind of almost panic and desire to inhale again. To fill ourselves up with air again. I've noticed it's easier for me to concentrate on my inhalation than it is on my exhalation. My mind more easily wanders on the exhalation. So much of life is like that. The boredom, the disillusionment – that side of life is where we wander, looking for something else. It's not easy just to stay with being bored, the other side of happiness and pleasure, the other side of inspiration. To be mindful of that, to stay with that, we have to determine to do so. We determine to stay with the exhalation from the beginning to the end of it: just that is not terribly significant in its seeming appearance, but we can use the pattern of anapanasati as a reflection. We try and contemplate the very experience we all have of inhalation, exhalation, inspiration and disillusionment. When we're born we start to grow up and develop. We have youth and vigour and reach a peak of physical maturity, then we get old and feeble. Our society doesn't want to get old, does it? We see so many old and ageing people trying to remain young, youthful and vigorous. There's so much money now in cosmetic surgery. People can have their wrinkles taken out, their double

chin, their sagging jowls, their crowsfeet around their eyes. They try to make the nose more attractive, and the lips more full and the teeth white and straight. A youthful complexion is really desirable.

Let's take a look at flowers for example. I used to contemplate roses in England, because they are so beautiful and have such a lovely fragrance. What is the perfect rose? It's the day when the rose reaches its perfect fullness in colour, form and fragrance. From a bud it opens out and then it reaches this point where it's perfect. But after that peak, what happens to it? It starts to get old and wilt. Its perfection and peak have passed and so it starts getting a little bit worn looking. The next day it's definitely old, but still attractive enough. Finally it starts turning brown and looks pretty horrible. So we throw it away and get rid of it. This is one way of reflecting on life and sensual experience – always arising and passing away. We just learn from watching roses, ourselves and the people around us, the day and the night and the seasons of the year.

In England with its four seasons we can observe that sequence. The days are very long now. And they keep getting longer until the summer solstice. Then they gradually get shorter and the nights get longer. So we have this reflection on the days being very short, the nights being very long. Then the light-element increases until the days are very long and nights are very short, and it reverses. Just this experience we all have of living in the sensory realm with seasons and changes, and a body that was born, grows up, gets old and will die. Everything is based on that pattern where all conditions are impermanent. The inhalation and exhalation is something we can observe right now; to observe the winter solstice and the summer solstice takes six months. But right here and right now we can observe the inhalation, exhalation and reflect on it. Not

just become kind of mesmerised by our breath, but really contemplating it, noticing and observing the way it is.

Everything around us is Dhamma; it's teaching us about the way things are. Reflecting on the Four Noble Truths is an ongoing process, working with things that we can actually observe in daily life. Watching the breath we notice that actually the body is breathing, we aren't breathing. After the last exhalation, when somebody dies, the body doesn't inhale again. We never see a corpse inhaling. When the body is about to die, there's one last exhalation, and then – finished. That's the death of the body. As long as the body is alive it will breathe. That's the nature of it. It's a physiological function that sustains the life of the body. Breathing is much more important than eating. We can ask ourselves: "Who is it that breathes?" Even when we are sleeping our body is breathing, isn't it? We don't have to be awake and make our body breathe. So we can observe the breath of the body because it's not-self. The breath isn't something that we feel possessive of or identified with. It doesn't arouse vanity in our minds. At least in my mind. I've never considered myself as somehow breathing better than somebody else, or envy somebody else's breathing. Men breathe better than women, or maybe the king of Thailand breathes in a way vastly superior to me – it's ridiculous, isn't it? Because breathing is just the way it is. It's a physiological function, like the heart beating and the metabolism operating. It functions quite on its own without our thinking about it or identifying with it.

With anapanasati we can tranquillize the mind by concentrating on the inhalation and exhalation at the tip of the nose. The more refined our breath becomes, the more tranquil we are. One can use anapanasati only for tranquillity or also for reflection. To really understand something we have to examine

it thoroughly. So that's why we reflect on the inhalation, exhalation – to know that pattern. All that arises, ceases and to realize the letting go of the arising. When we let go of desire and are no longer attached to the arising, then what arises, ceases. That's the natural way of things. That's Dhamma: "Sabbe sankhara anicca, sabbe dhamma anatta (All conditions are impermanent, all conditions are not-self)." Sometimes it seems to be more interesting to develop jhanas and have magical powers. Things that are more attainment-oriented where we can feel we're getting somewhere. Being someone who has attained something, or can do something special. Because just contemplating the exhalation doesn't seem like we're doing anything of much significance at all. But notice this reflection on Dhamma. To understand the way things are is the way out of suffering. Not by becoming superman, or being able to do miraculous things.

What is enlightenment? To me this term means to be able to see clearly the way things are. It is not the kind of light that blinds us. Light can be so strong that it blinds us and we can't see anything. If we try to look at the midday sun it'll burn our eyes out. Is that enlightenment? Or is it knowing things as they are. The amount of light needed to see things clearly isn't a blinding light, is it? So what kind of light is that? The light of wisdom and reflection, being able to learn the truth from very humbling and ordinary things of daily life. We don't need to know the ultimate purpose and meaning of everything in the whole universal system, the macrocosm in its totality. We learn just from watching the breath, the way the body breathes, the ageing process of the body itself. The hope and the despair in life, the happiness and the suffering – all of this. We learn from seemingly very subjective, personal and insignificant details of daily life, and we can arrive at the ultimate truth: being able to see and know things as they are. When we reflect

like this we're not putting Nibbana and enlightenment on a pedestal. This is what happens to a lot of Buddhists. It becomes something exalted and fantastic: "Nibbana! That's the most difficult thing. Is there anybody in Thailand who has realized Nibbana? Are there any enlightened monks? They must be supermen with radiant auras, most fantastic and elevated, exalted above everyone else." The human mind tends to idealize or idolize. But if we examine how the Buddha used the term "Nibbana", we see it doesn't mean much of anything. It's certainly not an exalted term. It means "cool" actually. Like American slang: "Be cool, man." The Buddha's advice is to cool it. But through human ignorance the word is put up on a pedestal and worshipped as something so beyond anyone's reach that we have no inspiration even to try. What was meant to be a very skilful teaching and useful convention for getting beyond ignorance, gets made into an idol and worshipped.

This is where teachers like Ajahn Chah really bring our attention to how to use these conventions in the way that the Buddha intended. Because they are for freedom and liberation; for seeing clearly and understanding things as they are. This we can do. It is not beyond our ability. It is a teaching for human beings.