

# Paccuppanna

The Present Moment

DHAMMA REFLECTIONS BY

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‘They do not repent the past, nor do they brood over the future.  
They live in the present. Therefore they are radiant.’

*Samyutta Nikaya*



## TIMELESS

Awareness has a mirror-like quality. We can tap into it right now, become aware of the mind and body as they are in this moment. Perhaps awareness is reflecting the feeling of sleepiness or of not knowing, the feeling of cold or heat, heaviness or lightness. Reflective consciousness can see things, even the things that are closest to us. It reflects feelings of aversion, anger, kindness, pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings – all kinds of things. This quality of seeing, of knowing this reflective mind, is neutral. There is no sense of judging or criticising; awareness merely reflects the judging or the critical mind. That is what the Buddha is talking about when he says that the Dhamma is ‘apparent here and now’; not tomorrow or yesterday, but here and now in the present moment. And the Dhamma is timeless – it is not dependent on time.

## STOPPING THE MIND

Occasionally, we wonder if we are on the right track. Should we change religions, change paths, change teachers? At times like this, when our minds are in the grip of confusion, the path is still here right in front of us, immediately apparent here and now, timeless.

Ajahn Chah gave a teaching which is transcendent – the rational mind cannot fathom this teaching:

‘Practice is not moving forward, but there is forward movement. At the same time, it is not moving back, but there is backward movement. And finally, practice is not stopping and being still, but there is stopping and being still. So there is moving forward and backward as well as being still, but you can’t say that it is any one of the three. Then practice eventually comes to a point where there is neither forward nor backward movement, nor any being still. Where is that?’

## MEETING REALITY

A teacher in the Thai Forest tradition once told some of his disciples that when we meet someone, we needn't be overly romantic. To put it bluntly, we are just meeting a big bag of *kilesas*. Once we see this reality as it is, we don't have unrealistic expectations. Often we suffer when we find people's minds are not the way we perhaps thought they were. We thought they were in charge. We thought they ought to be loving and caring. But it is good to remember that what we actually encounter is mostly a bunch of *kilesas*. This helps because attachment is a *kilesa*, even attachment to goodness and kindness. Attachment skews your perception. If you attach to goodness and kindness, or to being a Buddhist, somebody who doesn't fit your view is suddenly 'not right'. Often people say (or think), 'How can you be angry and be a Buddhist? If you were a true Buddhist, you



would be really patient with me. If you were a true Buddhist you would be able to control your mind.’

No. ‘True Buddhists’ are people who can see when they *don’t* control their minds. They see their mind as they are. They aren’t caught up in an idea of how the mind should be. As true Buddhists we have the wisdom to know what makes us turn into hellish beings with hellish lives, and the wisdom to know how to bring those lives into a place of goodness, kindness, love and peace, the qualities that make a liveable world. Then the practice and life become a single unit. We may be practising sitting in full lotus or on a chair, or lying down, walking or running, but the mind (*citta*) is with us all the time. And the mind is not just the brain or the intellect. It is the reality that we experience in each moment. This experience includes feelings, mental constructs, memories, desires, sensations – whatever experience is present here and now, this is the mind.

The practice is so beautifully simple. All the techniques, methods and teachings are designed simply to bring us back to the present moment, here and now, to bring us back to seeing clearly. All the techniques and methods help to give us a good pair of spectacles. We wear them so we don't have blurry eyesight. When we look at the world through lenses of greed, hatred or delusion, we look at a very blurry world. And yet as meditators, we can become attached to clarity, to purity, to wanting a perfect view. But it may be a long time before we achieve that perfect view. Meanwhile our vision is not clear yet and that's just the way it is.

The Buddha encourages us to develop Right Effort, Right Concentration and Right Mindfulness as balancing factors helping us bit by bit to achieve clear vision. Balance is a skill we develop, we don't achieve it straightaway. We're not working with an inanimate object. We are working with

energy, our big energy body that doesn't always tell us in advance how it is going to respond to the practice. So we have to become skilled in receiving this energy without freaking out, without misinterpreting it or being confused by the energetic movement of the mind and body. According to the Buddha's teaching, integration of the world begins with sila (ethics); that is the foundation. Ethics requires effort, it calls for energy. It can be more difficult than meditation and attaining Samadhi. Ethics is the first step, and the hardest one for most people.

## WHEN MIND SEES MIND

The consumer society creates a dynamic in which we become more and more frustrated as we pursue things we think will make us happy one day. Eventually there comes a point when we start to notice that all the tantalizing things in the world do not bring the happiness that a human being seeks. At some point, we experience *nibbida*, which means ‘disenchantment’. Things that once seemed so important become meaningless; they make no sense, they seem to have no purpose. We realize that we have just been piling up more anger, stupidity, selfishness, fear, worry and so on, and that this is not what we were looking for. At some point we begin to think, ‘Ah, maybe I need something that is going to help my mind stop being reborn into the misery of clinging to mind-states, to stop continually piling up delusion, negativity and aversion.’

And finally we bump into the Buddha’s teaching.

Awakened beings don't usually do things that make them miserable. Their lives may still have some misery, but they don't pick it up. They don't identify with it; they don't make it their own. They stop and look at it; they feel, experiencing their life as it is right now, and they leave it there.

Luang Por Dun<sup>1</sup> described the Four Noble Truths in this way: when the mind goes out, it is caught in desire. This is the cause of suffering. The fruit of the mind that goes out is suffering. When mind sees mind, this is the path. The result of mind seeing mind is *nirodha*, the cessation of suffering.

We cannot train the mind just by constantly accumulating knowledge about Buddhism. We have to start with our life as it is, right here, right now, in this moment. We may still be infatuated with the desire to be constantly satisfied. Detachment may not make sense yet. While in the grip of desire, we may see that life is varied and exciting, and this can make us temporarily happy

1. Luang Por Dun was one of Luang Por Mun's disciples and a highly respected Forest monk.

or miserable. But we are blind to other aspects of life, such as the joy of peace, of clarity, of a mind that is full of understanding and wisdom, a mind that is kind, calm and compassionate. We may occasionally experience that perspective, but is it our refuge yet? Has it taken root? Or is it just passing moments, passing experiences? Perhaps the mind and body haven't yet been transformed by these qualities. Have we seen clearly that anger is totally useless, that it harms everybody, including ourselves?

In the Fire Sermon the Buddha explains that everything is 'on fire': the mind is on fire, the eyes are on fire, the six senses are on fire. He used that simile to teach a group of ascetics who were fire worshippers. He explained to them that through seeing Dhamma, disenchantment arises and the mind cools down and it can eventually free itself from this fire. This 'burning' is the mind caught up in greed, hatred and delusion. If you have enough stress, anguish, disappointment or negativity in your

life, you will know how they burn. Clinging makes us really hot, heated up with misery. The Buddha points us toward the peace of a cool mind.

The Fire Sermon takes us through the whole package of the human being on fire: burning through the six sense-consciousnesses, the six sense-doors (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind) and their objects. This is the focus of the path of practice. We look at the mind, at our body, at our humanity, our human qualities, our human life; we investigate them, we search within ourselves: ‘What is it that causes me to feel the way I feel right now?’ We don’t have to *think* about it. Meditation takes us straight to the immediacy of the reality of now, the reality of looking at the mind and body without extra imagery. We don’t have to read a book to learn about this, we simply look at our mind and body. Ajahn Chah often told his disciples to read the book within themselves. The book is

our mind with all its stories, all its structures, constructions, memories, anticipations, hopes and so on. That is our inner book, the book we learn to read in meditation practice.

I find Luang Por Dun's teaching of the third noble truth very helpful: 'The mind seeing the mind is the Path.'<sup>2</sup> I don't have to believe it blindly; I can put it to the test, put it into practice, right here and now, by starting with mindfulness. Mindfulness is what carries us along the path of practice. It brings us straight back to the present moment where there is the possibility of being awake and aware and knowing what's what. It is

2. A senior monk of the meditation tradition came to pay his respects to Luang Por Dun on the first day of the Rains Retreat in 1956. After giving him instruction and a number of teachings on profound matters, Luang Por Dun summarized the four noble truths as follows:

The mind sent outside is the origination of suffering.

The result of the mind sent outside is suffering.

The mind seeing the mind is the path.

The result of the mind seeing the mind is the cessation of suffering.



important that we see directly, not just intellectually. As long as the mind still identifies seeing with intellectual understanding and hasn't come to the realization of Dhamma at the deeper level, it is still a bit lost. The intellectual mind is still there amid waves of doubt and anxiety, constantly moving around trying to defend one thing and reject another. The Dhamma mind is confident and trusting. It recognizes the limitation of taking refuge in the thinking mind. The thinking mind is not a waste of time, it's just limited. The thinking mind still has the tendency to think it knows, and so it keeps falling into views. Thinking 'I know' is conceit. Conceit is attaching to an idea of 'who I am.' You might think, 'I am a hopeless case. I can't be a Buddhist. It's too hard for me.' That's a form of conceit. Whether we think we're superior, inferior or equal – that's still conceit, that's still 'self', 'me'.

When we start relating without being so caught up in the attachment to 'me' and 'mine' – my mind, my position, my view – being human is really easy, and relating as human beings is not so difficult. We no longer see and experience anyone as 'out there'. We feel each other as human bodies, feeling bodies. When we recognize this, we begin to participate in life as something bigger than just 'me' and 'my'. That brings a lot of joy. We don't have to keep on trying to control everything through fear and worry. We are able to witness the blessing of trust.

## FIVE PRECEPTS

The Buddha teaches us that when we keep the Five Precepts – when we refrain from harming, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from using unkind speech, lying, backbiting and so on, when we refrain from taking drugs, intoxicants or substances that cloud our mind – we are actually practising generosity. The Buddha called the Precepts the five gifts:

Now, there are these five gifts, five great gifts – original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning – that are not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and are unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives and priests. Which five?

There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from taking life. In doing so, he gives

freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings.

In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression.

This is the first gift, the first great gift – original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning – that is not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and is unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives and priests.

Anguttara Nikaya 8.39

The Buddha tells us that in observing the first precept, we are giving numberless beings freedom from fear, enmity and oppression, and in return we partake of that freedom

ourselves. This is just to give a sense of how interconnected we all are and how vast is our influence in this world. He then elaborates on each of the other four precepts and shows that in observing them we are giving faultless gifts to a limitless number of beings.

No matter how disenchanted we feel with the world, this disenchantment can be turned into wise understanding of the limitations of our human life. When we have wise understanding, it can have a profound effect on other human beings and bring blessings and happiness into our lives and the lives of others. Simply by being awake and transforming the heart of Dhamma – letting go of greed, hatred, stupidity and delusion, conceit and the rest of it – we help other beings and ourselves.

## DRINKING FRESH WATER

Sometimes carrying the baggage of a spiritual tradition can take us away from the present moment. Clinging to Buddhist perception is not the path. This is why we sometimes don't feel the joy of practice: because we are still holding onto ideas of how things should be, instead of drinking at the source and quenching our thirst for enlightenment, for freedom. Drinking at the source means seeing directly. That is the beauty of this path: it is completely available and close to us, always here.

Mindfulness is a doorway to awareness of the present moment, so that even the hindrances (craving, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, doubt) can be seen for just what they are – changing, unsatisfactory and not-self. So when the heart and mind are flat, depressed, miserable, undisciplined, resistant, rebellious, childish, petty, silly – that

is the time for practice, and then you will find that a moment of mindfulness will provide the energy you need. You might not feel it straightaway, but trust that opening. Mindfulness brings us the perception of change, which in turn gives us the trust, confidence and faith to keep going, to not be fooled by the appearance of things. Confidence brings stability of mind, concentration.

## ONE MINDFUL MOMENT

There's no need to read tons of books or remember all the teachings we have learned over the years. Just one mindful moment in the body, breathing in and breathing out, is enough to bring us back to the Dhamma, back to the Buddha, back to reality. I'm not saying it's easy. Much of our practice consists of not getting it right. The path of awakening is like that – being able to know that our mistakes and failures are part and parcel of practice. They are the material we work with for Dhamma realization. In Dhamma practice, our mistakes and failings are the food digested to nourish the heart.



## THE PHYSICIAN

The Buddha is often called a physician of the mind. If we weren't sick, we wouldn't need a physician. The Buddha is awareness. Taking refuge in the Buddha does not clear all our problems, but it brings us to a place where we can start doing the work. Awareness brings clear vision of what is limiting us, burdening our heart, making our life miserable. We don't have to annihilate ourselves, but just see ourselves as we are. Then we can begin to relax and relate to ourselves with ease, humour and humility.

The deficiencies of our mind and body, the weak spots, are the materials needed for transformation. We don't seek problems, but when they arise we don't have to see them as something in the way. We can go to meet each experience with the faculties of the mind: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration

and wisdom. We begin to heal and experience the joy of letting go, of not clinging, grasping, or complicating things. Practice is particularly needed at times when we don't feel like it, when everything is going wrong, when our lives are falling apart, our families are driving us mad, our bosses and co-workers are making us crazy, when the mind is just about ready to give up. Those are the very situations in which the practice is most useful. At those times the physician and the remedy are truly essential. Bring in the physician and the remedies at those moments. Don't forget them – just find some simple Dhamma remedies, all natural, complete naturopathic treatment with no side effects, a sure way for long-term health.

## MARA

Mara is a trickster. Mara will try to fool us again and again. If there is no awareness and wisdom, it is extraordinary how Mara can trick us into believing things that have no connection with reality. Sometimes people believe Mara so much they end up destroying themselves, because Mara is the great destroyer. Mara doesn't want us to be enlightened or at peace. Mara destroys peace, destroys our confidence. Mara is not an entity out there, but the delusion of our own minds. Mara is our inability to see things the way they are. The path of practice works through challenging, inquiring, investigating, learning to see the manifestations of ignorance clearly. By seeing clearly, we free our heart from continuing to relate to ourselves in the mode of delusion.

## ‘AWAKENISM’

The focus of our practice is on allowing the mind to calm down. We don't need to worry about how many insights we will have or how many problems we will solve. We are learning how to stabilize the mind, and stabilizing the mind has nothing to do with wiping out the mind. It is an exercise where we keep reminding ourselves to be present. As we do that, we notice how many times the mind runs away somewhere else. We learn to be with the mind. ‘Buddhism’ is really more like ‘Mindism’. The Buddha was simply awake, so you could call it ‘Awakenism’. When we think of it like that, the mind becomes really light. There are no memories attached to the word ‘awakenism’. How many websites on ‘Buddhism’ have we seen over the last twenty years? Our minds are bursting at the seams with knowledge about ‘Buddhism’, right?

I like simple things. 'Buddh' means 'awake', so we can start with that. We don't have to go into a whole commentary about *Paticcasamuppada*. Sometimes we accidentally counteract the process of awakening by filling up our mind with more thoughts. We can be very attached to thought. Particularly in this culture, we tend to believe that everything can be solved through thinking. We can become completely besotted with thought and strongly loyal to the thinking mind. But in Thailand, if you start thinking too much, people say you're a bit mad.

We don't try to wipe the mind clean; we just allow it to settle. When the water in a lake is still, you can see to the bottom. Nobody can tell us what we will see at the bottom of the lake of our mind. There may be old cans of beer, rotting bicycles or bodies of cars and dead animals. We shouldn't imagine that when we calm the mind we're not going to see all the rotten memories, miserable thoughts and so on. Calming and

stabilizing the mind facilitates seeing, and seeing can lead to understanding – not through thinking, but by allowing the wisdom factor to appear. Insight doesn't necessarily have to do with thinking. We might suddenly drop the thought and realize that understanding grows. For a minute we can drop the thoughts that have been clogging up the brain and jump into the void. Actually, it is not a 'void'. It is a jump out of our security zone. And it is not a big jump, it is just a freedom jump, a loving jump.

The mind that is not attached has enormous potential. It is vast and powerful. We don't always trust it because it can be difficult and uncomfortable to walk the way of 'not knowing'. Ajahn Sumedho was very strong in this respect. He taught me and many other people to develop a practice of not knowing, training the mind to be at peace with not knowing. When we see the mind following its ordinary, habitual ways – 'don't

know.’ ‘Don’t know’ is very good for cutting through doubt, and doubt is one of the Five Hindrances. Not sure whether to do this or that, not sure whether or not Buddhism is good for me, whether I should go with this person or that person, whether I should sit on a chair or cushion – doubt can take on any form. It can be existential: do I exist or not? Am I really as I appear? Don’t know.

Doubt is a mechanism in the brain, but doubt is not ‘you’. When you stop following doubts, you might discover that you have a way of doing things which doesn’t need doubt. Questioning and investigating are not the same as doubt. Questioning is asking, ‘Is that true?’ There is a way of questioning that brings wisdom into the mind. When we question without expecting an answer, it may be that questioning leads us to ‘don’t know.’

When the mind is constantly trying to solve problems that it can’t solve properly, we can find ourselves in a very small

world, a world that is tight, predictable. It is very important to be with the open mind, the 'don't-know' mind. When we say 'don't know', nothing has changed externally, but internally we have suddenly stopped sticking to the idea that we *should* know, that we *must* know – and we've also stopped our loyalty to the opposite idea, the despair of worrying that we will never know, that we are not capable of knowing, that we need to find somebody else to know for us. And if we search for somebody else, unfortunately we don't always find the wisest person. Sometimes we are lucky, but we don't always meet a good adviser.

So we sit quietly on our cushions and just notice. We sit with the breath, with the body, with the sound of silence. These little devices, these skilful means, these objects of meditation are not a pathway to immediate enlightenment. They just calm the waves in the mind. For some people, having an object of



meditation doesn't always work. Some people feel happier when they just let their mind be spacious. If that works for you, use that comfortable spaciousness as an object, as a way of reminding you to be present.

When you meditate, you don't have to be anywhere special. You can just sit. Feel the body sitting and gently bring your attention to your object. This is a discipline. As soon as we try to discipline our mind, to focus it on just one thing, it will start buzzing. It may start remembering other 'skilful means' that you've used in the past and try to convince you that they are better than your present object of meditation. Then you might start jumping around from object to object until you gently direct your mind to return to the original object. If it is a well-trained mind, it will follow your orders. This is what we call a 'disciplined' or 'trained mind', which does what you want. If it is not trained yet, if it is restless or agitated, start

training it gently but firmly, like a child. Bring it back to your object of meditation.

When the mind is still, you may notice that the rest of your life is not particularly still. 'The mind that is still' is just another way of saying 'the mind that is present.' You may be present with laziness, carelessness, wilfulness, confusion. Don't worry about results. Meditating with a goal in mind creates a duality: there is 'me' and there is 'the goal'. Work on letting go of this idea of a goal, but do it without expectations. Our goal-oriented mind doesn't stop just because we say 'don't expect anything', but at least we begin to see its expectations. We begin to see the contents of all those unskillful *kilesas*, miserable, afflictive, harmful mental states. *Kilesas* have many names, and once we can put a name on them we can recognize them much more easily, and then we can catch them and avoid acting on them. We can actually see that we have the power and resources and

means to restrain ourselves from doing something unskillful. It is good to be able to recognize these things.

We think we can't stop re-creating bad habits. But we can stop. That is the joy of our practice – we begin to see the possibility of not acting or speaking in a way that keeps us stuck in the same old ruts. A mind that is caught in its own ruts is depressed. We are meant to be free. It is really important to have this perspective and to find joy. Energy in the mind is vital for experiencing joy. Most people search for joy through such things as drinking coffee, shopping, going to movies, watching television or listening to music. The Buddha's way is to have a mind that is not dependent on these things, though it may still enjoy television, shopping or whatever. Our mind, has a beautiful potential for connecting with the joy of the heart on the way to peace and liberation. This is vital.

No goal. No expectation. We are not going anywhere. The title of Ayya Khema's book, *Being Nobody, Going Nowhere*, is a skilful means in words. The mind is always going somewhere and trying to be somebody. These words are a good antidote. How many times do we catch ourselves going somewhere? Somebody says something we think is wrong and we run to correct them. I don't mean 'run' as for catching a bus. I'm talking about running with our critical mind, running with our angry mind, running with our greedy mind. We run. Anger in particular not only gets you running, it gets you up to Olympic standard. It feels like a fire that is unstoppable. It took me a long time and many experiences to realize that anger is redundant. I'm not saying that I never have anger, but I have no doubt now that anger solves nothing. It hurts oneself and others. There is no wisdom in it.

Sometimes people tell me, 'I have to express my anger. If I am not angry, I am not alive.' I have no doubt that we feel very

alive when we are banging our fists, slamming the door or kicking someone. Our depression suddenly goes away for a few minutes. But don't trust that. It will return, and it will just keep depositing us back in the same rut. We need to be reminded of this many times. It is easy to fall into habits which, like a mental law of gravity, pull us down into well-worn furrows in the mind. That is why in some teachings you will come across references to 'higher mind' and 'lower mind'. Developing the higher mind means leaving behind the mind of old habits created and conditioned through anger, greed and delusion. We let that mind go. The 'higher mind' is the mind of wisdom and compassion, an unselfish mind that is able to bring happiness into this world and benefit other people. It is a beautiful mind. But we mustn't be too caught up in duality, thinking we must destroy one mind to develop another. We simply let go of the lower mind, of all the activities bound up with attachment and destructive emotions, and allow the higher mind to manifest.

## WORRY

When worry leaves us, where does it go? Have you found a place where your worry goes? Or is what disappears really the illusion of worry? Worry is like a bubble. If we believe in it, it can be frightening. We can believe something huge is about to fall on us. But when we realise it's really just a bubble, it suddenly bursts and disappears. The ignorant mind will always find a reason to continue worrying. We think we have to worry about this and that. We fear that if we don't worry, life will stop. Well, if we stop worrying, for sure the miseries of life are likely to stop, but maybe something else will arrive. We don't know yet, but we can always take the risk of finding out by stopping the mind from worrying or fearing and seeing what happens. But don't stop the worry by repressing it. The way to stop it is by becoming aware, conscious, mindful. Awareness ends the illusions of worry. They might not stop straightaway. We need

to be patient and determined to be able to sustain our attention and determination, but when we do, the illusory quality of what we think, feel or hear starts getting lighter. That is because we have stopped believing in what we experience, so the power of illusory thought decreases.

## KEEPING ON

Even when the practice becomes boring or uninteresting, we still stay with it. The state of boredom may be a crucial moment, as it could mean we are on the edge of letting go. Mara will do anything to make us give up. When you're just about to give up, stay with the practice mindfully; persevere and read the mind correctly. 'Reading the mind correctly' is an expression used often in the Forest Tradition. It sounds simple, but we mostly read our minds incorrectly. We see permanence when there is impermanence. We see happiness when there is misery. We see things as belonging to us when they do not – 'my' property, 'my' body, 'my' mind. We often read the mind incorrectly and so think we are incapable of achievement, but if we really look into the mind we will discover its great abilities.



One way of reading the mind incorrectly is by being caught up in thinking, in that mass of agitating mental activity. Agitation is one of the Five Hindrances. It makes us worried and restless, it generates more and more mental proliferation. But we can say, 'Stop. I am just going to be with my breath for five minutes.' That's all. Of course, the little child inside may say, 'No! I'm not going to do that! I'm only going to do what I want! I won't do stupid things like paying attention to the breath!' Listen to that childish voice and then gently bring your attention back to the breath. The mind is very trainable. It is not too difficult to train, it just needs correct reading and learning the skill of calming the mind and letting go.

When you are confused, upset or agitated, this is just thought. Every thought agitates the nervous system and has an immediate effect on the body. When we don't know our mind, our thoughts, we don't have the space to see what is

happening. We suddenly find ourselves in a mess and think, 'What happened?!' We don't realize that we've been thinking in a particular way for a long time. Instead of looking at what has been going on in our minds, perhaps we have been blaming somebody else for our problems, and we've been so busy finding somebody to blame that we've forgotten our Buddhist practice of conscientiously looking at our mind, at our way of thinking. We can think negatively about someone: 'She is so stupid. She is irritating and horrible. She's hopeless. She hates me and I hate her.' We can think like that for years without ever questioning the effect those thoughts have on our life.

The mind is powerful. We have to be very careful about what we think. We manifest the world with our thoughts. If that's not a motivation to be free of defilements, I don't know what is! If the suffering in our lives is increasing, we should double-check what is happening. Maybe we are not doing something

right. We don't have to accuse or blame ourselves. The teaching just asks us to be intelligent and take responsibility for ourselves so that we can grow and mature. Then we can deal more confidently with our diseases and we won't need a doctor; we can actually be our own physician. We can be with our inner Buddha, and that is so empowering and joyful. And then, when we see the misery that we are unknowingly causing ourselves, we learn how to become humble, bow down and say, 'Yes. Okay. I'll start again.'

## PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Luang Por Waen calls the present 'correct Dhamma'. He refers to the past and future as 'drunken Dhamma'. That conveys the right message. We are lost if we are not in the present moment, because the present moment is mindfulness; mindfulness is present moment awareness. Past and future exist only through our thoughts, which remember the past and project the future. The Forest Masters are very creative with their language. The phrase 'drunken Dhamma' is a good image to inspire us, because we all know that the results of being drunk are not very pleasant.

## LIVING IN REALITY

When the weather is beautiful, we notice how the human mind is influenced and affected by the brightness of sunshine. On a sunny day in England, I always feel that the sunshine brings happiness into people's minds, and when they're happy they seem to get along better naturally. What happens to our minds when the clouds come? When the mind is miserable, it is difficult to connect with people.

The Buddha's entire teaching is about finding a happiness which is different from conventional happiness. Conventional happiness gives way to misery and unsatisfactory experiences. We tend to be experts in conditioned happiness; not a stable, fundamental happiness, but a happiness dependent on things. Some of those things are healthy and helpful, but others are destructive and can lead us to misery, sickness, addiction and obsession.

Buddhist teaching is a clear map to psychological health. The Buddha shows very clearly where the mind becomes diseased and the path that takes the mind to a state of health. There are many aspects to that path. One of the first important teachings I learned from Ajahn Sumedho was how to develop the ability to see life as it is and to simply learn from it, not to fall into the traps of judging, criticizing, wanting things to be different, feeling constantly discontented.

Remember to receive life as it is.

This is the first step towards living in reality, rather than in dreams which can easily turn into nightmares when we identify with them. If we don't identify with the dreams, we can feel freedom in our hearts. Then we can go through both nightmares and pleasant dreams, but not need to depend on any of them to be happy. Then we experience life as it is, and let go of life – we don't push it away, we just let it go. This is not

'me' doing something, it is a clear seeing. Awareness itself is what enables the mind to let go.

We use this teaching as an entry into learning, with an approach that is tolerant and accepting, benevolent and compassionate. It is not an approach that continues to divide, dissect, make judgements and criticize. It is an approach that is whole, wholesome, all-encompassing; an approach of non-contention, as Ajahn Sumedho would describe it. We are not contending with the reality of 'now', we are just able to see it as it is.

To see something clearly depends on certain conditions. We learn to appreciate what it means to be still. What does that mean? It simply means that you stop moving with the movements of your mind. You stop agitating yourself with that which is agitated in yourself, being confused with that which is confused within you, being unhappy with that which is unhappy inside you. When we reach the place of stopping and

being still, the condition of seeing arises naturally in the mind. A seeing mind doesn't move. It has stopped. It is here, now.

There are many different methods, techniques and teachings of meditation. Vipassana practice involves exploring the mind and seeing the result of that exploration. It leads to seeing clearly what the Buddha called the three characteristics of phenomena: everything is impermanent, everything is unsatisfactory and everything is 'not what you are' (*anicca, dukkha, anattā*). Vipassana means being able to see deeply and clearly, to know profoundly. When you see clearly, you have access to the reality of now. This is not something you imagine or have to believe; it is something you see clearly. Vipassana is an invitation to explore: 'Is this satisfactory or unsatisfactory?' Maybe you think you find greed or its object extremely satisfactory. On the other hand, maybe you find that the feeling of greed arising in the heart is not so pleasant and



restful. The Buddha invites us to really examine the excitement of this world of desires. He draws our attention to the danger of believing in this world of sensuality and its complexities, and to really apply our attention, to question and investigate.

## PATIENCE, ENERGY, INTEREST

Practice takes patience, energy, and a very deep interest in discovering what the Buddha means by greed, hatred and delusion. Very often the interest comes when we are at the end of our rope. It is not necessarily something that comes naturally. Many people come to practise because they have seen that suffering, limitation and confusion are not the way forward. They have realized that they are living in a subjective reality and they don't want to carry on living in that kind of world. So the practice often starts with, 'I'm fed up with this. I don't want it anymore. I've had enough of suffering, of being confused, deluded and angry.' Sometimes we don't actually move in the right direction until we have been pushed by the sense of 'enough is enough.' It doesn't have to be dramatic; it can be very subtle. Little by little we accumulate an understanding about anger, for example, and we realize that the state of anger

is not something we want to live in all the time or part of the time or even any time at all. Perhaps we come to know that the mind can be quiet and peaceful and we naturally feel the quiet loveliness of the peaceful mind.

This can come about through silence. Silence has a way of making us feel connected. We notice our mind is silent and suddenly we are back at home. Much of the time, our senses are taking us 'out there'. We don't realize that the world begins in the *citta*, in our heart/mind. The senses and their objects are constantly triggering our *citta*, so when we are in turmoil we tend to blame outside factors: people, situations, the world in general. When we bring the *citta* to a place of coolness and calm we have a chance to look at our responses. We can begin to clearly see that what manifests outside is very much a reflection of our mind itself. It may take a while to see this clearly because human beings have so many things going

on in their minds. It's a very complex inner world. We react to things twice over; we react once and then we react again. We find ourselves trapped in reactions, but that's not our fault, as in fact there is nobody to blame. If we want to blame anything, we should blame *avijjā* (ignorance). We can't blame ourselves for being blind. We didn't ask to be blind. We haven't invited blindness into our lives. The blindness just came along with us and our bodies and minds, so we can't really feel bad about it. That's why the Buddha doesn't make a big issue out of guilt. Instead, he draws our attention to understanding ways of reacting.

## THE PATH OF LIBERATION

When we attempt to follow a religious path, we sometimes approach the teachings and practices at a superficial level which has little to do with liberation. We may start feeling that we have to become something or somebody, to create ourselves and behave in accordance with a mistaken understanding of that particular teaching. When we start following the Buddha's path we may fear that we have to be a certain way and that doing something wrong would be terrible and jeopardize our freedom. We begin to see ourselves in a certain way and feel we have to constantly prop up this 'Buddhist self' who has to be good and kind – has to play a part, in other words.

But that's not freedom. The Buddhist teaching of liberation is a free vehicle. It doesn't have a specific name. The Buddha never called his teaching 'Buddhism'. Liberation is an aspiration that

arises naturally when the mind realizes that it is in bondage, caught up in the pain of delusion, anger and greed. The danger with 'religion' is that, grasped wrongly, it can take you back to those same things – greed, hatred and delusion. You can see that everywhere in the world.

Liberation is letting go of images about ourselves. It is difficult because what we call the 'ego' is made up of images, many of which are built up by fear and don't disappear easily. We don't become 'somebody' in our minds because 'we' have created that somebody, but just because it is created and manifests through greed, hatred, fear, delusion, envy, jealousy and many other unhealthy, unskilful mental states and intentions. To overcome this the Buddha offers a lot of very good, clear guidelines for integrating the path in our daily lives and helping the mind to cultivate qualities that are rooted in kindness and goodness. These guidelines come from his own experience. If we trust the

Buddha's experience, we have confidence in what he teaches. Indeed, we can see this for ourselves. When we do, say or think something good, when we manifest qualities that are skilful, healthy and sound, the result will always be a happier mind. We don't need to believe the Buddha to see that. We experience it for ourselves as we apply close attention.

When we see this, we find it fascinating that we did not see it before. That was because of ignorance, *avijja*. Sometimes these qualities manifest in what we call the unconscious or the subconscious. There are layers upon layers of mental activities of which we are unaware. That is why it is really worthwhile to pursue this path. If we truly want to discover what it is to free the mind, we can do this by paying deep attention to the mind itself, clearly seeing cause and result. We don't have to be perfect to do this; if we had to wait until we were perfect, we would wait for a long time.

Many of us have been discouraged by seeing our delusion and have almost abandoned any interest in the path because we feel, 'I'm so greedy (or impatient, angry, etc.), I can't do it. I can't follow this path. I can't be a Buddhist because I am so deluded.' But in fact, it is because we are deluded that we need to walk the Path. And we need to make peace with our delusion. What else is there to work with? Buddhism wouldn't need to exist if we didn't have anger, greed and ignorance. The Buddha brought this path into the world of humans to illuminate those mind-states, not to make us believe that by just reading or listening to his teachings, or meditating, we are instantly going to turn into a holy being.

If our minds are miserable, we can look at our belief systems. We may have very strong beliefs that are not conducive to happiness, such as, 'Nobody likes me', 'I can't stand that person' or 'I'm no good.' We may find we are attached to rites and



rituals, doubt, or many other things. We see those things and we acknowledge them in a way that is liberating. We don't have to eradicate our mind, kill it, trample on it, squeeze it, squash it, or turn it into something completely dead and miserable. We start by using the instrument we have at our disposal, and this instrument is called 'mind and body.' We use this instrument to face life and our 'self' as they are. That takes strength. It takes energy. It takes interest, fearlessness, compassion and patience. It takes many things to be able to look at reality as it is.

Once we become more mindful, we start noticing small things that we would have missed before: little details of the kindness of others, small things they do or say, small things they manifest in thought and words. We begin to notice these manifestations of kindness and our world becomes much happier. We can easily create a world of anger, a negative, critical and undermining

world, simply because we don't notice the noble qualities in people. Through mindfulness we break our habit of creating negativity, of undermining others and ourselves. Through mindfulness we notice when people are kind, or generous, the small things that make us see the world in a happier way.

## MERIT

In Buddhism, because we experience our mind and use our lives and minds to see and understand the world, we begin to know what a 'blessing' is. Basically it means 'happiness' or 'merit'. The Buddha said, 'Do not fear merit, bhikkhus. Merit is another word for happiness.' So we offer ourselves blessings by making merit. There is happiness in merit, the happiness of accumulating good conditions, good roots, good factors; all that brings happiness to our hearts. That is why the Buddha says that 'merit' is another word for 'happiness'.

## MAKING PEACE

The Buddha gives us a lot of tools that we can use, but the tools don't constitute liberation. They are only means to an end. Liberation is when we start letting go, when we start freeing the heart through renouncing all the things that are redundant in our minds and keep us in misery, such as depression, despair, lack of confidence, fear, anxiety. These qualities may make us think there is something wrong with us, but no. There is nothing wrong with us. Human life is really difficult. We have to attend to so many things just to survive at the physical level. We may have to look after people. Some of you are married and look after children, pets, a house, a car and bank accounts. There's nothing wrong with that. It is not easy to live a human life. Dealing with all these things demands a lot of energy, but those demands are not an obstacle to liberation. If you feel your life is difficult and troublesome, don't blame yourself; it is just

human life and it's like that. So hopefully you can make peace with being human, with the joy and the misery of a human life, and continue to develop a sense of great gratitude towards the Buddha's teaching. The Dhamma enables us to live our human life with a sense that it is worthwhile. It doesn't need to have a 'meaning'. We may never find a meaning in it, but we can come to understand and make the best of it. The meaning of life is life itself.

## DUKKHA

'*Dukkha*' is also sometimes translated as 'difficult to bear.' We meet this difficulty in our meditation practice. At some point in meditation, maybe often, maybe not so often, we may sense something difficult to bear, and that we've got to move the body or the mind to change something. If we pay attention to this moment, we might be able to realize the ending of that desire to move, that moment which is difficult to bear in a small or deep way.

If we find that our mind feels dull, there are many ways of working with this. We can bring attention back to the body sitting. We can investigate this quality of dullness as an object of observation. What does dullness feel like? We begin to see that it has a quality of vibration. It is changing all the time; it is not just one uniform mass. We can feel it in both the physical

and the mental body. We can double-check that moment when our mind says, 'I've got to move' or 'Something has to change.' We try to stay with it, and if we do that, we may actually realize the ending of that pressurizing mind. Begin to know that the mind can sometimes feel like a pressurizing force. Sometimes we think that pressure only comes from our outer life, but actually it comes from within, from the way we react to the outer life. When we take refuge in the Buddha/Dhamma/Sangha, we stop wanting life to be perfect and turn inwards to see whether our responses to life are just reactive habits, often tinted by anger, aversion, frustration, impatience and so on.

As we establish our mind in the refuge of awareness, we can see something much lighter about what goes on in the mind. We keep re-establishing this refuge of mindfulness, awareness. Whatever appears in this reflective, mirror-like space, notice the arising and the ending. Notice the space between, the time

when nothing has arisen, when no mind objects are present, when nothing is reflected. Notice the moments when there is the feeling that the mind is just resting.



## TAKING REFUGE

We take refuge in the Buddha.

We take refuge in the Dhamma.

We take refuge in the Sangha.

Reciting the Refuges is a good reminder of the place to which mindfulness takes us. Buddha/Dhamma/Sangha is really one place.

The Buddha is the awakened mind. The Dhamma is the truth discovered through the awakened mind. The Sangha has both an external and an internal aspect. Externally it is the community of all those who have been enlightened or reached stages of enlightenment during their lifetimes, and the community of spiritual friends who are on the path with us. Internally the Sangha is the purity of the heart. It is all happening right here, right now. It manifests as wisdom, right view, clarity of mind, understanding, insight – realization of Dhamma.

## AN INVITATION TO EXPLORE

Many of you know that the goal of the Buddhist path is to reach nibbāna. But nibbāna is not actually a world or a realm or a state. It is absence, the absence of greed, hatred and delusion. It is often referred to as ‘the cooling down of the mind’. How can we conceive the absence of something? We can’t. How can we imagine nibbāna? Instead of seeking to describe it, the Buddha pointed to what we know. One thing we know is suffering. It is not difficult for a human being to realize how difficult life is – we have to toil and work to be able to eat, to keep warm, to have a home, to make and keep our friends, and to deal with the people we don’t really want in our lives anymore, such as parents with whom we maybe don’t get on, to develop relationships that may be wonderful or disastrous. *Dukkha* is not very far away. It is in every corner of our life.

The opposite of *dukkha* is *sukha*, which means 'happiness' or 'ease'. There is suffering, but there is also happiness. Both are essential aspects of human experience. When there is *sukha*, the human heart wants more of it. During meditation, you notice the mind is peaceful and blissful for a few minutes and there's an immediate tendency (if the mind is untrained) to assume that this state should last, but of course it doesn't. 'Why is my happy, blissful moment of meditation turning into an awful memory of my last relationship (or job, or whatever)? I was blissed out of my mind, and suddenly up came an awful memory of when I was a child and my mother screamed at me.' These memories leave traces, marks in our hearts and minds. Sometimes when a memory is extreme it constitutes a trauma. Sometimes it is just called 'painful memory.'

*Sukha* and *dukkha* work together. The more we run away from *dukkha*, the more we want *sukha*; the more we want *sukha*, the

more *dukkha* pops its head up. It is like a pendulum. The mind is like a pendulum.

The Buddha did not speak much about what happens once we get to the absence of greed, hatred and delusion, though in the *Udana* he describes it in this way:

There is the unborn, uncreated, unformed, unoriginated, and therefore there is an escape from the born, created, formed, originated. If it were not for the unborn, uncreated, unformed, unoriginated, there would be no escape from the born, created, formed, originated, but because there is the unborn, uncreated, unformed, unoriginated, there is an escape, there is liberation from the born, created, formed, originated.

Udana 8.3

The Buddha taught profoundly and very broadly on the *dukkha* of human existence and, fortunately, he also expounded on the way out of *dukkha*. He offered us his unrivalled knowledge of the mind, not in the way science examines the human brain as an apparatus that puts us in touch with the world outside, but from the perspective of how to end *dukkha*. As one teacher said, ‘The whole path of Buddhism is to decrease suffering.’ So if you have suffering in your life, double-check: this is a symptom of something. It is not that you are ‘bad’. It is not something to be taken personally. None of us would have taken an interest in the Buddha’s teaching if we hadn’t at some point experienced a sense of being fed up with living blindly. Most of us have experienced regret and misery. We have felt unable to deal with suffering, stuck and incapable of liberating our heart.

The Buddhist path touches on every aspect of ourselves and every aspect of life. It is not just a set of methods to calm the mind down. It shows us that everything we do, say and think is interconnected. Everything we do has a result, bears a fruit. In our practice of meditation we learn to notice, to look, to see. This requires complete willingness to participate actively in the research. That is why we need to be awake. The word 'Buddha' means 'awake'. If you are not awake you don't have the energy that is necessary to penetrate this knowledge of the mind. The mind is very tricky. It is a very difficult thing to hold for even a second. Everything moves and changes very quickly. Ajahn Chah used the simile of catching a fish with your hands. I've never caught a fish, but I imagine it is very slippery. You can't hold it for very long. Ajahn Chah compared the mind to a slippery fish.

But the mind doesn't feel like a slippery fish. It can feel more as if we are being crushed underneath heaps of *dukkha*. So when we practise meditation we are affecting our lives in a deeper way than we imagine. We are having a taste of the absence of greed, hatred and delusion in a very small dose. For just a few minutes we see the mind when it is not attached. We begin to notice what that feels like. We begin to see, for example, that greed has a cause. Then we see it disappearing. What has happened? We have noticed the end of a moment of greed. The same can happen with anger. We become really upset because we don't get something we want. Then we suddenly observe what is happening; we begin to see, we can listen to it, feel it and notice when it has ended.

This requires a certain amount of attentiveness, because sometimes it is subtle. Before we began practising, we rarely paid attention to the moments when something ended – the

ending of a state of greed or anger, the ending of anything; as soon as we felt okay we would move on to the birth of the next state: 'I'm all right now. Let me find somebody else I can be with (or another piece of cake, etc.)' We forget. But mindfulness is remembering: remembering to look, to see, to be interested in this life which is creating our world moment by moment. What is our world right now? Are we happy? Are we peaceful? Are we a mixed bag of both or neither peace nor happiness, or this or that? Grey? Unformed? That is called confusion. Are we confused?

Basically, unless we are developing the skill of seeing, we can't know; we can't know something unless we see it. When we practise meditation, we calm the mind artificially by making use of a word, a mantra or the breath. Such a technique can help the mind to calm down so that you can see and hear inwardly more clearly.



When the mind is not in a good place, I've noticed that it doesn't function very well. The mind needs care. For instance, if your mind feels miserable, sometimes just noticing what is happening can bring a balance to the mind. The mind is comforted and then ready to continue working better. When we listen to our mind, it brings peace, and peace can bring energy into our mind.

The practice is an invitation to thoroughly explore the manifestation and structure of thoughts, feelings and moods. We begin to notice details, causes and results. This requires stillness, attention and motivation. Interest is one of the primary conditions. It is called '*chanda*' in Pali and it is a wholesome form of desire. Sometimes people find Buddhism depressing because they assume it means they can't want anything, and as soon as they want something they feel they have failed. But the Buddha's path is not about 'not wanting',

it is about noticing, studying the experience of desire, and letting go. There is a difference between a healthy desire and an unhealthy one. We may notice that a desire to be happy has made us unhappy because we have become hooked on the experience of happiness. But we can live without depending on a feeling of happiness. Not only that, we can also find a different kind of happiness that is more subtle – the happiness of freedom, the happiness of a mind liberated from dependence on wanting to be happy.

The Precepts are the first basic directions; they give us a sound foundation. We want to be happy – but do we want to kill, steal, lie, be promiscuous? Do we want to speak in a way that destroys our happiness? Do we want to take intoxicating drinks and drugs? We go straight into renunciation with the Five Precepts. We renounce anger and destructive emotions, stealing and lying, using our sexual energy for selfish ends. We

renounce using our ability to communicate and speak in a way that perpetuates a miserable world, and weakening control of our mind through intoxicating drink and drugs.

It is important to know that the first step on the path is to be human, not to be a Buddha. There is a tendency to be very ambitious, but great ambition can result in disappointment. Vipassana practice is simply the study of mind and body, and seeing the three characteristics to which the Buddha pointed – everything is impermanent, everything is unsatisfactory, and everything is not a ‘self’, there is no permanent ‘me’.

At first the idea of not having a ‘me’ in charge of everything may be devastating: ‘How can I live without my commander-in-chief?’ But when we see that the self is truly an illusion, we discover lots of blessings along the way. We are not left abandoned, flattened by the lack of aspiration and motivation. It is not like that at all. What takes us to realization of no-

self is wisdom. And wisdom is not a small thing; it is really worth exchanging delusion for wisdom. Wisdom is much more powerful, much more capable than delusion. It is able to respond to life with delight, so we can delight in the responses we see coming from a mind that is not caught up in delusion, a mind that knows.

## FEELING HAPPY

The mind that is not attached is already quite happy. This is a happiness that never goes. It is something we can taste in our meditation practice. We begin to notice that we are happy when we don't want anything. What kind of happiness is not wanting? At the point of not wanting, we are experiencing not being reborn into something. Desire is rebirth. We are reborn all the time in this sense, so we know rebirth. And we want a happy rebirth, don't we? If we are a normal human being we want to be happy. I'm not dismissing that; it is really important to want to be happy. But if we constantly cling to happiness that is dependent on conditions, we won't know the peace and happiness that emerge from a mind which is content, peaceful, empty of incessant wanting.

We can experiment with this in ourselves. We can test it, explore, enquire. We can question and have the freedom to

find out for ourselves whether the teaching is true or not. We begin to take notice, rather than being obsessed with perfecting a particular quality of mind. Instead we learn to relax in the present moment. There may be the wish to have a happy mind, a radiant and peaceful mind. All these desires are natural. These are healthy motivations, called *chanda* in Pali. But work must be done to get to that point. When we say, 'I want to be happy', we learn to recognize this mind state and allow mindfulness to see it as it is, instead of using wilfulness to try to get what we want according to an idea.

Then we can begin to notice the 'do-er' and the 'doing'. The idea of being able to get somewhere without 'doing' anything can be difficult to understand. How can I get somewhere without 'me'? And yet when we practise our meditation, little by little and with patience we begin to withstand the power of 'me' wanting to do something. Instead of 'me! me! me!', we

begin to simply understand. We hear those voices shouting 'me!', and our attitude is: 'Yes – I hear you. You want to be good. You want concentration. You want to be a good meditator. I understand that you are in a hurry, that you think you have a better way. But for now we are doing it like this.' Sometimes you have to talk to yourself in this way. 'The Buddha-mind is in charge. The wakeful mind is in charge. Okay?' Talk to the mind firmly sometimes. Otherwise it will just keep making you feel miserable and dragging you back onto the treadmill of suffering, lamentation and grief.

## LOVE

'Love' is a loaded word. I 'love' my sandwich. I 'love' my wife. There is selfless love and selfish love. The love in the Buddha's teaching has to do with compassion. He talks about universal love. He also talks about the danger of love based on attachment. We don't have to judge these different aspects of love. We experiment starting from our own experience in life. What is this love which is not dependent on our desires, on wanting to have things our own way? Compassion is a natural empathy for ourselves and others. We want the best for others. Loving-kindness does not ask for something in return. It is the natural response of generosity.

Before going to sleep we chant the Metta Sutta. Metta is a very good remedy for a sound sleep. We can fill up our mind with loving thoughts and generate this feeling of loving-kindness



towards ourselves and all beings. This has a very powerful effect. A mind suffused with loving-kindness is a conscious mind. It is an intelligent mind. We all have this kind of intelligence, so tap into it. We don't need to think about it a lot, just feel this mind that at this moment is like a container filled with loving-kindness.

May I be well.

May I be happy.

May I be at ease.

May all beings be well.

May all beings be happy.

May all beings be at ease.



## BIOGRAPHY

Ajahn Sundara was born in France in 1946 and studied dance there and in England. In her early thirties, whilst living and studying in England, she attend a talk and later a retreat led by Ajahn Sumedho. His teachings and experiences of the monastic way of life in the Forest Tradition resonated deeply.

In 1979 she asked to join the monastic community at Chithurst Monastery in England as one of the first four women novices. In 1983 she was given the Going Forth as a Siladhara (10-precept nun) by Ajahn Sumedho. After five years at Chithurst, she went to live at Amaravati Monastery, where she participated in the establishment of the nuns' community.

Between 1995 until 1998 she deepened her practice mostly in Thai Forest monasteries. In 2000, after spending a year as the senior incumbent of the nuns community at the Devon Vihara, she was based at Abhayagiri Monastery in the United States. She currently lives at Amaravati Monastery where she explores ways of practising, sustaining and integrating Buddhist teachings in Western culture. Since the late 1980's she has taught and led meditation retreats worldwide.

# Paccuppanna

The Present Moment

BY AJAHN SUNDARA

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