WALKING THE WORLD

COLLECTED DHAMMA REFLECTIONS

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AMARAVATI
PUBLICATIONS

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Walking the World by Ajahn Sundara

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DEDICATION

To Luang Por Sumedho for uncompromisingly
embodying the Dhamma and teaching that
'whatever moves is not you'.

And to my brother Jean-Jacques for being who he is.

We would like to acknowledge the support of many people in the preparation of this book, and especially the Kataññuta group of Malaysia, Singapore and Australia for bringing it into production.

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FOREWORD

The chapters in this wonderful book are edited transcriptions of talks given by Ajahn Sundara between 2003 and 2011. Many of these talks and teachings were given at Insight Meditation Center of the Mid-Peninsula in Redwood California. Some were from public talks and retreats held at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in the United Kingdom. It Can Be Very Simple is taken from an interview given to The Insight Journal of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Our Nature is from a talk given at Seattle Insight Meditation Society.

Ajahn Sundara is ordained in the Thai Forest Tradition. In this tradition, Dhamma talks are delivered in an impromptu manner – they are not scripted, or prepared in advance. Often, Ajahns don't even know what subject they will discuss until they are seated in front of their listeners and begin to speak. So the chapters in this book flow very directly from Ajahn Sundara's heart. These are spontaneous expressions arising from her experience of living the Buddha's teachings.

In the late 1970s, Ajahn Sundara first came into contact with the Dhamma when she had the opportunity of attending

talks and retreats led by Ajahn Sumedho. Although his teaching and way of life as a Buddhist monk resonated deeply with her, she did not initially form any intention of becoming a nun. Then, one day she was having a chat with Ajahn Sumedho, talking about all the great challenges of the world. Ajahn Sumedho said to her, 'Yes, and it's a matter of knowing where the world is, isn't it?'

That simple statement hit her 'like a lightning bolt!' She says, 'I suddenly realised that I was making my world, and I was free to lead my life as I wanted!' In that instant she knew that she had come home.

In a way, this book is an extension of that moment; it is Ajahn Sundara's encouragement to 'know where the world is.' The Buddha teaches that the world is to be found 'in this fathom-long body'. Suffering and the cause of suffering, liberation and the path leading to liberation, are all to be found right here – in this mind, in this body. Ajahn Sundara exhorts us to have the courage to really look at ourselves 'as we are'. If we see fear, anger, greed, lust, shame, or any 'uncomfortable' states, that's not a sign that our practice has gone wrong – seeing these states IS the practice. The Buddha taught us to look deeply at these things and know them for what they are. In these talks, Ajahn Sundara reassures us that this is the path of the Buddha, and it is a path worth walking, for it leads to great joy, unshakable peace, and liberation.

ADAM LONG

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This book could never have come into existence without the generous help, support and contributions of many people. I would particularly like to express my deep gratitude to Adam Long for providing the enthusiastic force behind the publication of these talks by transcribing and editing them and patiently and creatively reviewing them; Nicholas Halliday who caught the moment that brought to his attention the lack of nuns'publications, and made the project happen, designing the beautiful cover and book and choosing the title *Walking the World*; Sash Lewis for her kind support and tireless help in editing the chapters and providing all along some very useful suggestions; and Chandaka for patiently reading through the talks and offering friendly encouragements and helpful comments.

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AJAHN SUNDARA

ANOTHER DIMENSION

In the early days of my practice I always felt very moved by expressions of kindness, but I had the strange preconception that it was wrong to start practising kindness by being kind to myself. I believed that would be selfish – how could I start with myself?! I should start with others, that was the right way to go! I suppose it is part of our culture to view real love as something unselfish, and believe that loving means thinking about others before we think about ourselves. But the more we know our mind, the more we realize that there is only a little gap between what goes on in our minds and how we act in our lives.

When the mind is still untrained, there is only a tiny gap between its contents and the way it manifests externally. When we are angry, we just manifest anger. When we are upset we manifest this immediately. We are just acting out our mind state. But after practising for a while, we begin to appreciate that although we may not yet be able to act like a saint, at least we have a teaching that enables us to restrain the mind. In other words, we have a choice. We have an option.

What makes us miserable in life is being without any options, feeling we are slaves to ourselves, feeling that we don't have any choice. That is so miserable, so terrible. It feels like being in prison with no way out.

Many people who are angry and upset can act out their miserable mind state without any qualms. They don't know any better. We too, like the other human beings who surround us, have never been given much of an idea of how to go about life skilfully. We learn from very early childhood how to respond to worldly situations. We learn how to be clever. We learn how to use our intelligence. We learn lots of knowledge about this or that. We learn how to defend ourselves, how to fight people who bother us. But we are not taught much about *metta*, about kindness.

When I first became interested in the Buddhist teachings, *metta,* loving-kindness, just 'being kind', seemed to me to be such a weak state of mind. I thought it was okay to be kind, but it was no big deal. I wondered why I should train the mind to be kind. I wouldn't have minded doing a course in increasing my cleverness or intelligence, but increasing *metta* was not a priority. But as we meditate, we can see how *metta* takes on a dimension which we don't often achieve otherwise; a sense of acceptance, a sense of giving our mind space to be as it is. We can stop reacting to the way things are, or reacting to the reactions we have because of ideals or ideas of how we should be. Then we know *metta* as a new dimension of not engaging, not reacting, not pushing away things we don't like, not creating aversion to anything unpleasant or unlikeable. This is the training of the mind.

The training doesn't ask us to be any particular way in any particular situation, but through it we begin to teach our mind how to recognize the mind-state of kindness. As we are sitting, we recognize when we are going to war with ourselves, or trying to control our thoughts and perceptions so that they constantly fit into the perfect world we want. We start to realize how our mind tries to fit our consciousness into a little box. We have this tendency to want to control because we remember something that was pleasant, something that worked for us in the past or works for us even now, and we have the idea that if we do things the same way we did them in the past we will be okay. So we look through the microscope of our mind and notice the pressure to keep going back to what we know, to keep fitting our world into the box of the comfortable and the known – the well-trodden path that our mind has already walked. But in the process of going back to the past we are pressurising our minds. We are not open and relaxed in the present moment.

Have you noticed that when we sit there is a tendency to try to make our bodily form and bodily experience fit with the memory of somebody else's experience? Maybe ten years ago we read books or heard a teacher talking, for example, about the bliss of *jhana,* and that memory can make us feel inadequate for many years because we have never experienced the bliss of *jhana.* Memory sets up a sense of pressure in our everyday life as a meditator, because we are caught up in it, lost in thinking about what the teacher said years ago instead of being present in the here and now.

I suppose this need to be present, here and now, is something I learned from my teacher, Ajahn Sumedho. He spoke with great confidence about returning again and again to what he called 'the real', no matter what we are thinking about. Always back to 'the real'. It takes a while to know that 'the real' means facing life completely openly, as it is. Life is always open and the mind too is always open, but we have created so many little boxes and little worlds. These boxes are all created through memories – perceptual memories, feeling memories, thought memories, stories and even sensory memories; a certain sound we like, a certain taste. Our world is very much boxed up into this memory cage. So the mind is good at creating pressure and stress, and holding on to a whole world of memories. But if we just go back to the simple act of practising *metta,* then when we start to face the present moment, we begin to turn our back on the past and learn the practice of 'letting go'. We learn to let go of the world of memories – letting go of those boxes, drawers and cupboards where we have neatly packed our consciousness.

When we practise mindfulness, we are aware of a mind that is not caught in memory. We can relate to consciousness without the baggage of our box of memories, and then we can see the memories clearly as they are. We still see the past, but we see everything from a fresh perspective. We suddenly have a fresh new mind looking at all these things. Then we learn how to discard the things we don't need and keep the things we do need. We can sort out in an intelligent way what is helpful and what isn't. Remembering our mother's phone number is useful, but we might not need to keep the

addresses of all our old partners after 20 years. That is just one example. We carry many things around in ourselves that are completely redundant. We can see many stories we carry in our minds, stories about a reality that no longer exists. Most of our stories are produced from memories. Memories are 'the mind of the past'. In our practice we look at this mechanical conditioning. Once we begin to let go of this habit and open up to the world, the result is quite magical. The world is a magical place when we stop creating it from memory.

But memories don't go away so easily. They can be experienced as quite solid, and they have a haunting effect on some people - they keep coming back. We need to bear with the kammic forces of our memories until they eventually fall away by themselves, and this brings us back to *metta* – patience, kindness. The first aspect of *metta* is non-contention, not contending with the world as it is. This involves intense training. The whole discipline takes effect in that moment of restraint, of mindfulness, *sati-sampajañña* – mindfulness and clear understanding of what is happening here and now, which doesn't need memory. What is happening in the here and now is new. It takes a lot of courage to move away from the tendency to build our reality out of memory and open up the heart and mind to a much vaster reality, a universe that is not limited by the past.

This is really the blessing of our meditation practice. Developing the heart in this way takes us to a place where we enjoy life, because we begin to sense that it doesn't have a limit. Of course we have physical limits, but we

don't feel so trapped anymore. Our heart is not really limited, but unless we look at it closely and start using the tools of mindfulness to dismantle its little partitions, it is difficult to gain insight into the freedom and potential that we all have. But once we have had this experience, it gives us the confidence that this is the way to go, that the practice works.

Non-contending with 'life as it is' means giving space to oneself and others, not asking others to be what we want them to be. When we are in our little box we may feel very comfortable. We may have a whole list of theories, and when we encounter others we may be quite convinced that they are wrong and we are right, that their boxes are just not as good as ours, and that our little boxes are much fancier and more interesting than their little boxes.

So the quality of *metta* is a very important aspect of our practice. In the *sutta* on loving-kindness we read, 'Let none deceive another or despise any being in any state.' That's pretty clear, isn't it? The text continues, 'Let none through anger or ill-will wish harm upon another.' Yet it's quite shocking to witness the cruelty coursing through our mind when things don't go our way. Somebody upsets us and a cruel thought arises in the mind. We might not act on it, but it is still quite a shock to witness this tendency. The cruelty we have in ourselves is part of nature. As Dhamma practitioners, whether we are in lay life or not, we tend to visualize ourselves as kind, loving people, and yet cruelty is there. In unguarded

moments when we are pushed a bit beyond our limits, we can see the desire to harm someone who is harming us.

In his teaching on loving-kindness the Buddha says, 'Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings.' He continues, 'Radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upwards to the sky and downwards to the depths, outwards and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill-will.' This is what the spirit of *metta* is about. We might not be able to be a loving being constantly, but we can learn how to receive our hatred and ill-will kindly, without judgement, and let them go. Even in a moment of being mindful of hatred and ill-will in ourselves and not acting on them, we are already freed from their power. In that moment of clear seeing they have lost their power to blind us, and that experience of letting go is quite liberating.

When I was an *anagarikā*, I helped with cooking meals for Ajahn Kittisaro. He was then a monk and very ill. One morning I told Ajahn Sumedho, 'I have to quit cooking for Ajahn Kittisaro.' He asked, 'Why?' I said, 'I have so much anger, so much frustration, I feel I am poisoning him, poisoning his food with my anger.' Ajahn Sumedho replied, 'Well, you are aware of your anger, aren't you?' I answered, 'I am jolly well aware of my anger.' 'Well, it's not going anywhere, then.' At that moment I knew what he meant. That anger was seen and it wasn't going anywhere. It was in my mind, but it wasn't leaping out, bouncing off the wall and jumping into the frying pan!

So this is something that we need to remember. Sometimes we don't have much sense of having a lot of *metta* in our heart, but the very fact we are aware of that is already an act of non-contention, of *metta* – not creating more negative stuff round it and beating ourselves up because we feel bad. Beating ourselves up is not very kind, and besides, this sort of response is completely useless. There comes a point in the training when we realize that the only response to life is kindness, appreciation, encouragement and a sense of uplifting ourselves, inspiring our heart. Then *metta* becomes a very natural part of us. We can see ourselves as something natural in this universe, a kind of plant that needs kindness and attention, but not in a blind way.

Let's remember that this kindness and attention are intended to lead to liberation from greed, hatred and delusion. That does not mean agreeing with everything! The goal of our path remains clear. Sometimes *metta* can manifest as a mother slapping her child on the face because she is just about to run across the street and be hit by a bus. Sometimes we have to do that to ourselves too – 'Stop it! Don't do that!' – and be quite firm when we know we are just about to do something that will result in much regret, much anxiety and guilt; and then trigger our tendency to deal with this suffering by suppressing the guilt, getting distracted or doing something more stupid.

These things don't mean that you have to change your life or become somebody else. It is more the humble recognition of what is now. Is there something in the way now? Nothing is in the way when you are really prepared to learn from

everything, so you can recognize that much. There is nobody in the way, nothing in the way.

I remember that Ajahn Sumedho some years ago insisted those long silent retreats in the winter should be done in a spirit of conviviality. When I heard this I said, 'How on earth can you be silent and convivial at the same time?' I thought that was very strange! What could he mean by 'conviviality'? But because I have profound trust in Ajahn Sumedho's wisdom, my heart immediately started contemplating, 'What does he mean by this?' At the end of the three-month retreat we had a community sharing. Everybody talked about their insights. I shared with my friends that at first I thought the theme of conviviality on a silent formal retreat seemed like madness, but when I worked through the theme in my own practice day by day, something profound happened. An insight arose that 'I am not in my way'. That was the insight – I was not in my way! Before that I was always practising with 'me' having to do its thing, but suddenly, with conviviality percolating through, 'me' was not in the way of anything. At the time it was a revelation that I had seen myself as being in the way. But suddenly I was not standing in my own way – I was completely okay, here and now. There was perfection in just being with this person here.

Of course, when I was not in my way, nobody else was in my way either! There was a soft energy rapport with people – people were fine, they were okay, they were my friends. It was truly convivial, without having to speak to anybody. There was an energy of friendliness. I hadn't seen that very

well before. Before it was often more like, 'Shut up, I am practising *metta*!' I'm exaggerating – I never actually said that, but it was that type of mind state. We don't even know when we are doing this. We don't say it, but it is there in the air, people can feel it. Without being fully conscious, we use our 'mindfulness' to push people away. When we are not convivial, even without saying anything, without doing anything, there is a kind of tension. You can feel the vibes – 'Get out of my aura!' This tendency to contend with the world is not *metta*. When we have a convivial attitude, we don't have to smile or say anything but our body is quite relaxed and happy and everybody notices it and can even feel the energy of 'non-contention' and *metta*.

HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED?

Have you noticed how, when we look at ourselves, we keep bumping into our obstacles? That is why the practice can feel quite frustrating sometimes, if we don't have somebody experienced who can explain to us that obstacles are actually quite okay – that to feel wretched, undermined, and miserable is fine because these are only states of mind, perceptions that are impermanent.

Naturally the backdrop of all those things is not always clear. That is why mindfulness is cultivated. Mindfulness is the backdrop. Sometimes things are very deeply rooted in our mind and it's not easy to uproot them and let go of them. Sometimes it takes years of witnessing particular patterns or particular responses to life before we are free of them. Everything in us knows better than to hold onto them, yet we have other emotional aspects that are preventing the process of letting go. We have enough psychotherapeutic knowledge and understanding to realize that those emotional patterns can go all the way back to childhood, or even past-life experiences.

But even though our mind may be feeling stuck, a great chunk of ourselves isn't stuck at all and feels fine. So to be able to keep turning around and taking refuge in the part in us that is not stuck is a kind of art and skill. That's what is good about the spiritual path – we are able to keep looking at the part of ourselves that is already free, and we take refuge in that. Of course, we need all the help we can get. It is very fortunate to have a good teacher such as Ajahn Sumedho to whom you can go for advice, and who is not necessarily going to pamper you or tell you how good you are, but will remind you to stay mindful, wakeful and very present with things that may be quite difficult or even unbearable.

In the practice you don't cling to anything that arises in the mind – you make the very clear intention to let go. You find that if you do this often enough with whatever arises, with difficulties and problems, it really works. Something shifts and is transformed. Your world changes, and as your mind gains more and more confidence in the realm of Dhamma, truth, liberation, it loses its trust in your desires and fears.

A lot of our inability to let go comes from fear. We are frightened of letting go of things because everything we know, even our misery, is comforting on an emotional level. It seems to feel better than not knowing. But Ajahn Sumedho taught us for many years to train the mind to face the unknown. When questions arise, just say: I don't know... I don't know... I don't know – training the mind just like that. Do that in your everyday life. Allow the Dhamma to inform your consciousness, rather than continuing on the treadmill

of the conditioned mind's activities. All the conditioned mind can do is go from one thought to another to another. It's not that there is something wrong with the thinking mind. The thinking mind is useful for contemplation, for reflection, for clarification and for living your everyday life. As you contemplate the space of your mind, you can look at thoughts not as a rigid belief system, but just as energy, as images, forms. Then clarify what it is you want to consciously think and what you don't want to think.

We can often be quite confused by our mind because we find many mixed views in it. On this path you sometimes reach a place where the only thing left is to develop a sense of humour. Fortunately that comes quite naturally within the training, because what you have to go through is sometimes so ridiculous that it makes you laugh a lot. You may spend several hours in the forest at Chithurst Monastery spreading *metta* to all beings, radiating compassion to all sentient beings throughout the whole world. Then as you return to the nuns' cottage you cross paths with the one 'difficult' nun to whom you just sent tons of *metta*, and in a split second you are filled with rage. How can you not laugh? Or you may get very, very upset about something as mundane as the way people prepare salad dressing. Your mind can feel 'ennobled' by lots of 'noble' thoughts, and have profound insight into the nature of reality, leading to the realization that everything is changing, that it's all appearance and it's all in your mind. Then you happen to be cooking in the kitchen, and suddenly go completely berserk because someone chops carrots 'not the French way'. The French would never do that, never! Who cares? We only

eat one meal a day, so who cares how we chop the carrots? We have all these ennobling insights, and then you're in the kitchen and that's where you get into the real work. What do we do with our emotional nature in the kitchen? That's where our buttons get pushed and things get really heated.

Monastery life is like a huge cauldron or a pressure cooker. Sometimes you feel as if everyone is boiling together. People who come to the monastery may have no idea of this reality, because at first everything looks quite peaceful. For a newcomer everybody can appear angelic, pure-hearted, loving, neatly dressed, peaceful and harmonious. Most people become quite inspired at first. Then they get into the monastic routine and the daily life, working together. Soon some of them come to me and say, 'Sister, I have never experienced this in my life before – I see somebody putting a lid on in a certain way and I feel like hitting them.' Or, 'I've been reading a book on *metta*, trying to develop *metta* for the last several weeks, but when I see this person walking in front of me I feel enraged by her, although I've never spoken to her.' Can you see what we are up against? Once you start witnessing the life of your mind, it's quite funny.

But it's not so funny when we witness the wounds that go really deep. We can get very hurt. We are very susceptible creatures, and our little egos get agitated when they are not pampered or sweetened by nice words. You can say in front of a group, 'I'm an angry type, I'm very impatient, I'm not very nice with people, I can be so nasty, I've got lots of views and opinions about things, I'm selfish and can be quite jealous as well.' But if someone agrees with you – 'WHAT?!' As long as

you tell yourself how stupid you are, it's no problem. As long as the ego is talking about itself, it finds all kinds of ways of deluding itself. But if somebody else tells you that you are jealous and ignorant, look at your reaction. 'Me?! Don't attack me! What about you?!' That's how we usually react, we go on the offensive. The mind has a lot of ways of deluding itself. That's what we learn through the practice.

The path of practice is divided into three aspects: *sila* or ethics; *samadhi,* or the practice of meditation that includes effort or energy, concentration and mindfulness; and *paññ*a or wisdom, which is the first two links on the path, Right Understanding and Right Intention. Mental development, the aspect that includes mindfulness, effort and concentration, is not so difficult to relate to as long as we deal with techniques such as breathing or mindfulness of the body. But it's often much more difficult to relate to the actual hindrances or the obstacles to practice, such as confusion and frustration.

The practice leads to a lot of joy, happiness and peace, but as long as it is dependent on something it is going to change, so we can't count on something that depends on impermanent causes. This practice is leading you to understanding the mind, which is in many ways very treacherous and tricky. It's a real skill to relate to ourselves and to our mind in a sound, sane, kind and patient way, in the face of this trickiness and delusion. It's the training. It's an education. It's something we do little by little. We gradually learn how to do it. It doesn't come by itself. We learn to really take real care of our actions by body and speech and mind. Most of us start with the mind. We become interested in meditation and then notice

how angry we can get, or we notice the *kilesas*, the afflictive emotions or unskilful mental states that are very unpleasant. Then we notice our attachment. Even attachment to being a 'good' person is painful, because it is going to blind you and project all kinds of things onto the world. That's what we get ourselves into sometimes when we become fanatical about being a Buddhist – we want to convert everybody. We go home and start telling our friends about how we have become a better person. We've gone on some retreat and gained some insight, and now we are more at peace. We attach to this, become opinionated about our peacefulness and start projecting it onto other people. If other people aren't peaceful they are just 'bad Buddhists' or simply a nuisance, and they are obviously not practising. *I* am practising but *they* are not.

There are a lot of elements in ourselves that are blinding. We unravel these things as we become ready to open to our lives fully, fearlessly. You can only do this if your goal is very clear. Reflect often on why you started on this path in the first place and what you want to do with it, or whether you really want to be free. You may be surprised to discover that perhaps you don't want to be free – that you just want to have your piece of cake and eat it too! But hearing that voice is enough. You don't have to believe it, because it's not you.

If you can *listen* to these voices, the awareness of them is the path. It's here and now, and it's the refuge of awareness. It's where the mind is eventually released from all obstacles, all pain and all miseries. At some point you have to be very clear that this path of practice is for the sole purpose of freeing the heart from miseries, *dukkha*. So when you experience *dukkha*,

don't shy away from it. This is your opportunity. It's not a problem. It's your opportunity to liberate your mind from its attachment to ignorance. It's what you are supposed to see. But as soon as you witness something painful, there is a reaction that points at someone (or something) else and says, 'It's *your* fault.' You throw the ball into somebody else's court instead of looking at the source and taking responsibility for your reaction. To read the mind in the correct way is very powerful training.

Right Intention is non-harming and non-ill-will, the commitment to be totally harmless towards others and ourselves. This means fully accepting who we are and how we are. The third aspect of Right Intention is renunciation, letting go. On the wisdom aspect of the path, two parts are about being kind to oneself and to other people, and the third one is about releasing, letting go.

This winter my teacher was talking about blessings. How do you bless somebody? Blessing is kindness, isn't it? When you bless somebody you're not going to curse them, are you? When I feel blessed I feel very happy. My teacher gave me a wonderful teaching on blessings. The teaching is this: do not create anybody in your mind. Isn't that wonderful? Of course, you can recite, 'May you be happy, may you be great, may you be wonderful, may you have a long life', and so on. Wishing somebody to be happy is fine. But maybe you can't do that. How are you going to bless them if you hate their guts? Maybe that's asking too much, and you can recognize that. My teacher says that if you want to bless life in general to bring a sense of happiness to your own life, just don't create people in

your mind. That's blessing them, because you free them from your own problems, you don't imprison them with your own anger, your own expectations, your own frustration, your own miserable mind. You don't ask them to be any way other than the way they are. Isn't that wonderful? And it works! It works. Letting go.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: When I interact with people, I find a different person interacting with different people. It's disconcerting.

A: It can be, but as we observe ourselves we discover many characters in ourselves. Don't worry about it. In one day you can have twenty different characters coming up.

Q: So which one is real?

A: None. None are real. On a conventional level we have to be somebody. We learn to dance with these different characters. Twenty-six years ago I would have thought, 'What hypocrisy! I'm like this with this person and I'm like that with that person. How hypocritical that is!' No, it's not. We just learn about humanity. With some people we speak in one way, with other people we speak differently. We just become wise about human nature. You talk to your mother differently from the way you talk to your lover, don't you? The way you talk to your child is going to be different from how you talk to your best friend. If somebody pampers us and says how wonderful we are, we might give them our sweet character. If I push your buttons, I get your angry character. We have all these different characters. We just have to know they exist, but they are not really us. We've got endless selves in ourselves.

Q: When there is an interaction between two people it's not the selves, it's the interaction. It's as if the interaction is what is in the now, not the two people. It's the interaction that is creating the present, not the people.

A: It's many conditions that are creating the present. Even the way we've eaten our lunch could create the conditions that start taking place in an interaction, or what we are going to do in the evening can put us in a different mood. There are many things, many factors, many elements that can influence us in any interaction with anybody or any situation.

Q: I would just like to say I appreciate your honesty about your mind and the way it is. It's so much easier to be with myself after hearing that.

A: I'm very glad.

Q: In practice I've noticed all the characters and faces that come up. My mind wants to take the teachings of the Buddha and interpret them to mean that I should be wiping out these characters. I know this is not the practice, but that is where my mind wants to take it – that my practice is supposed to be about wiping those things out, that I should be a faceless being. Something deeper in me knows this is an extreme. I'm wondering if you can tell me how to sit with that.

A: There is a very strong tendency in us to want to get rid of things. It has a name. We can actually recognize it. It's one of the causes of suffering. It's the second Noble Truth, of suffering, *dukkha*, wanting to get rid of the things you don't like for example, the created perception in your mind of the various selves you don't like. This force is strong in all of us. We all suffer from it. We all have this disease of wanting the things we like and wanting to get rid of the things we don't

like. This is called *bhava-tanha*, attachment to becoming, and *vibhava-tanha*, attachment to non-becoming. We don't want to become those nasty characters. We want to become the pleasantness of an empty, peaceful mind. So we need to notice when this is happening. It's not simply a matter of recognizing the characters and the perception, idea and thought. You need to get in touch with the feeling underlying them. It's an aspect of aversion. It's an averse mind-state. It is the basis for this form of thinking. So that is how we can start undoing this tendency. Just notice it. Just name it 'aversion'. There is nothing wrong with it. It's opposite is wanting to become successful and wonderful and peaceful and it's called *bhava-tanha*, the desire to become something that we like.

It's painful to notice this tendency. It's hard to accept this part of ourselves that we need to understand better, rather than trying to wipe it out. But it's very normal. It's a normal tendency. To know this aspect of *dukkha samudaya* better, this desire to get rid of things we don't like is our field of investigation. It's very powerful, especially in the Western mind. We tend to be perfectionist, quite angry, averse types. We know how to get rid of things. In fact, our conditioning is such that when we don't know how to get rid of things we don't like, we are seen as stupid. It's stupid to be patient with the things we don't like, and yet that is what the Buddhist teaching is asking of you – to be very patient with the things you don't like. You can see what we're up against, what we're faced with.

Q: You compared cultures and talked about the Western culture encouraging critical thinking. I've always thought that this tendency in our culture is something we should try to overcome. You present it very differently. When you compared it to Asian cultures, you said they tend to be more faithful. I've always thought that if we were more like that, we would be more successful on the Buddhist path. That's not how you are presenting it.

A: Let's not forget that the Buddhist path is not about becoming anything. It's about understanding what is preventing you from being free from suffering. It's not about taking a position for or against anything. As you say, it's a broad generalization about Asians being more faith types and Westerners being more critical, discriminative types. But you realize at some point that you are not going to liberate somebody that you are not. You are not liberating an ideal, are you? We are liberating somebody who has been brought up in a culture founded in critical thinking. You will be happy to hear that within the Buddhist definition of different characters, the Buddha defined people with certain tendencies. You have the greedy type, the averse, angry type, the doubtful type, the discursive type, the faith type and so on. The angry or averse mind is very close to the wisdom mind. The critical, averse, angry type of mind wants to get rid of things. The wisdom mind gives you the understanding to let go of things. With wisdom you don't 'get rid' of things, you 'let them go'. The wisdom type knows immediately what the obstacle is. You develop a lot of energy to really practise with that. You

understand quickly, and that gives you a lot of confidence to get going with your practice, because you know how it's going to work. So the averse tendency can be used for your own benefit once you bring wisdom into it. This averse tendency will lead you to feel more energy with which to let go of things, because you see clearly how painful those things can be. We become averse to the things we don't like, that are painful. We rarely become averse to an ice cream or a nice cake. Mostly we are averse to somebody saying something like, 'From tomorrow we are going to fast for three days.' Oh, horror!

As Westerners our mind's confidence grows in a different way. This doesn't mean we have less faith or confidence. It goes through a different channel. We often need to understand to begin to feel confident. We can know exactly where our path is going, and know what to do, but we have little confidence or patience to set up the means to reach our goal. That's because we are not quite sure how to go about setting up the right conditions. We don't have confidence in doing the nitty-gritty to get results, for example , by being each day a little bit more mindful, a little bit kinder, a little bit more patient, less tyrannical, by gradually developing more skilful speech, little by little, and seeing the results over a period of time.

The critical faculty is very important in Buddhist teaching. Though it includes an element of devotion, it's more a wisdom path, it's more a wisdom path that requires the capacity to think clearly, to understand clearly. That aspect of the mind is very important. Thinking can be an obstacle, but it is also a tool. Thinking allows you to come to a deeper understanding

which can be integrated into your everyday life. This is where we are lacking. Often we don't know how to root our understanding into our everyday experience so that it can reverberate there and become real food for the heart.

INNER SPACE

In worldly life you have a lot of demands. You have activities, and a lot of energy is spent trying to sort out the world 'out there'. In monastic life we spend a lot of time sorting out the world in the heart and mind, which is not that different really. People think that when you come to live in a monastery your mind is going to be very peaceful, and you will have a very quiet, gentle, unencumbered, simple lifestyle. Well, I just want to dissolve any illusions about this. In some ways the worldly business that we've left behind continues in the monastery. The structure of monastic training is a reminder to keep things simple, but the mind is not simple. We may think that our troubled world and troubled life are caused by all the entanglements we encounter on a daily basis, in our family, our relationships, our work, with ourselves or our health – there are so many things. We tend to focus our attention externally. We forget where it all begins. We forget the source of our troubles.

So we come to a monastery to be reminded where it all begins – and where it all ends. Because unless we see the

source of our difficulties, our pain, our suffering, and see clearly that there is a quality of impermanence, fluidity and change in our experience, it's very much like living in a prison. You feel tightly stuck, with little space and no ability to see clearly. I don't think any of us would be here if we hadn't already discovered that there is a limit to how much the world or our life can give us in terms of happiness, fulfilment and joy. Most of us have come to the uncomfortable realization that at a certain level (I wouldn't say at an ultimate level), the world is not a fulfilling experience, because the fulfilment of a human being doesn't lie in perfecting the worldly life. We keep being frustrated because we're looking in the wrong place. If we had a choice we would do things differently, but very often we haven't got that much choice. We're stuck on the 'appearance' level, the 'seeming' level, the level where it's very difficult to see that we have choices, we have options. Meditation practice is really the first step to recognizing that we have a choice. Very often we sense that there is a problem, but we can't put our finger on it. We have a sense that something's not quite right, but we don't quite get the 'why' and 'how'. Fortunately, we are living in a time when there are vast numbers of teachings, teachers, paths, traditions, means and resources, tools and so on, which can be very helpful for understanding ourselves a little more clearly, a little more deeply – understanding the limitation of our habits and the unsatisfactoriness of greed and anger, and seeing our plain stupidity.

The Buddha's path is sometimes called the path of awakening. When we know the Dhamma truly it is not that

difficult to walk this path, but it is a path with paradoxes and that is why we can get very confused. At first in our practice we want to become happy, but the Buddha's Second Noble Truth tells us that attachment to becoming is the cause of suffering. We think, 'I don't want to become angry, I want to become good and kind and peaceful and loving.' That wanting may be a very good wanting, a very skilful kind of desire, but there is a paradox – if you hang on to the wanting in your meditation you become annoyed with yourself, angry, upset. You wonder why Buddhism is not working for you. But why should it be working if you keep on piling up the causes of suffering? No wonder it's not working. *Vipassana* practice teaches you the skills of dealing with the mind at a conventional level, just recognizing that we want to become good and we don't want to become bad, or we want to become intelligent and we don't want to become stupid. We want the happiness of having all the good things of the world and then we fear not having them. All this, if we attach to it, causes suffering.

A lot of the practice is just witnessing the delusion of our mind, witnessing how we get attached to things. Even though we may have written a PhD on the Four Noble Truths, or on Nibbana or the ultimate liberation, we still need to know these things directly, in the mind itself. We may have conceptual minds that are really quite articulate, refined and clear on an intellectual level, but as I often say, if you just keep reading the cookery book to find out how to bake a pizza, it's not that satisfactory. It's much nicer to eat a good warm pizza. So we are often stuck at that level. We live in a part of the world where, because of our education, people may become highly

trained mentally. When you go to the East you don't meet that sort of opinionated energy. That doesn't mean we are worse or better, but we have the suffering of identifying with a very highly developed intellectual understanding of things. And sometimes, unfortunately, we can get quite stuck if we just remain there without really looking for something more satisfying in terms of realization, insight and understanding.

On the first level of the path it is important to have a clear map, an overview of what the Buddha's teaching is about. So by all means, get to know the theory of Buddhist practice, get to know the Buddha's teaching, whether it's in the *suttas* or the commentaries, or by listening to good teachers who can give presentations on the teaching. That's very useful. But ask yourself, what is the purpose of this path? In meditation practice you need a very simple approach, a direct approach like awareness of the breath, the body. To the intellect that seems too simple. You can get very bored very quickly. After five minutes the knees start aching and you begin wondering what time the session finishes, and then your mind wanders out of the room and goes off somewhere, remembering an old movie, hoping that it all ends quickly or wishing it would never end. This is called mental proliferation, and if can you see this proliferation, that is really the craft of practice.

The Buddha's teaching in the Theravada tradition is very simple. The Buddha says that when you are bored, you should just see you are bored. That's it. When there is a feeling of anger, just know that there is anger. When there is a feeling of greed, just know there is greed. I know that's very unsatisfactory on an intellectual level. We are looking at

a mind that is caught in complexities: a world of complexities, a life of complexities and complex relationships, and we are addicted to that. It's a kind of addiction. Let's face it, we might not be taking drugs, but there is a very definite addiction to a mind that does things. A mind of silence, a mind of peace, a mind of stillness – that's not really our cup of tea most of the time, is it? In meditation, just the simple act of sitting quietly is one of the essential features of the Buddha's path – developing the mind through stilling the mind, quieting the mind, not by force but just letting the mind settle, letting the mind just relax and recognizing that maybe there is nothing to do right now. Through habit the mind keeps on going, but suddenly the penny drops and you realize that there's nothing to do. You are just with your boredom, or with your anxiety, or whatever's here at that moment. But even though there is nothing to do, the thought process continues piling up your 'to do' list – I've got to do *anapanasati*, and I mustn't get distracted, and the teacher told me I have to get rid of restlessness. (A good teacher will tell you just to be aware of restlessness). Don't move with it. Don't let the mind get agitated with restlessness. And if it is agitated, be still with agitation.

We can complain about the fact that our lives are not working. It's a time of recession, our bank account is going down, we aren't able to pay the mortgage, we're afraid of ending up sleeping rough. We all have reasons to be worried. And to be honest, all of us have been brought up just to react through aversion, through anger, through frustration. Most of our conditioning is in terms of putting our fists up and saying,

'I am going to do something about this now!' This can work for certain things. There are times when it's a skilful means, but only if it is done without aversion, without anger, without a sense of frustration. Then it's a skilful act. But if it's done out of aversion, frustration and anger, you'll get a backlash.

So if you want to get rid of a problem you may think that moving away from it will do that, and it may indeed be wise to move away from a difficult situation. The Buddha even teaches this as one of the means of dealing with difficult thoughts or difficult mind states. Just distracting oneself is one of the five ways of dealing with an unskilful thought, an unskilful state of mind. Just do something else. Go and walk the dog if you feel really depressed. That's one way of dealing with depression or misery. But as meditators we also want to go to the root of the problem, and the root is in the mind itself – to see, to witness for ourselves what the Buddha is telling us from the beginning of his teaching; that this is the path of liberation, this is the path leading to the ultimate profound, deep peace called Nibbana, the path of the cooling down of all formations, of greed, anger and delusion. So if we are really interested in this realization of the path, we can't just go on being distracted. We need to find a way of letting go and releasing our attachment to, let's say, depression, for example, or sadness, or whatever.

Patience is an important aspect of the practice, but this becomes paradoxical for many people who have been conditioned to use willpower. When I was younger, before I became a nun, I thought that patience was a feeble mind-state. My deluded mind thought that maybe you were only patient

when you had no other choice. If you can't do anything, then you'll be patient. But now I see that to free the heart, to free our mind from any miserable mental state, any miserable thought, we have to be still with it. We have to see it and be still, just do nothing. Our conditioning will say, 'Get up! Now! Quickly! As quickly as possible!' Isn't that what we do a lot of the time with our life? But through your patient quality of awareness, mindfulness, you will see more deeply that nothing that happens to you, nothing you think, nothing you feel is under your control. You think it's under your control, but it's not. When you realize this, that thoughts arise though you wish they wouldn't, and you can't do anything about it, when you really look at the mind directly, unbiased, with a clear mirror, a clear seeing, you will see that all kinds of things arise and come and go without any invitation. They invite themselves. They are like guests who invite themselves and leave when they want. Where is the control there, tell me? So who is in charge? Ask yourself. God? The Buddha? There is nobody in charge, and that is what is called *anatta* (non-self). There is no one there.

The only thing that is really in charge (until we see through it a bit) is our delusion. Our forgetfulness is constantly in charge of everything. You want to get up a bit earlier in the morning and do a bit of meditation – Lord *Avijja* (delusion, ignorance) turns up and says, 'Oh no, you can't do that. Not tomorrow. Maybe the next day.' And what about our appreciation of what we do in our practice? We forget that we are actually practising and are quite good people. How many of you will spend a lot of time remembering all the things

you haven't done in your practice and all the failures in your practice, forgetting the good aspects of your human mind, forgetting the good qualities you have? We remember all the nasty things that we've done. We could write books about them. We have this weird tendency. We love peace. We love the quality of freedom and liberation, even if we've tasted it just for a few seconds, but we forget over and over again, and again and again. That's why the Buddha said to be mindful, remember – *sati*, mindfulness, *sampajañña*, clear recollection, clear understanding, clear seeing.

'*Sati*' is sometimes translated as 'memory'. It reminds you, 'Oh, I'm here now. There's no problem here now.' How many times do we create the 'reality' of our future and, even worse, the 'reality' of our past? But the past is only a memory. It's only a thought, but we give it so much importance. We make it so believable – our grief for past experiences, for our youth, for our departed relatives, for our friends who have left us. We forget the here and now – who is remembering this? Who is concocting the stories? Who is creating? A large part of our practice is developing enough patience to listen to the conditionings of our own mind – to really listen, to have the ability to be still with the mind so you get to know all its tricks. And it has many. It will make you feel tired when you're not. It will make you feel bored when things could be really interesting. It will create heaven when you're in hell – ask an alcoholic. He wouldn't drink if he didn't think it was going to give him some happiness. Delusion is the great trickster.

We need to know where things begin; otherwise we will think we have to solve all the problems in the whole world.

We are exposed day in and day out to the media, which keep telling us that the world is wrong. But we don't need the media to know that. We can just meditate on our mind and we will see that the world that arises in the mind is perfectly unsatisfactory. You don't need to know that there is war in Iraq, and Afghanistan is getting worse, and there's cheating everywhere in society – you don't need to know as much as that to know that the world is very unsatisfactory. Have you noticed how many times we draw our attention outwards again and again? The world we are part of is wholly intent on making you believe that the problem is out there, and it makes you forget where it begins. Let's not even talk about television – just look at advertisements. Advertisements are one of the highest trainings in developing the Five Hindrances, greed, hatred, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt. Just keep looking at advertisements and you become an expert on them: wanting more, disliking the fridge that you bought six months ago and wanting a new one, hating the 'old' car you bought two years ago and longing for that beautiful new brand of car.

Even in the spiritual path *avijja* is at play. It has quite a lot of power to make you believe that one teaching is not good enough. Forgetfulness keeps us in a state of dissatisfaction. We feel there's something missing. Again, we forget where the source is. We forget where we are. We forget what the tools are, what wisdom is, what compassion is, and there we are, back again on the treadmill of birth, death, restlessness, worry, anxiety, fear and so on. So you need the ability to really stop. You've seen those Buddhas holding up two hands,

stopping the world – and what is the world in Buddhism? The world is the suffering we create. The Buddha says this world is in this fathom-long body – that is where the world arises and ends. So are we prepared to really see this suffering we create for ourselves, which the Buddha calls 'the world' – this creation, this attachment to our mind, to our body, to the concoctions they create and the complexities to which they give birth?

You know, there are not many ways to free the mind. It is important to bring the mind to a certain degree of peace, tranquillity and quietness. Check what you are doing during your daily life. How many causes for tranquillity, peace and quietness do you set up in your life to support them in your mind? The path of practice creates the foundation for realizing the end of suffering, the end of attachment, delusion, greed and anger. There is the *sila* aspect of the practice, the ethical aspect, whose reason, the Buddha says, is to be free from regret. Regret and remorse agitate the mind. The ethical precepts are so important because at a fundamental level they begin to help the mind lessen that tendency to be in a constant state of turmoil about the unskilful things we have done by body, speech, and mind – the things we have done through physical, verbal, and mental action. The foundation of *sila* brings a certain degree of peace to the mind, so that we can look into it and see what is really happening.

Then there is the aspect of wisdom, right view and right intention. Right intention is defined as three things, three kinds of thoughts that arise in the mind of a Buddha. The

Buddha still had thoughts, you see. He wasn't blanked out. And these three thoughts are the thoughts of non-ill-will, non-harming, and renunciation.

Renunciation – people tremble in their boots when you talk about renunciation. 'Oh my God, what's that?!?' But you could say the core of renunciation is really just the letting go, releasing, freeing of greed, hatred, and delusion. That's the real renunciation. It's just letting go. And again, this is to simplify, to relax the mind, to let go of this tension of grasping and clinging and holding. When I make a fist, my hand is not particularly relaxed. When I relax my hand – ahhh, nice. I can do lots of things with my hand when I relax it. When I am making a fist, there's not much I can use my hand for – just punching people in the face. Well, this is what we do with our minds. That's why, when people are very tense and very grasping and invested in things, you can feel it. The mind is like a fist shape. I never thought of it like that before, but that's quite a good image – a fist at the level of your head, wanting to punch everybody.

So wisdom – right view and right intention – creates a foundation of peace, loving-kindness, harmlessness, non-ill-will.

Then you have the meditation aspect of the practice, the mind development aspect, which is about letting the mind relax and calm down and then looking into the nature of the mind – looking into the contents of your mind and gaining confidence. You can actually come to a place where you have a handle on the mind – not through wanting to get rid of it, but through seeing it so clearly that you would never want

to get attached to it. Why would you want to get attached to something that is such a factory of misery? That would be stupid, wouldn't it?

So remember the source of your life, of your world, where the world begins and ends, and see the practice from a very down-to-earth point of view. Don't try to become something or get rid of things, just use your life as a process of understanding yourself, a process of knowing yourself, a process of coming to be at peace with yourself, being at peace with this very unsatisfactory factory of misery. And then we discover the peace of non-attachment, non-greed, non-hatred, a peace of awakening, a peace of realization, a peace of the mind, the quality of the mind when it's not attached, where you can tap into wisdom and compassion. You can live so much more happily without all that other 'Stuff'. And yet you need to really keep looking at the 'Stuff', 'Stuff' with a capital 'S', in order to understand that it's just things moving in and out, a make-believe world. We need to realize what we are doing, what we practise, how we hold this practice and what kind of understanding we have of it. Whether we are lay or monastic, whether we are men or women, whether we are young or old, we are all capable of knowing the mind, knowing the contents of the mind, knowing our actions, knowing our speech.

There is no limit to the mind, and there is no limit to how much we can understand it and let it go. We're not getting younger. The practice is a way of making peace with life as it moves on, as we all move from youth to middle age, to aging, to dying.

IT CAN BE VERY SIMPLE

Q: Thank you, Ajahn, for taking the time to talk with us this morning. Let me start by asking you something simple: what do you feel is the essence of Dhamma?

A: This is not such a simple question. The essence of Dhamma is liberation, liberation from *dukkha*, from suffering in its widest meaning. And also liberation from any kind of delusion, any kind of ignorance.

Q: Sometimes liberation is portrayed as a goal at the end of one's path, and at other times one hears about moments of liberation and freedom. Can you clarify this?

A: Liberation is not out there somewhere, or an event that will happen some time in the future. It begins right here, right now. Many conditions support the time when one might have a profound experience of letting go of some particular blind spot or pattern of attachment. Though Nibbana is presented as a goal, the goal of final liberation, each moment is a moment where there is a possibility of liberating the mind from its habitual grasping, its clinging, its blindness. So it's

the goal, and at the same time it's happening in the moment. This is not a contradiction.

Q: What do these moments feel like, when you actually experience insight?

A: It's not like a major fireworks experience where everything is suddenly just blown apart. For me it can be very simple, just suddenly noticing a habitual way of the mind seeing things. You contact the world, and suddenly you see the *dukkha* and you know. You just see the experience of tension and the tanha (craving) behind it. You can experience both the wanting, and then the relaxing into that experience and allowing it to just be there. You see that you can stop acting on it.

When it becomes clear that grasping is the cause of *dukkha*, you just let go. Instead of clinging, you just release it. The peace that comes from releasing is nirodha, the experience of cessation, the Third Noble Truth which is often hardly even noticed. The mind, under the influence of the ego, is more inclined to notice what is exciting or interesting. Usually you might be pushing away an experience, or grasping it, or struggling with it, or making something out of it, or becoming it. But then, in this moment of insight, you see these as just the reactive responses we usually have out of ignorance of our mind states, our bodily experiences and so on. Cessation is peaceful: the ending of grasping, the ending of our problems, the ending of 'me' with my story and all its complexities. You realize that there is no one there. The mind with its thoughts, feelings and perceptions just seems to arise out of

nowhere, disappears and arises again. It is only through our delusion that we are constantly building up a sense of self around that, creating what we hope is some kind of secure landscape. We construct a person again and again out of our misapprehension of physical and mental phenomena.

Q: So the Noble Truths are really revealed in experience, moment after moment?

A: Yes. If you are awake.

Q: And how do we wake up or remain awake in order to see these things in our experience?

A: Paradoxically, the experience of *dukkha* is part of our waking up. I've noticed that most human beings around me, including myself, seem to be spurred on by the experience of unsatisfactoriness. I don't think any one of us is looking for that or wants it, and it's not necessarily unsatisfactory in the sense of being unhappy. But often with the experience of *dukkha* comes the realization that you are asleep, that there is a lack of mindfulness, a lack of awareness and energy. A kind of contraction has already begun, and then suddenly you realize that you are not aware. You are not really present with what's happening. You are seeing the world through the veil of habits, the veil of misery and depression, excitement, anger or frustration. As a well-known teacher says, you are not meeting the moment as a fresh moment.

Q: Do you mean that you need to be awake to see the Noble Truths in your experience, and, at the same time, by seeing the Noble Truths you wake up?

A: That's right. When you really see suffering, you have already come to that place of wakefulness that is not clinging and grasping. So, in a way, by seeing suffering you have also almost seen the ending of suffering. It's not like a linear sequence in time – one, two, three, four. It's more like the case of a hand touching a cinder of hot coal – as soon as you pick it up you drop it, because you know it is hot. You don't wait, you just drop it. At some point it becomes as urgent as that.

Q: And what might you say to help a person who can see the unsatisfactoriness arising again and again in their experience, but somehow just can't seem to manage to see the holding that is underlying and causing it?

A: We all go through this. Often we can feel the misery of *dukkha* but we aren't able to drop it. It is as if we were addicted to it. I think all of us are in the same boat. But this is where practice makes a difference. With meditation we have tools that help us to investigate the nature of our experiences and to see our habitual grasping. Much of the practice is about being very patient and willing to bear with our habits until they run out of fuel. It's as though we were starting a program of detox. It doesn't feel so good. We can experience the withdrawal symptoms of addiction to delusion. For a while you just feel very ill at ease because you are not feeding the habits of grasping. Many people come to practice thinking, 'Oh, it's going to be really nice. I'm going to find peace, and I'll be confident and more clear.' They don't realize that when you enter the practice, you actually enter a fierce fire.

Q: And what helps us make the breakthrough? Is it just the gradual effects of patiently returning our attention to the present? Or is it a momentum that grows from moments of insight closer together or deeper?

A: Sometimes it is just a matter of patiently bearing with difficult states of mind, moods, emotions, perceptions, old conditioning and so on. As we keep taking refuge in mindfulness, moment by moment, we are not fuelling our habits and our grasping begins to loosen up. It does not seem like very much at first, yet you begin to notice how certain situations, certain people, certain moods that used to agitate your mind have no hold anymore. When I first learned about practice, my teacher emphasized right view. His teaching constantly reminded me to observe experiences as changing, and to notice when suffering was or was not there. Paying attention, I began to be aware when I took things personally and when I did not, when the sense of self was or was not present. The more it hurt, I noticed, the more I was involved in what I experienced. I was noticing the patterns of attachment in my life and the mind's lack of inherent selfhood.

I think sometimes in the West we see the practice and the path of training the mind in a way that is a little narrow. We think of it, perhaps, as a technique or some kind of special condition for reaching a breakthrough. We often forget that every aspect of life is a tool for realizing Dhamma. Everything in life influences us, and awareness is key. Awareness of mistakes can take us right into the fire. Sometimes not getting it quite right is what wakes you up much more sharply than developing a lot of techniques for being aware.

Transformation sometimes needs fire, and we don't have to be afraid of the heat that's generated by the shadow side of our personality.

Q: But what is the wisdom component of that? Many people, when their ego gets thrown down, feel bad about themselves, but this can just fuel more unskilful states. What is the crucial factor that will allow one to use this as a tool for growth rather than for further suffering?

A: Wisdom can help distinguish between the suffering that perpetuates itself and the suffering that takes us to the end of suffering. Most people identify with what they experience, so when they feel miserable they don't know how to let awareness reflect back their experiences. If we are still desperately clinging to being successful, or being loved, or being praised, or being famous or whatever, we won't be able to see the bigger picture. We won't be able to reach the state of peace that Ajahn Chah was pointing to when he said, 'If you let go of a little you have a little peace. If you let go of a lot you have a lot of peace. And if you let go completely, then you have complete peace.' When you have seen with insight that the things we crave are not really worth making ourselves miserable for, it becomes possible to be at peace with whatever is happening.

Q: Is this easier to do in a monastic environment?

A: Certainly at the beginning it's easier to practise in an environment where people share a common interest

and commitment, and where their lifestyle is designed to support the practice and realization of Dhamma. It is also an advantage to be away from a lot of situations where the worldly assumptions hold undisputed sway. In our Western secular society, to be famous, successful, loved and praised is the only goal, isn't it? That is what you are brought up to believe from childhood. But when you are in a monastic environment for a while, you have many encouragements to just drop the whole thing and see what happens when you don't cling to these ideals. There are also very clear ethical standards, which is a big help. Sila (ethics) provides clear guidelines that remind us to be mindful of all aspects of our life – mind, body, speech and our interaction with the outside world. But these guidelines would not be very useful if they were seen simply as another set of ideas to be clung to. Wisdom and a compassionate attitude must be present to use them skilfully, and we must realize that our mistakes as well as our successes are valuable material for practice.

Q: So even as a monastic you still have an occasional opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them?

A: Occasional?! People have such a funny idea about monasticism. It's a place where your shortcomings become magnified and you have to face yourself as you are, rather than as an ideal you may be trying to uphold. You have many mirrors of yourself in a community. It can be quite a shock sometimes to realize how many identities you are living with!

Q: How did you come to the Dhamma? Who has been your teacher?

A: I always think of Thomas Merton and Krishnamurti as the people who gave me an inkling of an inquiring mind and the dimension of awareness. But it all really began for me with Ajahn Sumedho. I met him early in 1978 when he came to visit the university where I was studying at the time. One of the students, who had been a monk with Ajahn Chah, had started a Buddhist Society where some meditation was being taught. What really struck me was that Ajahn Sumedho was describing in his talks a lifestyle that I had been looking for but never imagined I could ever find in our culture. I had always lived in city areas, in a world of artists and intellectuals where tranquillity and peace were not exactly the aim of life. He spoke of the simple lifestyle of a monk in Thailand, and I saw somebody who was intelligent, reflective, bright and humorous. He embodied qualities that I appreciated. I remembered his humour more than anything. There was a certain freshness about his outlook that was very reassuring. Having trained as a dancer, I was familiar with the kind of focused attention and concentration you need in order to be in the present moment. You can't dance by thinking or with a manual in your hands. You've got to be right there. I was looking for something that could sustain that experience of presence in my everyday life, but there was nothing in our society that seemed able to provide this.

Q: Presumably as a dancer you were well trained in mindfulness and concentration. If these are factors that lead to awakening, why don't all dancers have wisdom?

A: Well, concentration and a certain degree of mindfulness are present, but not what the Buddha calls Right Mindfulness. There was no shortage of suffering and opportunity to see the Dhamma, yet I didn't know how to find a skilful way to deal with it. Even though I had learned a lot about the body, I did not know what it was about. It was a bit like a doctor who might know every detail about the human body, but who is totally ignorant of its real nature. I eventually found the dancer's world ego-centred and narcissistic.

Q: So how did you get from there to the monastic community?

A: Inspired by the teaching of Krishnamurti, I started inquiring into what I was feeling and thinking, sitting quietly and simply being present. In the stillness there was a strong awareness of the restlessness of the mind, the fear, the agitation, the frustration and so on. It was like opening the gates to all that which did not want to be present. And I began to see how mind and body interacted with one another, which triggered my curiosity – 'Oh, that's very interesting. What's going on here?' I had never known that I was living with such an active mind and body. All sorts of things were becoming conscious, not just difficult aspects of the mind but also some very positive ones, which came as a surprise. Suddenly I felt a

great wish to be generous, and because I was not so preoccupied with myself I had more time and wanted to share what I had. So there was a slow transformation happening beyond my control. This was a very unfamiliar experience, because like most people I thought that my strength and ability to act and respond to life came from getting actively involved, not by relaxing and just being at peace in the present moment, yet so many experiences were coming up by doing nothing, by just being present. Some changes were also taking place in my professional and personal life, raising many questions that I knew had no real answer. Somehow the answers were not so important, but I felt that the questions were.

Q: We're getting closer. And the final step?

A: The turning point was a retreat with Ajahn Sumedho. I discovered that I loved getting up at four o'clock in the morning and eating only one meal a day. I did get totally bored, miserable, hungry and critical at times, yet to me, because of the presence of mindfulness, it was ten days in heaven! I discovered that I had enough space to see my critical mind reflected everywhere – 'I don't like him. I don't like it here. She's not practising right' – and enough compassion to let things be. This incredible simplicity of the present moment and all this energy just to be here and now and to notice what was going on in the mind, fascinated me. However, the last thing I thought was that I would wind up at a monastery. I had all sorts of ideas and plans for the years ahead. But at some point I was talking to Ajahn Sumedho about all this, going on about the greatness of the challenges of the world. When I

stopped he just said, 'Yes, and it's a matter of knowing where the world is, isn't it?' And that was like a lightning bolt. It changed everything. Suddenly I realized something that I had read in many books: that I was actually making my world and was free to lead my life as I wanted

Q: So as the Buddha said, 'The world is in this fathom-long body.' Is that what he was referring to?

A: Yes. The Buddha said, 'You cannot reach the end of the world by walking, but you cannot end *dukkha* without going to the end of the world.' I didn't realize the impact it had until I realized my mind had somehow stopped. Soon after I thought – 'Well, ten days did a jolly good job. How about three months? That should sort you out for the rest of your life.' Of course, that first month turned out to be so fascinating I stayed on, and eventually joined the order of nuns.

Q: And how developed was the nuns' community at that point?

A: Well, there was nothing. We were four laywomen who happened to come to the monastery at about the same time. We were ordained together a few weeks later. Learning to live together under the same roof was an extraordinary classroom. We were four incredibly strong individuals, very different. It was an entirely different lifestyle for all of us, to suddenly find ourselves with three other people day in and day out in really rough conditions. In the early years the monastery was a really tough place to live. It was virtually a building site, stripped from the cellar up to the roof. It was cold and damp,

and there was a kind of spooky atmosphere at times. We got up at four and had to be up at the main house at five o'clock in the morning. Since we were a fifteen minute walk up a tiny deserted lane from the bottom of a hill, we had to get up even earlier than the men. Each week there was an all-night vigil where we meditated until four or five o'clock in the morning. We lived on one meal a day, we didn't have breakfast for two years. Being French, food is important, that was really quite a drastic change for me, a real mind-stopper!

Q: And there must have been some special difficulties around the fact that nuns and monks were relatively close together?

A: Yes, of course. It was quite an extraordinary situation. The monks had just moved from Thailand to the West, to an entirely different culture. They did not have the support of a predominantly Buddhist Asian society and had never lived close to nuns. For me personally, not knowing much about this tradition, it wasn't too bad at the time, as I remember, because I just took on board the situation as it was. As a female monastic I never felt particularly inferior in those days – I think I was too conceited to feel that I was inferior, anyway. But I have to say we were very well-treated, very respected. I am often asked questions like, 'How can you cope with the fact that according to the ancient monastic codes women are subordinate to men?' and so on. This has been an issue in our community, not just for the nuns but for the monks too, and it has not been an easy one. We have had to learn to work with a situation that challenges much of our conditioning

about being strong and independent Western women. The practice helps us respond to the way things are, rather than projecting some sort of ideal onto a monastic form which is to be used as a skilful means rather than an end in itself. But this is an ongoing challenge, and the question remains: how do we relate to this whole convention skilfully, and translate into our culture a tradition that is so incredibly different from what we know in the West? In the last decade the nuns' community has become much more independent and administers its own internal affairs. The responsibilities of running the monastery are shared, and most decisions are made by a group of senior monks and nuns. Over the years great mutual respect has developed between the male and female members of the community. In this and many other ways there seems to be a good deal of evolution in the modern Sangha.

Since I have been in the United States more over the last ten years, I have noticed that there is a sense of growing interest in monastic life, which I had not seen so much before. There seems to be a deeper understanding of what monastic life means for us, and a greater interest in supporting monastics. I think that the more understanding there is between the lay community and the monastic community, the more mutual respect naturally develops. This will surely benefit and enrich each other's experience and quality of practice. Not too long ago more polarity existed, so I feel this is a really positive development. The growing connection between our Sangha and the larger retreat centres in America is very heart-warming. I was at one of these retreat centres recently

when Ajahn Sumedho was there teaching a group of senior lay Dhamma teachers, and was very happy to see a bit more of the harmony within the communities of which the Buddha so often spoke when he reminded us to meet often, meet in concord, and part in concord.

Q: Any last thoughts, Sister?

A: I would just like to express my gratitude and appreciation to everyone for the kindness, generosity and support I have received during my three-month stay, and to thank particularly those who made it possible for me to spend the Rains Retreat here.

MINDFULNESS AND WISDOM, THE TOOLS OF PRACTICE

Sometimes when things become very difficult, when we are faced with a serious illness, lose someone we love deeply or there is a crisis in our life, all that seems to be left is refuge in the present. During difficult times that refuge in the here and now is comforting and enables us to face each moment as it comes. It's surprising how still the mind becomes then, and how that presence of mind just seems to know what to do next.

Mindfulness helps us not to complicate things, not to add to what is already there. We may notice that once we are mindful of our habitual thoughts, they tend to cease. As soon as we bring attention or awareness to our personal history, it loses its reality. This refuge of mindfulness is the blessing of the mind, the awareness that allows the mind to see clearly. Mindfulness activates wisdom and compassion to guide our life, rather than delusion, fear or blind desires.

Our lives during this retreat have generated a lot of blessings as we awakened to the goodness in ourselves and

took refuge in awareness. Every day we shared the goodness of our practice, of our endeavour to free our hearts. Now we can see the results and how much more peaceful our minds are. Its contents may still be disturbed, but now the mind is able to offer a peaceful container, a calm space where we can see clearly, without being confused by the complexities concocted by delusion. We can recognize the part played in our lives by the results of our past kamma, our past actions, but as we witness them, we are no longer fooled or carried away by them. This is the result of our practice, though we may not see it at once. Sometimes it might take an unexpected, challenging situation to show us the benefits of our practice.

We can be quite greedy in our approach to meditation, greedy for proof that what we are doing is working. We are conditioned to want instant results. We tend to want to know immediately. We want someone to guarantee that we are going in the right direction, that we are not making mistakes. After this retreat, we would ideally prefer never to make any more mistakes, never again to have to go through all the difficulties we went through before the retreat. Our mind may conjure up possibilities of being eternally at peace, eternally clear, eternally unchallenged. That thought may exist subconsciously even though we don't consciously think like this: 'If only I had no challenges in my life, if only I was always mindful, I could really practise correctly.' This is wrong view, but emotionally we often get stuck in that view. The mind looks for a life with no problems, no challenges and no worries.

During this retreat we were given a powerful lesson. The environment was peaceful, we took the Precepts, there were Dhamma teachings and much encouragement, but still someone had to be rushed into hospital and undergo an invasive heart examination, and we didn't know for a few days how that situation would develop. Fortunately everything turned out well, and that person is back sitting here with us now. Yet many people go on retreats thinking, 'During a retreat things should work smoothly because I am doing something good.' We have a simplistic view of life in a corner of our mind: 'If I do this, I will get that'. But we witness for ourselves that this is not the case. Practice is a selfless act. We practise not to gain anything, not to realize our dreams, but just to practise.

Often the mind creates a dualistic worldview: 'If I feel good I can practise, but if I don't feel good the whole practice goes down the drain.' We all go through this. It's human nature. But Ajahn Chah used to say something that helped me a lot in my life as a nun: 'If you want to practise, practise. If you don't want to practise, practise.' Simple, isn't it? Those words are jewels of wisdom that we can trust. Sometimes we feel good. We have energy and confidence. We feel happy. In the practice we develop what the Buddha called the five faculties of the mind: the faculty of faith or confidence; the faculty of wisdom or understanding; the faculty of concentration; the faculty of energy or effort; and the faculty of mindfulness, which balances the other four. When we feel good in our practice, some of those faculties may be present. We feel confident, we

have more energy and the practice of concentration is easier. We may have more clarity of mind. Then we naturally think: 'Ah, if I always felt like this, then I could practise.'

But when times are difficult and we feel ill or depressed, when we get up in pain to just another day with more worries and burdens, and nothing to look forward to, then where are those faculties? It's hard to find them. The mind is flat and scattered, confusion prevails and energy seems to have slipped away. I used to wonder why this happened, until I realised how avijja works at those times. When mindfulness is absent, it tells us to go back to bed and annihilate ourselves. It says: 'You're so scattered and miserable, just go back to bed; why don't you take a few sleeping pills and sleep?' This is the voice of delusion, which may sound rather extreme, but it's a familiar voice of not wanting what is here in the present moment. Monks and nuns go through such experiences too – we may hear those voices every morning for years when we get up: 'You're not ready for the day, it's too hard, you won't make it.'

We are strongly conditioned by delusion. We may attend a meditation retreat thinking of Dhamma in a casual way as a therapeutic programme. We don't reflect that when we enter a path of awakening we will encounter the forces of delusion again and again, and they are very powerful. We must have confidence that cultivating this path of practice is actually going to help us, and that we have the tools to deal with our difficulties. Sometimes during the day the faculties of mindfulness, faith, wisdom, energy and concentration may seem to have disappeared, but they arise if we strengthen

our heart through our practice. Then we will be able to face the difficulties we encounter. All those faculties of mind may not be present at once, but when we develop our practice of meditation and lead a life of integrity and honesty, they are strengthened. It doesn't have to be a life of perfection, that's not the point, but a life of integrity, rooted in knowing the way things are, in knowing the Dhamma. This helps us, for example, to understand that dwelling on negativity when we don't get things right is not the way out of suffering. The way out is to let go and begin again.

We seldom read in books about what practice really involves. Usually we come across the results achieved by people who have practised for many years. The books tend to describe the successes because they are inspiring, what publishers think people want to read. We don't often read books about the moments of difficulty: about having to begin again, feeling stupid for days, feeling inadequate and obsessed with worries and anxieties even after practising for years, talking stupidly and experiencing guilt. But in fact these things don't indicate failure. They're just the results of lifetimes of kamma, and we have to abide patiently with them until they go away.

Sometimes we have to bear with narratives in our mind that do not seem to have anything to do with this life. We wonder why we are obsessed by something, or why we encounter things that are frightening or bring confusion. This is part of the path of practice. At other times we doubt whether we are doing the right thing. Are we on the right track? Should we change religions, change paths, change teachers? At these

times, are we seeing what is actually happening? We may feel that we have lost the path, and then our mind falls into a state of doubt. Our mind is confused when we don't know what to do. How many of us see that when we are confused, doubt creeps in and makes us doubt further? 'I'm not good enough. I don't have what it takes for practice. My life is so busy I can't really do it, it's for monks and nuns who live on the tops of mountains.' This happens when we've lost the listening heart, the mindfulness with which to hear those thoughts. The path is there, but we have gone down the track of delusion and the mind believes what it is saying. We're chugging along on the train of sankhara (mental formations, patterns, programmes). Yet the path is still right in front of us, immediately apparent here and now, timeless, as we chant in the mornings.

As we practise we notice what takes us out of the present. Our mind wanders off into what we will do tomorrow, six months from now or in a year's time. We go back to our childhood, to our past, to yesterday or the previous moment. We notice how we can hang on to the past or move on to a future that hasn't come yet. There is nothing wrong with that if we are aware of what is happening and can see it clearly; then we can enjoy watching the mind moving backwards and forwards. But most of the time we move with it. We get entangled with it, moving backwards or forwards with it. Ajahn Chah gave his disciples a teaching which in its immediacy is impossible for the rational mind to fathom: 'In the practice there is no moving forward, no moving back, and no standing still.' What does that mean? A real mind-stopper! It's like a Zen koan, a paradox to be meditated on to sharpen the mind

and stop it from moving with all that it experiences. When the mind stops it is present here and now. That's all it takes!

Sometimes it feels as if we are miles and miles, lifetimes away from enlightenment, from clearly seeing the nature of mind and body. Yet what creates time? Is it our thinking? What is not timeless in us? Sometimes even carrying the baggage of a tradition takes us away from the timeless moment. We find our mind dwelling in 'Buddhist perceptions' – not Christian or agnostic perceptions any more, but Buddhist perceptions now. But clinging to 'Buddhist perceptions' is not the path. This is why we sometimes don't feel the joy of practice. We are still holding on to 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. It doesn't take much. That is the beauty of this path, that it's so available, always here, so close to us. So we should see whether we are holding on to perceptions. For example, we may be holding on to the idea that everything is impermanent, but struggling because what we are witnessing now appears solid, permanent and unchanging. But if we let go of any idea whatsoever, lo and behold, what seems permanent and unchanging moves on in accordance with Dhamma.

The Buddha's message is that we should not hold on to the words of his teachings, not hold on to concepts, but go to the source itself, to the mind. Mindfulness is the doorway to the awareness that brings us to the present moment, so the mind can realize the truth of 'the way things are' without any intermediary, just like drinking fresh water at the source. Then 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. They are not what we truly are. So whenever the mind is flat, depressed, miserable, down, undisciplined, resistant, rebellious, childish, petty, silly, that is the time for practice, and then we will find that a moment of mindfulness will provide the energy we need. We might not experience this straightaway, but with experience we begin to trust that this is what will happen. As soon as there is mindfulness there is change, and when the perception of change appears it gives us the confidence, the faith to keep going, not to be fooled by the appearance of things.

Confidence brings stability of mind, concentration. When mindfulness increases, concentration is only a moment away. There's no need to go far away, read tons of books or remember all the teachings we have learned over the years; just one moment of mindfulness of 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. I think it was Ajahn Chah who said; '....We see ourselves clinging to good and bad, and we know it. We cling to good and know it's not the right practice, but we still can't let go. This is fifty percent or seventy percent of the practice already.' The path of awakening is like that – being able to know that our mistakes, our failures, the downsides of our life are part and parcel of the practice, not separate from it or a hindrance, but just the material we have to work with to realize the Dhamma. The mistakes and failures are the food that is digested through the practice and transforms our heart.

The Buddha is often compared to a physician of the mind. The Buddha is awareness, the knowing mind, and even the sickness of the mind is Dhamma. If the mind was not sick, we wouldn't need the physician. It's not that taking refuge in the Buddha will clear all our problems, but that then we can really start to do the work. We have awareness and a clear view of what is limiting us, burdening our heart, making our life miserable. When we see this, something in us perhaps recoils at the task ahead and says: 'I don't want to walk this path, it's too painful. I don't want to see too clearly. I just want to pray and hope for divine forces to clear all my kamma. I don't want to annihilate myself.' But that is not what the Buddha was teaching. We don't have to annihilate ourselves. We just need to see and understand ourselves as we are, and begin to relax and relate to ourselves more lightly, with ease, humour and humility. Our weak spots, the deficiencies of our mind and body, are the materials we need for transformation. We don't seek those problems, but when they arise we no longer see them as an obstacle in our way. We go to meet each experience with mindfulness, confidence, concentration, energy and wisdom, the faculties of the mind that begin to heal all our failings. We learn to let go, to stop clinging, grasping, complicating things.

Remember the mind is a trickster, like a stage magician. Mara, the delusion of our mind, is a trickster. If we have no awareness and wisdom, no sati-sampajañña, Mara will try to fool us again and again. It's extraordinary how it can trick us into believing things that have no connection with reality. Sometimes people believe Mara so much that they end up

destroying themselves, because Mara is the great destroyer. It doesn't want us to be enlightened, doesn't want us to be at peace. Mara destroys peace, destroys our confidence. Mara is not some kind of entity out there, but our own inability to see things the way they really are. The path of practice works through challenging, inquiring, investigating, learning to see the manifestations of our ignorance clearly. This path of awareness awakens and frees our heart from continuing to relate to ourselves in the mode of delusion. During this retreat we learned to come out of the delusion programme and enter the path of Dhamma, the path of awakening, which is not just another inner programme, but something in us that can observe those programmes for what they are, without being fooled by them. Some of our programmes are useful: for instance, to find our way from one place to another, or remember our room number or where to find our car after the end of the retreat. But a lot of them are useless, just blind habits.

We are very fortunate to be able to hear and recognize the Buddha's teaching, which is a true blessing in our lives. We can tap into our confidence and faith to keep walking this path. Even though there is nobody going, there is still moving forward and the heart is transformed. Since we are in a time-bound reality, the human realm, we have yesterday, today and tomorrow; we have to deal with time-bound situations and relate to them skilfully. Ajahn Amaro has said that we may be in the present, but we can also be aware of what is going on around us, not just counting

our breaths, oblivious of the circumstances in which we are living.

To sum up, remember that we particularly need the practice at times when we don't feel like doing it: when everything is going wrong, our life is falling apart, our family drives us mad, our boss and colleagues are sending us into a state of dementia. Those are the very situations when the practice is most useful, not just on retreat, but whenever the mind is about to explode or crack up! At those times the physician and the remedy are truly essential, the way out of the pain we experience. So call on the physician and the remedy at those moments. Don't forget them, don't get lost in the medicine cupboard of Buddhism; just use some of its simple remedies, completely natural treatment with no side-effects, but a sure way to long-term health.

OUR NATURE

We live in a world that is becoming increasingly complex, and we are more aware of the struggles, conflicts and wars that are taking place, not just close to us, but also as far away as the other side of the planet. It's interesting to reflect on how this affects us in our everyday life. A part of ourselves loves simplicity, peace, some kind of unity, and yet we have this experience of conflict, internal wars, external wars, this constant battle just to survive.

Many of us may come to meditation to resolve a certain degree of conflict, a certain degree of pain caused by resistance in ourselves. Buddhism teaches us that everything is constantly in a state of change, of flow, and that there is a way of looking at things that means we don't constantly need to breed conflicts. When we go to the root of the mind, we realize that from the very beginning there is already the seed of this duality between peace and conflict. We find ourselves struggling through life, and often spending a lot of money in the hope of resolving our inner inability to be at peace with ourselves. But just recognizing our fundamental malaise

might help us to stop struggling with the idea that we've got a problem, that there's something wrong with us, that we have to sort ourselves out and one day we'll be all right. That's a bit like wishing the seasons to stop, the clouds in the sky to stop moving or the rain to stop falling.

The process of understanding the Buddha's teaching is very important. We can understand it intellectually very quickly – it doesn't require a great degree of intelligence to think clearly that things are changing, things are painful. Once we come to a certain age, I don't think we need a lot of teaching about suffering. It's pretty easy to see suffering. A more difficult aspect of the Buddha's teaching is that actually there is no permanent entity that I can call 'me' around to experience all these things. That really throws us. I used to say to my teacher, 'It's amazing that we don't go completely crazy.' We are practising – some of we monks and nuns dedicate our lives to the practice – while being taught that in fact there's no one around to practise, no one to train; and yet we continue to put all this effort into living a life of training!' That's already a potential beginning of conflict between conventional reality and ultimate reality, insight and delusion, samsara (the eternal round of birth and death) and Nibbana, good and bad, happy and unhappy, black and white, big and small, and so on. This is a strange world!

In the teaching on *paticca-samuppāda*, the law of dependent origination, we learn how to recognize in our mind, from one stage to another, how suffering is created. There are twelve links in paticca-samuppāda, starting with ignorance and ending in dukkha. Some scholars have written extensively

about this subject, and when you read about it, it may seem extremely complex. Yet wisdom teachers like Ajahn Chah have a magical way of cutting through these complexities with their insight and experience. He said that the paticca-samuppāda process was simply like falling from a tree – you don't count how many branches there are as you go down, but when you hit the ground, it hurts, it's painful! My teacher Ajahn Sumedho, through his insights into this chain, talks about the first two links, usually translated into English as 'Ignorance (avijja) conditions mental formations (sankhara)', as 'Avijja complicates everything'. He explains how, through ignorance, we habitually start building up mental concoctions. We perceive something wrongly and we build up whole stories about it, stories upon stories, until someone explains that the first perception was wrong.

When you're in a state of ignorance, everything becomes complicated. People say to me, 'All these terrible things going on in the world, all these dreadful stories we hear about people being so awful to each other. What can we do, Sister?' I say, 'From my perspective, I think it's quite extraordinary that we don't hurt each other more often!' Once you know your mind and its forces, with the power of delusion, the power of anger, the power of your inner violence, you'll be amazed that you can exist without attacking others or finding something wrong with everybody and everything around you. So bearing in mind what people are doing and thinking all the time, it's quite miraculous that the world is in such good shape.

Of course, if each of us understood the source of delusion, instead of moaning and complaining out of habit and spending

millions of dollars trying to improve and understand the world, we could save a lot of lives and free ourselves and others from a lot of trouble. There is a sense of great relief when you start to know avijja from your own direct experience, when you get to know your mind's concoctions, your addiction to compounded things, and realize how they have led you to mistrust the heart itself, the heart of non-delusion – vijja, true knowledge, the heart of awakening, the heart of wisdom and compassion, the heart of truth.

The mind is very powerful, but are we aware of this? The state of ignorance is unawareness of the powers of one's own mind. On one side, the mind has the power of its greed, its hatred and its delusion. On the other side, it has its capacity to generate happiness in ourselves and the world we live in. When we feel angry or upset with someone and want to put them down in return for how they treated us, or when we undermine somebody because they have hurt or mistreated us, we use our power of anger and destruction without knowing it. When we truly know the suffering caused by that kind of power, we will want to improve ourselves, to be more peaceful, kinder. But do we know how to manifest the mind of non-conflict, peace, kindness and understanding, not just on the surface as a kind of mask conditioned by our social demands, our social etiquette and our greed, but through true understanding and insight into the suffering resulting from negative emotions? When we practise the Dhamma, we can understand that through ignorance we ourselves create the suffering caused by our conflict and our miseries. This does not mean thinking miseries are 'our' fault, 'our' responsibility

or ‘our’ problem – but we realize we are part of a long, long chain of events which are often quite beyond our control. Our responsibility lies in how we meet those events.

So where does the conflict in ourselves and the world stop? Are we even ready to stop it? Do we really want to stop it? Let’s ask ourselves. If we ask ourselves honestly, we might find that actually we like our conflict, chaos and delusion, that in many ways we find them quite exciting!

Delusion, the Buddha teaches, is not a curse. It’s part of nature. He tells us that by seeing it and understanding its cause, we can liberate ourselves from it. At one level, emotionally speaking, delusion is mostly more comfortable than awakening, so our comfort zone is often connected with our delusion, our tendency to fall asleep. Waking up, on the other hand, is uncomfortable; it often doesn’t follow the party line and is therefore quite startling. But once we know this, we can start looking at our comfort zone without being afraid to be uncomfortable.

When we are young, going against our parents or society can feel great. But to go against delusion, especially when we are more set in our ways, does not feel so great. To understand suffering and let it go, we have to have seen it at a deep level and be quite strong and determined. Sometimes Buddhism can be presented as another way of improving ourselves, so we smarten up delusion, cut off the rough edges and create a cosy little nest, something more adapted to ‘me’ and ‘my’ needs. But that doesn’t really fulfil the purpose of the practice, which is liberation, freeing the heart from delusion.

The practice asks for the wisdom of responding to our present situation by being 'here and now', instead of getting lost in dreaming and wishing to be somewhere or somebody else. This requires the qualities of mindfulness, trust, faith and the ability wherever we are to focus on what's going on in our mind as well as on things around us. When we are able to be fully present, we discover a very energizing ability to develop the mind in the present moment, regardless of the situation we are in, instead of getting lost in moaning and complaining, even though that can feel very comfortable emotionally.

When we find something in ourselves that is not in harmony with Dhamma, we can rejoice in the very fact that we can see that disharmony. We can even gain energy and momentum in our practice by just being awake to it, noticing it and applying the remedies we have. But often our most immediate reaction is to create another conflict – 'I shouldn't have been like this, I should have thought differently, I should do this, I should do that, I mustn't do this, if my mind behaved differently I could be a really good practitioner.' Instead we need to find a refuge in ourselves, and to be able to rest truly in that refuge, we have to experience it as reality. This is the place where the mind can see clearly and in accordance with Dhamma. Then the battle between Dhamma and avijja can cease, because we know we can rest and trust the clarity of this refuge. It can show us where to tap into wisdom and compassion, where we can see things from a new perspective, the perspective of here and now, and respond to life instead of just reacting to it.

The reason why we often lose contact with that refuge is that we keep churning out those old 'me' stories. 'Me' is not a curse, a swear-word or a bug we have caught. People sometimes talk about 'me', themselves, as if they had caught a 'me' disease. Once we see that 'me' is actually quite serviceable and can be used for a lot of very good purposes, we can start befriending it. It's like thought. Many people think, 'If I stop thinking I can do my meditation', or 'I've really moved forward – I've progressed because I don't think so much.' Indeed, that could be true. It's a possibility, but they could also have a completely wrong perspective on things by believing that the way forward is to suppress a great chunk of their life. Thinking is a tool to be used wisely.

We have to go back to our refuge. That's the safest place in ourselves, and it's not separate from life and its immense complexity, its immense madness, its chaos – what blinds us so often and so easily, drives us crazy, can be truly miserable or truly wonderful, nothing special or something truly fantastic. We can make it what we want. But until we understand the mind, we will still fall prey to the idea that life is a problem. Then we will be frightened of our own energies and the energies of others, and scared of our life force when it manifests. But when apprehended with the Dhamma, mindfulness and clear seeing, this life force is here to enlighten us, not to curse us. It's not a problem, in other words. As practitioners, we can begin to be extremely grateful to have something so close to us and so alive, to awaken us and lead us on the path to the heart's liberation from all suffering.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: One of the things you said, which I'm maybe misinterpreting, is that to end my delusion in order to make myself more comfortable is still a delusion. I can work on myself, I can work on my mind, I can change the patterns of my delusion, but the goal even within that is to make 'me' more comfortable. Isn't that still a delusion?

A: I hear what you say. Wanting to be more comfortable is not a delusion in itself, but if you attach to it, then it becomes a delusion because it will block your view, so that even when you receive comfort and happiness you won't be able to see them, because you'll be so busy clinging to your view.

I had an insight that was very helpful and very simple. Whatever we pick up – a glass, a microphone, my thoughts, anything – has two sides, good and bad, positive and negative. Almost everything you put your mind to can have positive and negative sides. This insight enabled me to stop being so opinionated about things and brought me much peace. You can write a book on the good aspects of something, and you can write a book on its destructive aspects. I didn't stop having views and opinions as a result of this insight. I still have some perception of how things are, and realize that I am committed to doing good, refraining from doing evil and liberating my heart, truths that I trust will still influence me in my response to a situation. But I also realized that my views and opinions can go by the wayside. They can just be dropped. I don't need them to tell me what is good and bad, because I know from experience. I know harming is unskilful. I know non-harming

is skilful. I know controlling people is not good. But do I really need a lot of views and opinions? No. I'm not saying you should be like that, but it was an interesting perspective – how do I respond to life's situations without my views and opinions? And that was the insight – I don't need them. I still have plenty of views and opinions about things, I can still churn them out if I want to, but they don't occupy my mind anymore. They leave it free, which is very nice as I no longer become really heated up about something and passionate in a way that can be destructive, as I used to do.

So I notice that there comes a time when we can respond to life from just the goodness that we are developing in our practice, our awareness of unskilfulness in ourselves and our life, and our understanding and knowledge of our own mind and heart. Then we will be able to know and respond immediately. We won't need to have books, stories, theories and a lot of ideas about things. The mind itself is very creative. If we let it be without stirring the soup of kilesas (defilements), delusion, it will help us. It will really serve us.

It's like what you might do if you meet a tiger. We can have lots of views and opinions about that, but if you actually met a tiger, you'd drop your views and opinions and just respond. It's amazing how you can respond in that sort of situation. In Thailand a king cobra came right up to my kuti (hut). Fortunately I had a window and my kuti was a bit raised up. But I was meditating when I heard a shriek, a very intense, high-pitched shriek. I thought somebody was killing somebody else. I was really startled. I looked through my window and saw a black snake with a little frog in its mouth.

I didn't think. I went to get a little piece of yellow candle and my mind just went 'Candle, drop, frog will be free.' It didn't 'think', it 'knew' – free the frog with a candle. There were just actions. I don't know how to shoot things or aim very well. But I dropped the candle, and I knew it had to fall on the head of the snake, otherwise it wouldn't work. It had to be right on the head. So I dropped the candle exactly onto the snake's head, and the frog jumped out of its mouth. I didn't have any views and opinions. In fact, if I had had any, I would probably have missed the head.

Q: But in freeing the frog the snake went hungry. You denied it its meal. The snake is also a being that needs to be fed.

A: That's right. I could be reborn into a difficult situation with the snake in the next life... but I'll have a jolly good time with the frogs!

Q: You were talking about trusting in our nature as Dhamma. From a scientific point of view, nature is random entanglement at the sub-atomic level and everything is chaos, but within the chaos there is order. In the universe things are destroyed and created, things die and are born, and so forth. It's all inter-connected, with checks and balances. We're all atoms, so understanding the nature of atoms is in itself understanding 'being', so to speak. Doesn't that mean looking at things from the point of view that everything is just energy, and accepting that this is our nature, rather than saying, 'I

shouldn't be like this' and 'I should be like that'? Actually, that's the way it is.

A: That's right! In fact, I think I discovered the law of chaos in myself! I didn't know anything about this law, but when I heard about it I became very interested and read about it. The idea of being waves touched upon by many other waves resonated with my meditation experience. We create. This is what the Buddha said. We create stories about 'I am the wave' and 'There are good waves and bad waves,' and 'There are big waves and small waves.' And then we want a big wave when we've got a small one, and we want a little one when we've got a big one. It's endless. That's what it is about – creating new waves out of delusion, which is just me being frightened of the waves.

REALITY IS HERE AND NOW

Today is the half-moon day, a traditional day in the Buddhist calendar, during which we are encouraged to spend time more quietly and to return to the simplicity that forms the real basis of our life. Right now we are going through a period that feels a bit like going through the trough of a wave after the high energy of the Kathina season during which people travel each week from one monastery to another. Kathina is a traditional alms-giving ceremony at the end of the Vassa (the Rains Retreat). It's a time of gathering, celebrating and seeing old friends – some monastics even visit from different parts of Europe. Now we are moving towards calming down, in harmony with the winter season when nature returns to a quieter mode.

We too are part of nature, but do we feel that sense of inner quietening down? Or do we still feel in 'spring' mode, perhaps pressurizing ourselves to keep getting excited or distracting ourselves from the natural flow of things? Most of us are influenced by and sensitized to this natural flow, but we may

find a force within us that resists it and can cause us problems. This force within us is like the weather. It can be bright and pleasant, but is quite powerful and often beyond our control. Weather forecasters can tell us all the facts and figures on why a cloud is going this way or the wind is going that way, but the weather can still change completely unexpectedly, despite all the forecasters' observations and expectations. And as we may have noticed, a lot of our life too is mostly beyond our control. This can be a great source of suffering for us because we can feel unable to deal with this chaotic and uncontrollable reality. When we first try to control our mind, we may notice that it can react like an animal and start growling and rebelling.

The force that we experience in ourselves to which we react so eagerly is also a part of our life that we find rather exciting. Have you noticed how we love that world of reactivity, the extremes of the mind – I like, I don't like, I love that, I hate her, I hate this, I want, I don't want, etc? This may be a simplistic way of expressing it, but we can easily add the stories of our lives and our individual scenarios to these particular desires which for many people tend to be a habitual way of thinking. It is not easy to move towards a more balanced and wise response to life unless we see clearly the suffering of those extremes.

So why do we study the mind? Is it to pacify it and avoid the realities of life? Is it to see clearly what makes it move and react? Is it to free it from the confusion of our conditioning? When we react or misunderstand, what is happening within ourselves or in our surroundings? A whole chain reaction

can take place, creating stories after stories, worlds after worlds out of nothing. It's quite amazing. Maybe we could name it our human mini-Big Bang of creation. Much of our practice is simply to witness the creations of our mind and the melodrama that we call 'ourselves', 'me', and see deeply into their nature. Even though they all have in common the qualities of impermanence, insatisfactoriness, and selflessness, it's really hard to let go of these inner melodramas which can be so exciting, so much more exciting than letting go and discovering peace, so much more fun. We quite like ourselves and our little universe of 'me', 'mine' – we can be quite attached to our personal universe, though sometimes we might be totally unaware of this. This is where I find the directness of the Buddhist teaching so helpful. It hurts? Let's double-check – are we clinging to something? It's painful? – Let's double-check – are we attached to what causes our pain? It's amazing how simple and direct this process of recognition is, how immediate, here and now.

Intellectually, we can very quickly understand the Buddhist teaching on suffering and the end of suffering. We can be receptive , especially when the mind is relatively calm, clear and open to hear the words of the Buddha. We can even feel very inspired by the teachings. But when we're not in that particular kind of mood, and instead perhaps feeling dispirited, angry, upset, depressed, it's a little more difficult to see clearly where these inspiring words of the Buddha are guiding us. We can feel confused. What is the teaching guiding us towards? The teaching is giving us a framework to begin to look at the mind as it is and to train it towards a way

of skilfulness and wisdom. This guidance is needed especially when the mind is unruly, rebellious, unkind and forgetful. When we are plunged into a tumultuous sea of emotions, perceptions, memories, of 'me and my stories', and caught up in waves of complexities, we can even lose sight of what it is that brought us and attracted us to Buddhism in the first place.

The teaching can remain a conceptual experience, and at some level feel quite satisfactory. The Buddha's words are inspiring and we can remain at that level of inspiration, but let's ask ourselves, is it transforming our mind? Concepts and ideas may bring a bit of peace to the heart; we can feel a momentary sense of relief that the Buddha's words echo our own understanding and his teaching resonates in us. Yet, when we commit ourselves more seriously to this path of practice, whether as a monk, a nun or a layperson, this level of inspiration is limited and superficial. We may intellectually understand something more clearly for a little while, but without a sustained looking into the workings of the mind, our understanding can't go very deep. It does not reach the point of liberating insight, the point of profound transformation.

I think the search for peace is really what brings many of us to Amaravati. Of course, those who have lived here long enough realize that Amaravati is as human a place as anywhere else, with its turmoil and chaos, difficult relationships, unkindness, jealousy, etc. The human world goes on whether we're at Amaravati or in the middle of London, but here we train ourselves to develop a different kind of relationship to

it. It's a relationship that is guided by the Buddhist teaching, with its training in mindfulness focused on the mind and the heart. It's not just about doing what I want. Not just saying whatever I want. Not just getting what I want. Not just speaking unkindly and heedlessly as I want or as my habits decide, but it's about being guided by the principles of mindfulness, kindness, renunciation and contentment described in the Buddhist teachings. When we feel calm and happy, when we're more at peace with ourselves, we may be quite capable of not doing just what we want and instead doing what is kind and helpful. At those moments we may not appreciate fully appreciate the importance of the training. But when we're not in our wisest, calmest, kindest or most generous mood that's when the need for training becomes apparent.

Our mind is a bit like a wild beast and that beast needs to be trained. In the Zen tradition it's called 'taming the Bull'. At first the bull is unruly and doesn't want to be led where it's supposed to go, it keeps resisting, but little by little, with guidance, patience and willingness, it begins to let itself be tamed. The mind is just like that. Early on in my training I noticed that as soon as I told my mind, 'Just be here and now', it would say, 'No'. And the human mind is clever; it is not just blatantly unruly and rebellious, but it's good at finding easy excuses to distract itself from the reality of the present moment – let's call a friend, read a book or have a drink; let's do something else!

Because we have these tendencies, the Buddha defined the threefold training for the heart/mind quite clearly as

ethics, meditation and wisdom (sila, samadhi, *paññā*). Perhaps when we read the description of the Noble Eightfold Path it seems simple at first. We may think we can manage not to lie, for example. We read a definition of Right Speech as not slandering, not backbiting, not gossiping, not indulging in useless speech, and we think we can manage to do that. We may come to the monastery with noble intentions about not gossiping, backbiting, slandering or swearing at other people. Then after a few days, a few weeks, or a few months, we eventually meet the part of ourselves which truly needs to be trained, but may appear not one bit interested in being noble, not one bit interested in being compassionate and kind, but instead thinks, 'It's me, mine. I'll do what I want. Don't tell me what to do, I am in charge of 'ME'.' We eventually meet the beast that resists the training.

So this is our work, and a monastery is not just a peaceful, quiet, angelic realm. It's a realm of meditation to train and liberate the heart from its miseries of self-delusion. We are conscious that as long as there is suffering, there is a need for training. We may sometimes forget that. In the spiritual life it's very easy to think of the path in terms of developing a sense of well-being, happiness, love, friendship. If we enter the training with a lot of personal opinions about how it should be, we will be in a very difficult situation. The training intensifies the fire of greed, hatred and delusion and requires a certain amount of surrender. The practice of sila, restraint and meditation shows us the way of skilfulness, yet our habits often show us another way, 'my way'. When we are mindful of our habitual responses to life and stop following them, the

fire of our defilements can become really hot, and a great part of the training is about how to handle this heat. Most of us have a difficult time handling it. Sometimes it can feel very hard, too hard. It can cause deep inner struggles. Things inside us grate against each other like two flintstones rubbed together to make a fire.

Yet the training is also focused on nurturing happiness in our mind/heart and life. When we look at the stages of the Noble Eightfold Path (virtue, meditation and wisdom) it is clear that this is a path of skilfulness, a path of kindness and compassion, a path of respect towards ourselves and others. It's clearly a path that leads us to a happier life, despite the struggles we encounter: the heat, the fear, the doubts, the confusion, the despair that we can experience as we enter a deeper level of the mind.

Sometimes in monastic life there are periods when we may feel depressed as we go through a loss of identity, leaving behind what we know, the familiar or what is comfortable. As we let go of the past our response is to feel a sense of grief and loss. It is a very natural thing and a very human tendency. I don't think that trees have the ability to proliferate on the idea that something whose nature is to change should not change. Can you imagine a tree contemplating the loss of all its leaves every autumn and feeling depressed about it? We'd have a lot of depressed trees around, wouldn't we? Can you imagine the beauty of spring, and all those colourful natural creations suddenly being depressed because they are going through changes? That'd be pretty miserable. Indeed, we love nature because it follows its nature.

But for us as conscious human beings, it is obvious that we are in a realm of suffering. We are able to think, we are able to choose, we are able to create our world for better or for worse. We're creators ourselves. Flowers and trees don't have many choices, but we do, and that's where dukkha can arise. We can feel very confused by the many choices that present themselves to us, and we can easily make the wrong choice. But in reality we can be sure that when we identify with the path of delusion, anger and greed, we end up following a path of misery. If we have practised long enough we will have absolutely no doubt of this. Of course, sometimes we can't control the habits that lead us down the path of misery. It just happens, and unless we begin to take refuge in awareness we don't even know it's happening. That refuge of seeing, knowing, mindfulness, awareness, is our mirror, the part of us that is not caught up in the habit world. The habit world is often quite blind, because it's mixed up with our attachments to the positive and the negative aspects of our mind. They're all mixed together like clothes in a tumble-dryer. Sometimes we don't know where things begin and end, or we become lost in this mix of mood and feeling, loving, wanting to be good, kind, and then feeling submerged by selfish and evil desires. If we can stop for a moment, be present to what is happening, we can just watch and experience the tumbling effect without being part of it. If we can do this, even for just a second, we can suddenly let go of that chaotic movement of the mind.

That's what Amaravati is about. It's a place of letting go and taking refuge in the present moment. It's a place

that keeps reminding us of the treasures inherent in this awakened awareness.

So to go back to the fire of training, any monk or nun will at some point experience it. I am sure that it can be experienced in lay life too, but for monastics it's particularly focused, and it can intensify when our intention of training the mind is strong. And even if we lose sight of that intention for a few days, it is still there and the flintstones of the heart continue to rub against each other.

It's wonderful to look at the personality we're living with and realize that it doesn't need to be endlessly maintained. As long as we are identified with that personality we will feel a yo-yo, up and down feeling of happiness or unhappiness. This identification brings a perception of duality, of me and others, interior and exterior. We can be so attached to this reality that we don't even know there is another way of being. We can be so identified with the illusion of being in charge that this yo-yo feeling seems to be very much part of our control mechanism. But though we think we control it, we don't; it's just happening to us. The training helps us to realize this more and more clearly.

Training in the Buddhist teaching is not itself another control mechanism. I suppose that's why it's such an attractive path. It does not need to create another 'controller'. Through understanding and insight, the pain of ignorance is released from the heart. We don't need to create a person training to be a good or a wise one. We just need to be mindful and know the result of our actions. Are they miserable, are they happy? This simple but clear realization leads naturally to the

transformation and the freeing of our mind/heart. We don't need to be very clever to know that.

But it takes a lot of energy, strength and courage to continue being committed to seeing, rather than becoming this or that, or rejecting this or that, or wanting ourselves or others to be different. Habitually we tend to focus on others. After a while, we may feel quite good about ourselves and start looking at others' faults. Especially if we consider ourselves as 'real practitioners', it's very easy to want to sort everybody else out and forget looking at our own mind. Have you noticed how much easier it is to notice somebody else's slanderous speech or gossiping tendencies, feeling – 'Oh, I'm so sorry for them, maybe I should go and talk to them and teach them how they should speak, teach them about Right Speech.' But we forget about looking at ourselves. That's the phenomenon of avijja, ignorance, when we can be aware of everybody's shortcomings except our own.

So this training is the work in which we are engaged in the monastery. It's very quiet here. We don't have big banners announcing what's going on; the beauty of this work is that it happens quietly. Sometimes we don't even know we're changing and being transformed through this life, because the training can be inconspicuous. Once Ajahn Sumedho said 'You know, when we're really mindful we have to be prepared to look a bit stupid or clueless.' Sometimes we can look foolish because when we're mindful we stop showing the world how much we know and how clever we are. We stop responding in a tit-for-tat manner, showing other people that we know

better than them. Perhaps we are aware how foolish they are, but we don't say so, or we may know better than they do, but we don't show it. So we can look a bit foolish in the eyes of others!

This takes us back to simply questioning why we're here and what the training entails – knowledge, understanding, struggle, making peace with the struggle, feeling confused, resistance, release. Does the training mean continuously beating ourselves into shape or making ourselves somebody other than we are? Are we trying so hard that we eventually give up and lose heart because we've have pushed ourselves too far? What motivates us to train is seeing clearly the need for training. We can't train just as an idea, that doesn't work. We have to see that there is a real need to train. When this happens, our heart understands and is moved to feel compassion for the suffering it creates and experiences.

There are times when we lose sight of why we are here and what the training is about. We can feel confused as to what we are supposed to do. Let's go back to the question – why am I here? Am I here to carry on being miserable or to be happier? What kind of happiness am I looking for? The training's a tall order. It asks us to be really congruent with our understanding. It doesn't ask us to damp everything down, but just to be more aware of the directions we have decided to follow in our life. And it's not a straight line. In fact, it can move in zigzags. Sometimes we want to train, sometimes we don't; sometimes we hate this life, sometimes we love it. Sometimes we lose track, we don't know where we

are anymore; and sometimes we feel very clearly that we are going somewhere. It's not a straight line, but in the present moment we're not going anywhere, and this is our refuge in mindfulness. Taking refuge in the here and now is part of the amazing simplicity of training in the Buddhist teaching. We are not going anywhere, but the heart still develops and is transformed.

RESTING IN AWARENESS

Many of us have come here to study the mind, its nature and contents, and to try to come to some understanding of ourselves in the perspective of the Buddha's enlightenment. This means not just believing in what the Buddha said and taught, but realizing for ourselves what he describes in his teachings. Sometimes the practice is expressed in stages. The *pariyatti* stage is the study stage where we make use of our intellectual understanding. We use words and concepts, we remember things, and we study the texts. This is an important level for understanding the conceptual framework of the Buddha's teaching such as what he actually means by dukkha, anicca, kamma and so on. Then there is the level of *patipatti* meaning 'practice' or meditation. And the third level is called pativedi, and that's the level of insight, realization, of purification. This is the level of transformation when the mind lets go of layers of delusion, anger and greed.

It's important to remind ourselves of these three levels. In the Western world, where education is available to most people, we very often go into an overdrive of thinking

and reading, maybe without even realizing it. But in my generation of monks and nuns, at least for the first few years of training, although we were not forbidden to read, reading was definitely considered a lesser practice. There was a kind of inverse snobbery about it. Those who read a lot were considered not to be ones who really practised. That wasn't always true, but there was a sense that if you were focused on reading you were not really practising.

It's through practice that we begin to let go of our concepts and ideas, and as we let go of them we may easily feel as if we're turning into a kind of vegetable. We have to be very patient with that stage. When we feel we're losing the identity bound up with our conceptual world, there's a sense of grief, of loss. We don't quite know what's happening. But this is what this monastery is really for, to enable us to reach pativedi, the level of realization.

In practice we enter a place within ourselves that at times can be frightening. We get in touch with aspects of the mind which we can't really contact when we keep on being attached to thinking. If we stay identified with our thoughts, we can't really see them for what they are: anicca, dukkha, anatta. As we meditate we may hear our thoughts clearly, but as soon as we get off the meditation cushion, we start believing in many of them again. We easily get caught up again in the stories, the identities, our views and opinions, and so on. It's easy because they are our most basic assumptions about ourselves, they're what we think we are, and so we all fall into the trap again and again. We can spend a whole human lifetime just

watching how we keep on creating our world by holding on to our thoughts, emotions, perceptions and memories; holding on to the past and fearing the future.

Thinking about the future is what most societies encourage us to do today. There's nothing terribly unethical about it, except that thought is not reality. A thought is like a cloud passing through the mind. It's not what reality is really about. When we believe our thoughts we are easily reduced to a very small world that feels unsatisfactory and painful. It's miserable to reduce the mind to just a train of thoughts. When you let the mind be as it really is, you realize it has another aspect, another life that is much freer, more creative and fearless. That fearless mind doesn't worry about the unknown, and it can face seeing itself as it is. We often ignore this aspect of the mind because we spend a lot of time thinking about our ideals, pondering how we 'should' think, wondering what kind of train of thought we 'should' have. At the pariyatti level we can study long lists of skilful and unskilful mental states. If we believe in those concepts and think that we should not get angry, we should not be jealous, and so on, we forget that practice is not about judging what's going on in the mind, but seeing those states as impermanent, unsatisfactory and empty of solid entity. The practice is about developing what the Buddha calls Right View, seeing things clearly as they are.

In our practice we can spend a lot of energy trying to rearrange our reality so that it fits perfectly into our conceptual framework, rather than seeing things as they really are.

There's nothing wrong with rearranging reality. We can just notice this tendency, with no particular need to judge it. But whenever our reality doesn't fit that intellectual framework, we fear we'll lose the world we have created, that we'll lose our image. That's the biggest fear, isn't it? How many of us carry an image of what we should be around with us? It may be an image of any kind, including the Buddhist image. But even trying to be a good Buddhist can turn into an obstacle, because Buddhism is not about becoming something, creating somebody, or having a Buddhist persona. The Buddhist teaching is about letting go. It's about disenchantment with delusion, disenchantment with the deluded mind. Many of us are frightened of that disenchantment, because we need to be strong to face looking at ourselves in a less pleasant light. It's not particularly pleasant to look at jealousy or envy, or to have to witness our negative or critical feelings. In fact, it's sometimes quite ugly. And of course, the more idealistic we are, and the more we believe our thoughts, the more unbearable it is to have to observe these negative feelings – until we realize fully that the mood itself is only a shadow passing through consciousness, and consciousness doesn't have to identify with anything.

As long as we cling to any states of brightness or negativity in the mind, or any quality of the mind, we still haven't let go. It's as simple as that. And yet many of us are attached to being a certain way. We may not be able to observe negativity because we think that if we look at our negativity for too long we might fall ill or become a negative person. The reflective

mind is our refuge, our real home that which enables us to let go and rest in the reality of now, of things as they are. Nothing else feels real in the same way. Anything else feels very fleeting, very unstable or completely unreal – like a dream, a shadow life. The most real thing is the capacity to rest in awareness, to stay there in the face of change.

It's really important to begin to feel comfortable with that reflective mind, because through its mirror-like quality, it has the amazing power of letting us know what's going on inside us. We're not just helpless creatures lost in our thoughts and perceptions; we have the ability to reflect them back, to use them to understand ourselves better and to let go. If we didn't really see the objects that come up in the mind, we wouldn't know what letting go is about. The objects of our mind are often referred to as our teachers. They teach us anicca (impermanence), for example, the anicca of thought, the anicca of perception, the anicca of any identity we carry around. But because our world is so close to us, so dear and important, it has such meaningful value for us, very often we don't have perspective. We don't have enough space between the mind and what it reflects back.

We must never forget that the path is simply the mind itself. The path is not the world of heaven or hell, the world of creations and so on. When we're aware of our mind, we're aware of the path. A famous Thai Forest Ajahn described the Four Noble Truths in a most profound and direct way:

The mind that goes out is the cause of Dukkha (samudaya, the cause of suffering)

The result of the mind that goes out is Dukkha (dukkha, suffering)

The mind seeing the mind is the Path (Magga, the path leading to the end of suffering)

The result of the mind seeing the mind is the cessation of Dukkha (Nirodha, the cessation of suffering)

The Fourth Noble Truth is the mind seeing the mind – magga, the path. When we study the Noble Eightfold Path, we find eight links: Right view, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. We can study the details of each link, but at the level of practice and meditation, seeing the mind is the Path.

When we practise, we notice that things become simpler. At the study level, the conceptual level, everything becomes more complicated because we are back into words and concepts. It's important to have knowledge of that level, because it's like a map and we need to have a clear map. But then we must use the map to walk. Our meditation practice becomes the walking path. We're actually walking through the mind, and that is the interesting aspect. We are not here to read books endlessly and find out whether what they say corresponds to the reality of our mind's experience. We are here to dismantle structures of the ego. We are here to let go of what we think we are, to abandon the structure that created this 'me' in the first place. We may not be very successful at it

a lot of the time, but we learn to make it clear in ourselves, and that is very helpful, especially at times when life is difficult.

Most of us here want to practise and let go of our suffering. Who wants to hang on to suffering? But when we hit the limits of our mind, when we hit a part of ourselves that needs to go, that hurts a lot. As long as we don't see our limits we can feel quite comfortable. But when we see the walls we create because of our fears, it really seems as if we're in a prison, and yet it's painful to let go.

So a lot of the path of practice deals not just with getting things right or developing the factors of the path, such as Right Effort, Right Concentration and Right Mindfulness in our meditation. A big chunk of it is facing those times on the path when we are letting go and stepping into the unknown.

Abandoning our old self-identity can bring much grief, and also sometimes a lot of anger. It's not that there's something wrong with us, but we sometimes wonder why we feel so angry, so depressed, so filled with grief. This can be just a manifestation of the abandoning of greed, hatred and delusion. Or it can be the result of abandoning personal things – abandoning the past, abandoning things we've loved, not judging whether they're right or wrong, but just abandoning them. Reactions to the process of detachment can manifest in really strange ways, even silly ones. For months in the early years at Chithurst I felt very greedy and wanted to reduce the amount of food I was eating, but as soon as I saw a piece of pizza in my alms bowl, it was – oh, no, I can't give that up, that might be the last time I have a piece of pizza. It felt almost

like dying – dying to something stupid like a piece of pizza, even though we would still have pizza for years on end. That can seem ridiculous. We want to give up greed, hatred and delusion, we've read all the books on them, and all the books that say we should be kind and loving and compassionate – and then the thought of giving up a piece of pizza turns into a death sentence! Our fear of letting go can sometimes manifest regarding very mundane things, things that we think we could never miss. But those mundane things are really just external manifestations of fear. Mara, the delusion of our mind, will sometimes make the mind grasp at the most stupid things to stop us from letting go, like a pizza. How stupid. We're somebody on the path, on the way to liberation, and we can't let go of a piece of pizza. Doesn't that sound ridiculous?

Instead of allowing the mind to let go, relax and abandon things that don't need to be hung onto, our conceptual framework can often complicate matters. Sometimes we can easily miss the point through thinking too much about the practice, because then we complicate a process that needs simplicity. Our path of practice is about going back to basics. Ajahn Sumedho constantly helps us to go back to basics. What's happening right now? Why did I come to the monastery? What brought me here? Do I choose to be here? Do I want to be here? But if I don't want to be here, where do I want to be?

There is a need to empower ourselves in our choice to be here. Mara will constantly undermine and weaken our determination to practise, and make us tremble at the thought of letting go. Mara will show you the thing you want to let go

of as the dearest thing in the world, something you can never live without. But ask yourself: what am I here for? Am I here just to continue to study as if it were a university? I could do that, but maybe there are better universities than Amaravati and better courses on Buddhism. Am I here for that? Or am I here to do something that only a Buddhist monastery like Amaravati can offer right now? Let's ask ourselves what this monastery offers that is different from a university, a classroom, a job. What is it about this place that is so special that people are attracted to it? Are we here to feel right, to feel good, to feel this or that? Or are we here to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the nature of the mind, beyond the conceptual framework that holds the world in place? If I believe my ideas, then they tend to hold my world in place and be very powerful. We can create our world just like that – a hell world, a happy world, a chaotic world, a friendly world, a miserable world. Of course, for many years until we are less identified with our mind, we ourselves are just created by what goes on in it. Even if we might not be able to create much, we're still victimized by our own mind. But we don't have to let ourselves be victims. It's not necessary.

In our meditation practice we look at life as it manifests inwardly. We can see situations that took place this morning, or yesterday, or ten years ago. We can see the feelings that remain from residues of the past, and from the present as well. We can learn a lot of information about the way we respond to life and the residues of our actions. The clearer the mirror, the clearer we are, the more we become aware of what manifests within. And then we have the external world, our

everyday life, our interaction with people and the situations of our daily life. This mirrors something else – or what seems to be something else, but actually, the more we practise, the more we realize that what manifests externally mirrors what's going on internally. Once you understand this it's a lot easier to deal with life, because you see very clearly that the world which arises in ourselves is what manifests externally. Until we see this we may feel we don't have many choices, but the more clearly we see it, the easier it is to transform our life for the better, so that we can be a little kinder, a little bit more helpful to ourselves and other people, a little more readily generous.

The more at peace with ourselves we are, the more we find that the heart responds to life. It's amazing how this happens, it's quite extraordinary. That's a beauty of the human heart. Once we begin to let go and begin to come to the point of not attaching to our greed, our hatred and our delusion, we stop identifying with the mind's contents. Those contents may persist, the negative ones don't go away, they still keep arising; but because we're not so attached we can allow a lot of space between them and the awareness of our mind, which through experience is basically kind, loving, caring, generous, wanting to give the best to life.

We're about to begin our three-month winter retreat. Many people have already come to support the monastic community, and soon we'll be coming to the end of the work period. Hopefully we won't have too many burst pipes or the sounds of too many fire alarms, and it will be a time of tranquillity and quiet. We used to call it the holiday of the

heart. I personally look forward to the retreat, and the time of doing formal practice and disengaging from any need to justify any activities. When we're on retreat it's more difficult to convince ourselves that we've got to do this and that and keep the mind busy. We can actually start letting go and relaxing. It's a very special period, and we realize more and more the preciousness of participating in this winter retreat. It's a unique opportunity. In how many places in the world can you just basically stop, be completely dead to the world, let it go, disengage? It's quite an amazing thing. This is what Amaravati can offer, and it's so precious and rare.

This time of retreat is really a time of balancing all the factors of our practice, learning a certain amount of discipline. There's the structure of the monastery, the structure of the daily instruction, but within that discipline, and within the restraint of our training, it's really vital to be reminded to approach this retreat programme with gentleness and kindness to oneself. We can easily get into a competitive mode – 'I'm going to be the most enlightened person after three months,' or 'I'm going to crack it after three months!' Our mind may be full of thoughts about these three months and the many projects we've already planned for our meditation during that time. It's easy to get involved in a project, but being able to learn to use the structure, relax, and develop a heart of kindness within it gives a balance of gentleness, of yielding, while at the same time upholding the Dhamma.

So this is the challenge for all of us: to have a strong discipline and yet a soft mind, a gentle approach, a kind attitude. That's not something we get right straightaway.

Sometimes we have difficult situations in life which we can no longer tolerate. We feel impatient, restless, agitated, and instead of coming back to the still point and awareness, our mind struggles, trying to find a way out. It's really amazing how, instead of mirroring what's happening and reflecting from that still place within ourselves, we become agitated and restless. But at some point our meditation must stop being just a 'cushion practice'. At any time of the day we are able to stop and ask ourselves what's happening. Rather than getting caught up into our mind and body stories, can we be aware of what's happening and what we're feeling at any given moment?

Everything we encounter in the monastery is a teacher and a teaching. Sometimes everything here can look wretched and miserable. The people who inspired us stop inspiring us. The people we felt were great we now find boring. If we relied on them for our spiritual life or our path, we wouldn't go very far. We'd probably have to leave the monastery within a few months. But when we start using those situations to reflect on Dhamma, on the nature and contents of the mind, it becomes fun. We become independent, we don't have to have the external world satisfying us all the time or giving us what we want. In fact, we start really enjoying it when we don't get what we want. It's fun. We can watch our mind reacting, being really upset and becoming angry and restless. That's when we can liberate restlessness. How are you going to liberate restlessness if you don't experience it? If you don't stay still and completely centred observing restlessness when you're doing vipassana practice, when are you going to see it?

We can remind ourselves what an opportunity this is. If somebody bores us to tears, we can tell ourselves that this person is at least teaching us about boredom. And we can thank them (we don't have to do it out loud). That's how life becomes alive here. If we don't seize these opportunities, if we constantly wait for the perfect conditions, the perfect teaching, that's being dead. That might sound a bit strong, but we've got nothing else to work with except these opportunities. So if somebody makes us feel stupid, quietly say, 'Thank you. I can experience feeling stupid. Am I identifying with feeling stupid? Am I really stupid? Is stupidity me? I'm watching stupidity, what does it feel like? Ah, that's interesting. It's gone. How interesting. I was feeling stupidity five minutes ago and now it's gone.' Do the same with anger. When somebody makes you angry you may think that's wrong, that you've got to settle things with that person, calm down and be at peace, because we assume meditation is about tranquillity and we're not supposed to be angry in Buddhism, we should be compassionate and kind. That's how we so often end up rearranging ourselves and other people. We want other people to be kind to us, but we don't realize that only we can stop ourselves feeling our own anger, we don't have to wait for other people to do it for us. Indeed, we might have to wait a long, long time for that.

I'm very grateful to my teacher for having reminded me that when things get difficult, we need to be patient, to bear gently with the difficulties of those periods. It's better to go through periods like that with a kind heart, rather than resentment and an 'I'm going to make it' attitude. We can let

ourselves be really vulnerable. That doesn't necessarily feel good for the ego, which hates that sort of thing. It doesn't want to be vulnerable and helpless, it wants to be strong and empowered. If we listen to our mind, we'll know it's thinking 'I' all the time. It's always saying: 'I want to do this', 'I', 'I', and 'I'. 'I'm going to do this' and 'I'll do that tomorrow.' We swim in this 'I' of reality, and most of the time, instead of reflecting and being mindful of it, we believe it. We take it very seriously, instead of resting and allowing the mind that is not caught in 'I' and 'me' to manifest. But if we allow our awareness to manifest, something so much more alive emerges. We can still get caught in 'I' again and again, but at least we can see the difference. When we listen to those stories in our mind, we wonder, 'Who is speaking here? Is it somebody I have any control over, or is it somebody real? Who is talking to me?' It's important to listen to this 'I', because sometimes we obtain a lot of good information about what's going on in our mind. We may think, 'I am a loving, caring, tender, gentle person', but when we listen to our mind we hear, '... and he did this, and she did that, grrrrrrrrrrr', raging inside. We thought we were on the path of kindness, love and compassion, but then we discover all these voices of anger inside us.

So it's worth knowing that when we find the world we live in irritating, it very often has to do with the fact that we are dealing with feeling upset within ourselves. It's not that there's anything wrong with being upset. Life is a major upsetting experience a lot of the time: We don't know where we're going or where we came from, life is very uncertain and sometimes seems totally meaningless. Making peace with this

fact is quite hard. But it's important to recognize that what manifests externally is often connected to what is happening within us. The two are not separate, and to realize that is very empowering because then we can take full responsibility for it, and our practice becomes even more meaningful. The world may feel totally meaningless, life might have no meaning to it, but we know that what goes on within us can manifest externally and this means that we have to be very responsible.

Like anyone else we are drawn to leading a happy life. None of us wants to be unhappy. We all want to be happy. If we feel miserable and depressed and identify with that, it's very difficult to detach from that state – and if we don't, we have made a miserable world. So if we want a happy heart, a happy world, it's our responsibility to make that happen.

Being happy is not the aim of our lives, but a foundation of happiness is important to be able to continue to let go of attachment. We need to have some inner strength and happiness is part of that strength.

May you have strength, clarity and happiness in your practice during this winter retreat.

THE BENEFITS OF PRACTICE

Tonight I have not prepared a talk. Instead I'm offering you a nice blank page. Wouldn't it be great if we could all start the day with a blank page, if we could start the day with space to follow our hearts, and not an agenda or a 'must-do' list? Most of you have a lot of plans, activities and demands on your lives, and your energy can be sapped in trying to balance and make sense of it all.

We are exposed day in and day out to the media, which show us the world's problems. You don't really need to be told that the world is unsatisfactory. You already know that. And yet, have you noticed how we project our attention outwards again and again? The world we are part of is intent on deluding us, intent on convincing us that the problem is out there – completely and forcefully intent on that. And so we forget where the world begins.

The desire (called *tanha*) to experience pleasant sensory experiences is actually painful, because pleasant sensory experiences will always be ephemeral and therefore contain the seeds of dissatisfaction. We can blithely and heedlessly

pursue those desires, but eventually we discover the truth, that it's not really working. We want to be happy with having all the good things in the world, but then we do not want to lose them. Billboards are a great metaphor for this. Billboards can be seen as a high training in developing awareness of the Five Hindrances. Just keep looking at billboards and you become an expert on restlessness, doubt, worry, fear, agitation, and wanting more – disliking the last fridge that you bought six months ago and wanting a new one, hating your old car that you bought two years ago and wanting that beautiful new brand of car. And with the wanting comes the fear of loss. It's a time of recession. Our bank accounts are going down. We aren't able to pay the mortgage. We all have reasons to be worried. We can make such a good case for being continuously worried and anxious, confused and chaotic, depressed, lonely – the list can be long.

Most of us would not be here if we hadn't already discovered that there is a limit to how much happiness, fulfilment and joy we can cultivate in the conditioned, impermanent world. We have come to the uncomfortable realization that the world as it is cannot be our refuge. The fulfilment of a human being does not lie in perfecting the worldly life. That is an impossibility and we only become frustrated when we try. If we set our sights on finding refuge in worldly conditions and cannot see that there are other choices, more fruitful options, we imprison ourselves, with little space or ability to see clearly. We have a sense that something is not quite right, but we cannot put our finger on the problem.

If we do not take advantage of the Dhamma teachings available to us, we can spend years being quite happily, joyfully deluded. It's not that easy to detect delusion, because it can be linked to a felt sense of emotional comfort. We are satisfied with holding onto the desire to become something, or we are comfortable holding onto familiar states of denial and aversion. We are emotionally happy acquiring things, or even getting rid of things. We falsely fulfil ourselves with innumerable cravings that capture our citta (the mind/heart). Pursuing this path of comfort inevitably invites frustration, fear, and anxiety, because our true happiness is not there.

At this point we can begin investigating vipassana meditation, which teaches the skills of practice, the skills of dealing with the mind at a conventional level. Fortunately, we're living in a time when there is ready access to teachings, teachers and resources to help us realize, in modern terms, what the Buddha taught: the unsatisfactoriness of greed, anger and delusion (also known as plain stupidity).

Meditation practice is the first step to understanding the nature of our mind a little more clearly, a little more deeply. Meditation practice can be very simple and direct: the breath, the body – it seems almost too simple for a refined intellect, doesn't it? You may become bored very quickly. And then your knees start aching, your legs become restless, you are emotionally dull, you start wanting the bell to ring; and then you distract yourself with an old movie or whatever, and forget the breath. This is called mental proliferation. Now, seeing this proliferation is really the craft of practice – just

seeing what the mind is doing. The Buddha's teaching in the Theravada tradition is very simple. The Buddha says that when you are bored you just know that you are bored. That's it. When there is a feeling of anger, just know that there is anger. When there is a feeling of greed, you know there is greed. That may seem unsatisfactory on an intellectual level. We are left with nothing much, really. We simply need to remind ourselves there is nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to become, and this is a simple antidote to the tendency to want to become, to want to be distracted, restless and worried.

Proliferation keeps on going through habit, but suddenly the penny drops and you say, 'Oh, there's nothing to do. I'm just with my boredom, or with my anxiety' – whatever's here at that moment. And you notice that even though there is nothing to do, the thought process continues compiling your 'to do' list – I've got to do anapanasati (meditation on the breath), and I mustn't get distracted, and the teacher told me I have to get rid of restlessness. Actually, a good teacher will tell you to be aware of restlessness. Don't move with it. Don't let the mind be agitated with restlessness, and if it is agitated, be aware of the agitation.

So where is your mind right now? If we can witness the proliferation of our mind, we are already practising with wisdom. If we do not know how we become attached to mind-states and material phenomena, all the intellectual understanding in the world will not alleviate our suffering. We may have written a PhD on the Four Noble Truths, on Nibbana, on the ultimate liberation, but if we don't directly know our own minds, then we have studied for nothing. A cookery

book can tell you how to make a pizza, but the experience of eating a good warm pizza is of a different order. There is no real satisfaction in reading about the ultimate pizza if you never experience eating it! We are fooled partly by the high order of mental training our education has conferred on us, along with an attachment to our intellectual understanding of views, ideas and opinions. Unfortunately, this can blind us to the possibility of true insight and understanding. Once you stop looking at the cookery book and start making a good meal of your practice, it's quite fascinating to see directly something as simple as 'who is creating this?'

Ask yourself – who is talking here? It's interesting, eh? I had my first insight into this after doing a ten-day retreat with Ajahn Sumedho in 1979. I had been watching my mind for ten days and discovering the joy and discipline of a monastic schedule – I really liked getting up early and eating one meal a day. I trained as a dancer, so I'd always liked discipline. It seemed familiar and comfortable for me. And I remember that after this ten-day retreat I was in London, and I suddenly began to see that I had internal commentators discussing anything and everything. It was so bizarre. I thought, 'Who is talking here? I'm not interested in all that stuff! Who is in charge here? Wait a minute! Hey! Can I ask who is doing the talking here?' To me this was very funny – I actually began to realize I had characters in there that I had just met for the first time. Of course, they'd been around for a long, long time, but I'd only just met these funny characters that were commenting on my life, uninvited. That was a realization of some sort. And I began to ask, 'Do I want to live with all these

funny voices, all these commentators on my life? Who is in charge here? Who is remembering this? Who is concocting the stories? Who is creating?' It's interesting, isn't it?

You think the mind is under your control but it's not. When you really look at the mind directly, unbiased, with a clear mirror, a clear seeing, you will see that all kinds of things arise and come and go without any invitation. They're like guests who invite themselves and only leave when they want to. You realize that thoughts arise but you wish they wouldn't, and repressing them makes it worse. Where is the control there? Who is in charge? Ask yourself. God? The Buddha? There is nobody in charge but our delusion of forgetfulness.

We even forget that we are actually practising and are quite good people. How many of you spend a lot of time remembering all the things that you haven't done in your practice, all the failures in your practice, forgetting the good aspects of your human mind, forgetting the good qualities that you have? This forgetfulness keeps us in a state of dissatisfaction. We feel there's something missing. We forget where the source is. We forget where we are. We forget what the tools are, what wisdom is, what compassion is, and there we are, back again on the treadmill of birth, death, restlessness, worry, anxiety and fear.

The path of awakening is riddled with paradoxes. We love peace, we love freedom and liberation, even if we've tasted them for just a few seconds, a few moments, but then we forget – again, and again and again. That's why the Buddha said to be mindful, to remember: sati, mindfulness, sampajañña,

clear recollection, clear understanding, clear seeing. Sati is also sometimes translated as 'memory'. It reminds you, 'Oh, I'm here now. There's no problem here now.' How many times do we create the 'reality' of our future, and, even worse, the 'reality' of the past? But the past is only a memory. It's only a thought, but we give it so much importance. We make it so believable – our grief for past experiences, for our youth, for our departed relatives, for our friends who have left us.

We're not doing something that is light. Ask yourself: what is the purpose of this path? We are seeking refuge from the becoming of suffering. We want to become happy, without fear and anxiety. We want suffering to cease. This cessation is the Third Noble Truth taught by the Buddha. The Four Noble Truths are at the heart of the Buddha's teaching, showing the way (Magga, the Path, the Fourth Noble Truth) leading to the end of suffering. The First Noble Truth is that there is suffering. The Second Noble Truth is that there is a cause of suffering. The path begins with wisdom: right view, or right understanding (samma ditthi), and right intention or right thought (samma sankapa). Right intention consists of thoughts of non ill-will, thoughts of non-cruelty and thoughts of renunciation. We read in the suttas that the Buddha had three thoughts often coursing through his mind: thoughts of non-ill-will, of non-harming and renunciation. The Buddha still had thoughts, you see, and these thoughts form the path factor of Right Intention. These three thoughts create a foundation of peace, loving-kindness, harmlessness and compassion.

Paradoxically, when we meditate we focus on our mind states and we end up judging them – I don't want to become angry, I want to become good and kind and peaceful and loving. This is a very good wanting, a very skilful kind of desire, but that very wanting is already a form of unhappiness and suffering. If you hang on to that desire to become, your practice is thwarted. You become angry or upset with yourself and wonder why Buddhist meditation is not working for you. But why would it work when you compound the suffering by piling on more causes of suffering? Just recognize that we want to be good and we don't want to become bad; or we want to be intelligent, we don't want to be stupid – all these desires and aversions cause suffering if we attach to them.

Many of us have been brought up to react through aversion, through anger, through frustration and so on. Most of our conditioning is in terms of 'I'm going to do something about it now!' That can work for certain things. There are times when it's a kind of skilful means to actually do something. If that something is done without aversion, without anger and a sense of frustration, then it's a skilful act. But if it's done out of aversion, frustration and anger, you will inevitably encounter an unfortunate backlash. If you want to get rid of a problem, you may think moving away from it will do that, and it may indeed be wise to move away from a difficult situation. The Buddha taught that one of the five ways to deal with difficult thoughts or difficult mind states is to distract oneself. Just do something else. Walk the dog if you feel really depressed. That's one way of dealing with depression or misery.

But as meditators we also want to go to the root of the problem, and the root is in the mind itself. We need to see, to witness for ourselves what the Buddha is telling us from the beginning of his teaching. This is the path of liberation. This is the path leading to an ultimate profound, deep peace called Nibbana, the path of the cooling down of all formations, of greed, anger and delusion. So if we are really interested in this realization of the path, we can't just go on being distracted. We want to find a way of really letting go and releasing our attachment to, for example, depression. Our conditioned mind, especially here in the West, uses willpower to get rid of problems with force. But the wisdom of the Buddha encourages people not to simply be reactive or upset, or to avoid things, but to turn towards the problem, look at it and find a means of resolving it through understanding, through patience, through the ability to bear with things which are difficult to bear.

A great part of our practice is actually developing enough patience to listen to the conditioning of our own citta – to really listen, to have the ability to be still with the mind so you get to know all its tricks. And it has many. It will make you feel tired when you're not. It will make you feel bored when things could be really interesting. It will create heaven when you're in hell – ask an alcoholic. He wouldn't drink if he didn't think it was going to give him some happiness. You know, delusion is the great trickster.

To free the heart, to free our mind from any miserable mental state, we have to be still with it. We have to see it and

be still. Just do nothing. Our conditioning will say, 'Get up! Now! Quickly! As quickly as possible!' Isn't that what we do a lot of the time with our life? If you think of daily life, notice how many times this conditioning just arises, beyond our control. This is what the Buddha is pointing to, that all things are dukkha (unsatisfactory) and impermanent, and through our patient quality of awareness, mindfulness, we will see more deeply that everything that happens to us, everything we think, everything we feel, is not us. It is not who we are.

A lot of the time a mind of silence, a mind of peace, a mind of stillness, is not really our cup of tea – except when we are really stressed, on the verge of a breakdown, when we may think being still and quiet might help. But most of the time we forget where the source of our problem begins, where our problems start. So in meditation, just the simple act of sitting quietly is one of the essential features of the Buddha's path – developing the mind through stilling the mind, quieting the mind, but not doing that forcefully. Just let the mind settle, let the mind just relax and recognize that maybe there is nothing to do right now.

Develop the ability to really stop. Have you seen those Buddha rupas with the two hands stopping the world? And what is the world in Buddhism? Once the Buddha was visited by a Deva who asked him'The world, the world, what is the world? And how do you put an end to the world?' The Buddha said it is not as if you could walk to the end of the world – there's no coming to the end of the world without the ending of suffering. So the Buddha's teaching points to the world as

the suffering we create. And this world, the Buddha says, is in this fathom-long body. That is where the world arises and the world ends.

One of the advantages of a renunciate life is that we are encouraged to find the inner space and balanced mind that comes from the practice of Dhamma. In monastic life we dedicate time to sorting out the world in our hearts, in our mind itself. But people tremble in their boots about renunciation. 'Renunciation?! Oh my God, what's that?!' Well, the core of renunciation is just the letting go, the releasing, the freeing of greed, hatred, and delusion. That's the real renunciation. All this practice of letting go that you are cultivating in your life is renunciation. This is to simplify, to relax the mind, to let go of this tension of grasping and clinging and holding.

So remember the source of your life, of your world, where the world begins and ends, and see the practice from a very practical point of view. Don't try to become something or get rid of things. Just use your life as a process of understanding yourself, a process of knowing yourself, a process of coming to be at peace with yourself – the peace of non-attachment, non-greed, non-hatred, non-stupidity, a peace of awakening, a peace of realization of the mind and the quality of the mind when it's not attached. Whether we are lay or monastic, whether we are men or women, whether we are young or old, we are all capable of knowing the mind directly, knowing its contents, knowing our actions, knowing our speech. There no limit to the mind and how much we can understand it and let it go.

THE HEART OF MONASTIC LIFE

We're coming to the end of our Vassa (the annual rains retreat between July and October) with just two days before we finish the retreat, and last Wednesday we started this quiet week. I'm sure it's been quieter for some people than others, and I have a lot of mudita (sympathetic joy) for those who have been able to drop every responsibility and the duties and activities that are involved in being part of a community. It's good to be able to drop things and, for a little while, not carry on with our ordinary humdrum daily lives. Even in a monastery we can easily be carried away by our duties, the responsibilities, the work, and this may sometimes continue to a certain extent even on retreat, at least for some people.

One thing that I appreciate, of which I've become more aware during this week, is of the temple here at Amaravati. You could say it is the focus, the heart of the monastic life. You could say that externally, the heart of monastic life is really the meditation hall. That is the physical place where we remain connected with the heart of the path that we follow, the path of our inward practice.

How do we keep our life clearly focused? I can see that in monastic life, whether we are on a pilgrimage, whether we are a wandering monk or nun or whether we are part of a community, the focus is the same. It has to do with simplicity, and sometimes it can be mistaken for controlling life to keep things simple. There is an aspect of our training that is about keeping things simple. If you think of the routine we have on a daily basis, the fact that we observe Precepts definitely keeps us out of trouble externally. That doesn't mean that trouble stops internally, but at least externally we are not in the pub, smoking cigarettes all day long, watching TV or being carried away by the fascination of the sensory world. Externally things are simple. The temple is a simple, beautiful space. There's not a lot of furniture around, not a lot of distractions.

This focus has to do with keeping in check what may distract us from the focus of our life. What is it that can almost obscure why we came to this life in the first place? By meditating more intensively as we've done in the past few days, we can begin to see more clearly the world that we carry around. What kind of world are we aware of in ourselves? What is the feeling tone of what we are experiencing right now? What is the texture of our feeling experience at this moment? It's interesting: we regularly chant the description of the five khandhas, the aggregates that make up the body and mind. There's the body made up of the four elements, and the mind with its feelings, perceptions, thoughts and consciousness. What is the consciousness of what we are feeling right now? What is the world?

We can easily be carried away by the desire to perfect tools or means for practice. It's almost as if we're focusing so much on the hammer that we've forgotten the piece of wood we're working on. We focus on all the tools in the workshop, and we forget the piece of furniture we're making. Not exactly the best analogy, perhaps a bit masculine for a nun, but sometimes I think of my mind as a workshop – it feels like that. We have many tools in the practice and we become quite fascinated by them, but we forget about the material we are working with. We forget what it is that we are addressing, and lose the subtlety of life as it is in this moment. We are so concentrated on external things, even the breath, or focusing so much on getting our concentration right, or wondering whether our mindfulness is strong or not – questioning, doubting – that we actually lose touch with the very material these tools are meant to help us see clearly. Right now we may feel very empty, very peaceful, with nothing much happening. But in my experience, if I stay sitting long enough, out of this emptiness the world may emerge. Thoughts, feelings, stories can emerge out of nowhere and come and go. A lot of the time not much emerges, but even when there's nothing much happening, there's still an experience of something. So it's not difficult to lose contact with what's happening now, even when nothing much is happening.

Again, in meditation we are sometimes so focused on the tools that we squeeze ourselves into some kind of a mould which we assume we have to become or fit into. This mould may be pleasant for a little while. We may look like the model

which pleases us, but it's still not quite connected with reality, with the way things are right now. How many of us can find anybody right now, at this moment, who actually looks like what each of us is supposed to look like? Is there anybody around? Just get used to that experience – is there anybody around? Is there a meditator around? Is there somebody around? It's interesting, eh? This is a contrast with so much of what we create about ourselves. When we sit in meditation, we really get to see whether there is someone around. Is there something that I really can call me? Mine? Or what do I create? What is it that makes me believe there is a 'me' around? What is it that makes me feel something important is happening to me right now?

Sometimes we come to a monastery with a real sense of purpose, but discover later that things may be very different from the purpose we envisaged at first. After reading lots of books on Buddhism, we perhaps enter the monastery with the idea that we must become a good Buddhist, or become kind, or compassionate, or loving and so on. And thus we enter into conflict with ourselves, because the reality is quite different; in fact, it can be so different that we hardly recognize ourselves. I remember this, and many of us have experienced it. You find that you've read enough books and you have enough desires in yourself to become a better person, so you enter the monastery, but then discover that you experience yourself as somebody very different from the kind, loving, generous person you wished to develop into or at least know in yourself.

So we need to be able to understand this conflicting energy within ourselves. On one level we want to be pure and loving and not driven by sensual desires. We want to be respectful of each other and so on. And then we discover these blind forces that are so different. It takes a while to really get to know these forces in ourselves, and to get to know our habitual tendency to create the sense of self. The self is like a punch bag, something punches it and it punches back. One reason why I think most of us love the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the Buddha's first teaching on the Four Noble Truths, is that it's the story of the punch bag. Somebody says something that hits a little nerve. It doesn't feel very good, so you punch or kick back. All of us do it, don't imagine you're the only one. It's an ongoing experience of this conditioning of 'me'. Something hits a nerve that triggers a 'me', and of course we're not aware of that, so we send back another 'me' that hits somebody else's 'me', and this can go on forever. It's called the Wheel of Birth and Death. It keeps going.

For a long time we may think we are in charge, so we can feel very bad about ourselves, guilty or embarrassed. How many times do we feel embarrassed about the way we behave? Even when nobody sees it and it's just an internal experience, you feel so embarrassed. This beautiful person that you hope to become one day is suddenly raging about some silly thing, some silly object. It's as if your grand ideal has suddenly fallen off its pedestal. We often think we are in charge, but as you keep on practising you realize your behaviour is really just blind habits, blind conditioning, blind responses. They

are blind because they act out before your mindfulness can even catch them. When you're mindful you are aware, you are conscious, you can see clearly. But a lot of the time the habits are so strong that they just punch – they punch the world, they punch reality. Sometimes the punch is hidden away; it's a punch with a smile, so it's more difficult to realize it's a punch. It's a very polite punch, a very sweet one.

Even in ourselves, our relationship to our own tendency to punch ourselves, we can feel very guilty, and blame ourselves and feel terrible. It feels right somehow to beat myself up, because there is this illusion that because I'm in charge I should be more clever. I should be much more intelligent than just to have silly responses to life. But responses aren't silly, or aren't silly in themselves, it's our judgement that makes them silly or not silly. We can judge them and say – 'This is right, this is wrong, this is clever, this is not, I'm a cynic, I'm a kind person, I'm a beautiful person, I'm a disaster, I'm terrible, I'm weak.' They go on and on, these thoughts that judge reality like that, and we can add to them or not add to them, see them or not see them as they are. But in our meditation practice we begin to see the stories we add to reality, like the story of our past life – not our past lives, but just our past life in this life. We don't go as far as seeing any life other than this life from our birth until now. But in our meditation we begin to see from the platform of a clear mind that life goes on and evolves quite naturally.

We can continue the stories, liking or disliking them, wishing they weren't around, clinging to them and hanging on to them as 'my personal face', 'my personal me'. We can

perpetuate the sense of self forever just by not seeing what we are doing. If you don't see your mind, how can you have insight into the nature of a state of mind, or the five khandhas, or any aspect of the mind and body? That's what insight is about: seeing deeply the nature of thoughts, the nature of vedana, feelings, sankhara, mental constructions, which can be a huge amount of stories or just a few thoughts. But they all involve constructing something, what the Buddha calls 'the conjuring tricks of consciousness'. Our consciousness can be like a magician's tricks, like a mirage.

I'm sure most of us have seen this aspect of our mind and body, the illusory aspect. But the real crux, the bit we actually need to see, is when it hurts. When things hurt, this is the First Noble Truth. But when it hurts is often when we get distracted. We start disliking what hurts, or we start indulging this suffering that we are experiencing, or we want to move away, or we want to create more 'me's', more selves around it. It happens so quickly. It's interesting. The experience of suffering is like the heart of our handle on delusion. Either we recreate a 'self' and delusion, and the birth of a whole new will and many wills, or we get a handle on it and realize this is just a momentary experience here and now – just that much. Even when we know that much, we can still be aware for many years of the immense power of the waves of birth and death, the immense power of habits. They are so powerful that in a way, you give up on having any control over them from a 'self' perspective, because from a self-perspective everything is unstable. You can't really count on a 'me' to help you out. It doesn't do the job very well. It's always creating somebody

who is wrong, somebody who is right. If you count on self-identity to sort out your delusion, you might as well give up right now.

But the awareness of suffering will give you exactly what you need to learn in terms of wisdom. The awareness of suffering is not sorting out one 'me' with another 'me' – it's really penetrating that experience of suffering which is actually 'me', which is that experience of holding on to something and going beyond it, which is freedom, liberation from the self-identity. So to be able to see suffering and the ending of suffering is a very important moment in our lives as meditators or as practitioners of Dhamma. And that's how our confidence in the Dhamma really begins to take shape, truly begins to be seen. We can gain a terrific amount of confidence when we know that this refuge in awareness is really the gateway to liberation.

It's simple to say but, in a way it's another matter to be there when things in the mind are shaky and turbulent, and very, very believable – when the mind seems so real, so true, so absolutely right. It takes a lot of strength to withstand the power of the mind, the waves in our mind – not to believe in the manifestations of our mind, our body, our feelings, our consciousness and so on. This strength is what is growing in our meditation practice: just the fact that we can concentrate the mind more steadily, learn to be less distracted in the present moment, have enough energy to stay awake. These are the major tools for withstanding the mind's power of illusion. Most of us have seen things happening to us without doing anything, without having to plan them.

You can see that a lot of things happen in our lives without our having to make them happen. That aspect of our life is almost like a blessing, a very good thing happening to us without our having to desire it, without our having to cling and grasp. As we develop our meditation practice we can see what the Buddha was talking about in terms of cause and effect. In a way, a lot of our development of the path is developing causes in ourselves that will naturally bring good effects. We don't have to become something or do something, become again or create a new self. There is another way – just being able to reflect wisely on our actions, on our train of thoughts. By 'reflecting' I mean being mindful of our thoughts, mindful of our actions, noticing the details of these things, how we respond to ourselves – whether we are patient or impatient, whether we are kind or unkind.

We can spend a lot of time finding out what other people's practice is about, checking that they're practising, how they're doing. Have you noticed that? We can spend a lot of energy just making sure that our neighbours are doing the right thing, whether she or he is patient enough with me, whether he is kind enough with me and so on. We can easily get lost in focusing on external things. But just look at the details of our own mind – what is happening there right now? Am I at peace? Do I hate what is happening? Do I love it? Do I care for it or not? Do I wish to be somewhere else? Am I forcing myself to be here? All these details are sometimes unacknowledged, and yet this is the material of our practice.

Am I just enduring this retreat? Am I just counting the minutes until the next job? It's really important to pay

attention to the details and make peace with them. Sometimes we can't do anything other than just be at peace with the flow of experiences in ourselves that are caused by other things. There is a cause for them. Those things don't arise out of absolutely nothing. When you like somebody or you feel aversion to somebody, you don't need to go back and think why or why not – just notice it. Maybe they remind you of your father or your mother, or somebody you disliked before you came to the monastery, or they just happen to be smiling at your worst enemy, or they said something or did something in the past that you disliked. There may be a lot of reasons why we feel a certain way, or think a certain way, or perceive a certain way, but how many stories are we carrying at that moment? Or are we just directly seeing things as they are, so that we don't continue to keep that illusion of self alive?

There's a very lovely teacher who passed away a few years ago, an English monk, a disciple of Ajahn Maha Boowa. His name was Ajahn Pañňavaddho, and I really liked what he said when he was talking to a group of monks in Thailand. If I remember correctly, he said, 'You know, people say in Buddhism there is no self. But actually, all day long we bump into a lot of selves.' That's reassuring in a way, coming from a deep practitioner like Ajahn Pañňavaddho. So it's not as if we try to become somebody who has no self. There are plenty of 'selves' around. We don't need to kill them. But awareness is what takes away the belief system in the self, the belief system that I exist as a separate, unique individual, man or woman. And that is a shift in consciousness. When you stop being an individual you realize your mind is not limited by your idea of

who you think you are, who you think is the person you live with. The mind is not limited by that, but this can only be seen clearly when you stop taking refuge in your belief systems.

You don't know you have belief systems until they are challenged. I've been humiliated by my teacher in public occasionally, but not very often. But Ajahn Chah used to say that if you want to know somebody, just ... he didn't say 'humiliate' them but make them feel 'uncomfortable' (the word was something between 'uncomfortable' and 'angry'), and see how they respond. Then you'll really know somebody. But you don't have to have Ajahn Chah for that to happen to you. We are regularly upset by people, aren't we? There's always somebody who gets on our nerves at some point. So how do you respond to that? This is a really good internalized teaching. How many situations just in this community are upsetting? How many people tread on our toes and get on our nerves? How do we respond to that? Then you get to know that 'self', how that 'self' is acting in you. How is it manifesting? Because we can so easily believe in our 'self'. We can really believe in it without ever questioning it.

So, to go back to the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the teaching on The Four Noble Truths, and to think of the moment when somebody, not Ajahn Chah but life itself, is challenging your belief system, which is really the creation of 'me', the conditioning of 'me'. When somebody really enrages you, humiliates you, or challenges you in such a way that you feel you could punch them in the face, you truly get to know yourself, because then you can really see the anger response. Especially in a monastery with so much goodness, so much

teaching on developing kindness and love and being ethical and peaceful, a peaceful environment in many ways, with so many reminders of peace and kindness, love, joy and light, and so on, it's very easy to start identifying with the idea that 'I should be like this all the time – bright, cheerful, happy, peaceful, kind, loving, caring.' But then we lose the heart of the practice, the heart of the path of liberation, which is not about just being kind and loving and caring, and all the rest of it, but about being able to respond to the mind when it doesn't get what it wants, when the things you like are taken away from you, when you are troubled in your mind or body, or you're uncomfortable. A lot of practice in the Forest Tradition has to do with that. It challenges you, because then you get to know yourself. You don't have any illusions anymore about your belief system. You have to begin to question whether what you think is true or not.

And we all have belief systems. I still remember a time when I did a sitter's practice for a few weeks when I was an anagarika (a novice) in Cornwall with Ajahn Candasiri. We were all on retreat together for three months. We shared the Shrine Room in somebody's farmhouse, which was a separate building. I had a recurring bad back in the early days at Chithurst, for a very short period, but it was very painful. People used to say, 'Oh no, don't do that. Don't do the sitter's practice. You're going to ruin your back.' But when you're bored, doing nothing, silent for a few months, every possible ascetic practice comes to your mind as a way of making things different. I discovered then that people do ascetic practices when they've got nothing else to do. I'm not saying that's

always the case, but it's one way of passing time. I remember the first night, my belief system told me that I had to have a corner of a room and three or four cushions behind me, so I could be padded on both sides and wouldn't fall over, and I would be comfortable with my back resting against something soft. I had that for about three nights, and then, I think out of boredom, on the fourth night I started by taking one cushion out, then the next night another cushion, and on the night after I think I chucked out all my cushions because I realized that I was actually more comfortable without them than with them. If anyone had told me that a few days before, I would have been really upset, and no one could have convinced me I didn't need those cushions, because my belief system said, 'No. I can't do without them.' That's a small example, but after four days I was actually more comfortable against the wall, sleeping lightly but feeling quite okay. Of course, I was very sleepy at four o'clock in the morning, I can tell you, falling asleep chanting, but that's another story.

But I had faith, in the sense that I didn't have to believe my belief system. It's a little nugget like that which keeps you realizing that unless your belief system is challenged, you won't move far. This is often why we look for teachers – because we will only take an insult from a teacher, not our best friend or our fellow monastics. We are waiting for the great man or the great woman to tell us how stupid we are – well, not us, but our conditioned responses. I haven't found any 'myself' over the years. I've believed in my 'self' many times, but I haven't found anybody very solid for very long.

So during a retreat like this, try to know where your belief

system is right now. What are you believing as real, as what you absolutely need to be fully alive and 'you'? Most of the belief system has to do with the survival of the 'me' mind. That's what I can see more and more. But this knowledge is not easy. The belief system goes together with what feels comfortable for me as my worldview. My belief system would not stay in place for very long if it didn't feel comfortable. Let's face that, let's be quite frank about it. Most of my belief systems have been associated with what is comfortable and pleasant. So this is really a good time to double-check: what am I doing with my mind? What happens when my belief system is challenged? How do I respond to that? Do I hate the person who does that? Do I feel I have to be a good person and not hate them? This is very simplistic, but you can create your own more subtle dimension of such 'likes and dislikes'.

And you will have very enlightening experiences as a result. I remember when Ajahn Sucitto was our 'Mother Superior'. I didn't find him particularly easy, although I was quite respectful of him. I trusted him as a good practitioner of Dhamma, but on a personal level I found it very difficult to be under his guidance, and I remember working with a lot of aversion. One day I was practising the teaching of Luang Por Sumedho – when you find something very difficult, bring it into consciousness, because every time you bring something into consciousness you dissolve the solidity of that experience, its grasping aspect and the fear behind it. So if you are frightened of something and you make it very conscious, you find that the emotional charge behind what you bring into your consciousness begins to dissolve. I've

experienced that many, many times. It was one of my main practices at one point. You can bring up the emotional charge of things you fear, things you feel anxious about, things you are embarrassed about, all that sort of thing, and little by little the fear behind that charge starts decreasing. So I remember walking towards Ajahn Sucitto – this to me is a very lovely story, a very warm memory I keep – I was walking towards him and bringing up quite negative thoughts consciously, with the intention of letting them go, so there was no intention of recreating a person who was Ajahn Sucitto, or a 'me' who was Sister Sundara. I wasn't trying to recreate somebody either internally or externally, but I was trying to work on letting go of my negative perception of that person. And so I was consciously walking towards him with a clear intention that was for liberation. He came close to me – we were just nearing the beginning of the Vassa – and said, 'Well, you know, Sundara, I think for this year maybe you don't need to give up cheese and chocolate. I think maybe that's enough of that. How about practising metta?' I was very touched by this, because my heart was in a place of metta then. I wasn't trying to be unkind to him, I was just bringing up these things to free my mind from any negativity and horrible perceptions that might come up, and he said, 'Why don't you practise metta?' It was really a very sweet moment for me, because I realized that in a way I was quite a good disciple, and I said, 'Yes, I think you're right. Yes, I think I'll do that for the Vassa. For three months I'll practise metta.'

And then I thought – oh my god, how am I going to practice metta? I was very cynical then, and quite critical – all that

metta stuff was not my thing in those days. I had all these demons coming up, conjuring up pink-cheeked nuns looking very sweet, with lots of smiles and bright little eyes, saying, 'I love you. I love you. May you be well.' Oh, just the thought of it! I was so averse to it. It brought up a mountain of aversion.

I decided to do it for three months, and I actually vowed – well, I didn't really make a vow because Ajahn Sumedho said, 'Never make a vow' – but I thought it was such a good idea to practise metta, I thought, yes, I'm going to do that for three months. But this put me into a really deep state of aversion and doubts for about two weeks before the Vassa. How on earth was I going to do that? And as I was pondering on how that was going to happen, one day there was a little voice in my mind – it was so dramatically helpful, that I'd like to share this with you – which said, 'Well, you can just say, 'I can bear it'. That voice was just for me. It wouldn't speak to anybody else, but for me it sank deep into my heart, 'I can bear it.' Yes, whatever is difficult, I can bear it. And I did my metta practice for three months with just that little sentence, 'I can bear it.'

So, through that little sentence, that little kind of – not a mantra, because I was not absorbing into it –but just like a reminder, I began to be aware of an incredible amount of negative sensation in my body. I began to notice that every time something negative would come up, I was very much aware of it. And in fact, through that practice of 'I can bear it' for three months, I didn't turn into a 'sweet nun'. I was more the Zen type in those days. I had to look like a sharp and no-nonsense type of nun, and that idea of being sweet and soft and gentle was intolerable to me. There were sweet,

soft, gentle people in the community as well, so I had to work with that, not to be averse to the people who were like that. For three months I actually liberated mountains of anger and frustration and negativity.

So this practice of metta which took place in a way that spoke to my 'heart', connected with something in me that was touched and said, 'Yes. Do it, and trust it, and have faith in it.' Real faith. Nobody else would have been bothered with 'I can bear it' – they would have said something like 'So what?' It wouldn't have meant anything to them. But for me it obviously went very deep and I said 'Yes.' And the depth of that acknowledgement meant that it was a really useful tool. That tool worked. We all try out lots of tools, and for me this particular tool worked and enabled my mind to let go of a huge amount of anger.

So it's good to find your own tools. The Buddha advised developing metta in many different ways. There are many chants, many techniques for developing metta. When Sharon Salzberg, whom we have known over the years, was in Burma, she had to develop metta to the four directions, with a long, long list of all the people she had to send metta to. I don't know if that worked for her, but for me 'I can bear it' worked. It wasn't part of the Pali canon, but it had a deep, profound effect on my whole mind and body. This is something that comes through the wisdom aspect of our mind. When you chew over something like a doubt for a while, you may suddenly find that some very profound wisdom and understanding comes, an enlightening understanding of this particular doubtful mind, to the point where you just let go and it is finished.

So each one of us can trust that we have the means to free our mind. These means may not necessarily be set out in the Pali Canon, but they're still leading to the end of dukkha. This is the heart of it: the dukkha of this doubt, and the end of the dukkha of this doubt; the dukkha of anger, and the end of dukkha and the end of anger. At one level this comes from experience, not from thinking of things from a 'self' perspective, not from reading books with a 'self' perspective, but from challenging that 'self' identity and being quite grateful when people tread on our toes. Using mindful reflection you find something magic happens. It's truly as if Ajahn Chah is right in front of us. I never met Ajahn Chah myself, so I'm really talking hypothetically when I say the name of Ajahn Chah. But in a way that great teacher can be right here in front of us when we see dukkha not from a 'self' perspective, but just from that place of mindfulness, awareness and freedom inside not to be – not to recreate an identity again and again and again.

THE TRUTH OF CESSATION AND THE PATH

During these last few days on retreat you've been able to witness the amount of changes that have taken place in yourselves. How many feelings have arisen? How many stories? How many memories? How many things have come up in the mind and disappeared? Even if you wanted to conjure them up again you would not be able to do so, however much you tried. That which arose two or three days ago is gone, even though you try to remember it. Feelings, emotions catch us so painfully sometimes, but although we may have had a very strong emotion two or three days ago, when we try to recall that feeling, it's gone. So in a way you have tasted the experience of cessation.

The first teaching the Buddha gave is called the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the sutta on the turning of the wheel of Dhamma. In it he expounds the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and states very clearly how to use them. When we understand that craving (tanha) is the cause of suffering (dukkha) we abandon craving and thus realize

nirodha, cessation. Nirodha is to be realized, so it's not a matter of believing in cessation or thinking about cessation, but of seeing cessation directly and knowing the peace of Nirodha.

As my teacher used to say, if we believe or attach to the idea that the goal of the path is to realize that everything ceases, is not 'mine' or 'self', is just suffering, that sounds rather dreary, doesn't it? As a prospect for our future life, the idea of just ceasing with nothing left doesn't necessarily inspire the heart, does it? If I talked about blossoming, growing, developing, increasing, progress, that sounds much more positive. But when we hear the word 'cessation', we think, 'Cessation, ugh – what is she talking about?' Cessation does not sound terribly attractive as a practice. We want the truth, we want liberation, but we may not have realized that this is only possible through understanding, through direct insight into, the truth of cessation. That's the place of letting go. When you've let go and seen clearly what happens then, you have a chance of realizing cessation.

Most of us are fascinated by the arising of conditions, by the beginning of things, by birth. We can all rejoice when a baby is born. We can go crazy cooing over a little baby, but to react in that way to an old person isn't a feeling that arises naturally in the heart. We don't coo over an old granny or say how cute she is. We can see, even in nature, there's an immediate response to birth of wanting to rejoice, to celebrate. But as many Dhamma teachers have said, celebrations should take place at death rather than birth, because birth is being reborn into the realm of suffering, a realm of trials and tribulations.

So nirodha, the Third Noble Truth, is probably the most important truth on the path of realization. That's where realization takes place. It means the cessation of attachment, the cessation of wrong views, the cessation of suffering caused by our clinging to anything, the cessation of unskilful behaviour. So how do we realize this?

First of all, I think it's important to know the obstacles that prevent us from seeing cessation. In our everyday lives we witness how much we are always wanting to be born, how much we are always wanting new experiences. Our society encourages us to go into that mode. Our whole culture runs on being born into something new, better, richer. It's a culture that worships birth. It doesn't care much about death. Society tells us that if we can't give importance to birth, we are probably attached to death or depressed. This attitude can make us feel sad, undermined, and victimized by this birth culture. Birth is a new car, a new job, a new partner, a new friend, or a new gadget. We can attach to whatever is new – a new train of thought, even a new insight. At the moment we attach to the 'new', we are happy, elated and inspired. But we don't see that this attachment will lead us to death. Death is when the attachment to inspiration goes and we are left with desperation or disappointment.

We begin to see cessation by noticing those feelings when they arise – when we first feel inspired and then dispirited, disappointed, depressed and so on. Notice the suffering of being attached to inspiration, for example. If we attach to inspiration, we want things always to go well, because inspiration goes with the feeling of happiness, of uplift. But

life is not an ongoing uplift. We don't have to go very far to know that, we just have to watch the news every day. How long can we keep having our lives uplifted? But what we certainly can do all the time, when we give our attention to it, is realize the Dhamma. Let us be taught by life. Let us learn from life. Let us receive life as a teaching, as a way of maturing and realizing the truth of cessation more deeply.

I want to reiterate that when we say 'cessation', we mean the cessation of the suffering of the deluded mind. But, because that mind may be all we know, we think that if we let it go there will be nothing left of us. That's not true. You've already seen how many dramas in your life you've let go of and you're still bursting with life, aren't you? How many attachments have you let go of over the years? You haven't disappeared, have you? You haven't vanished from the planet because you let go of whatever was a problem for you five or ten years ago, something you thought you could never live without; even though at the time you felt you could die if you lived without it, you survived. My teacher said he would come to a point in his practice where he would say, 'I can't bear this! I can't! I can't!' But then he noticed he could always bear it. If you're patient enough with that thought, 'I can't bear it', the next moment you'll still be bearing it – and the next moment, and the next moment.

We often come to that point in life, or just in a session of meditation, where we feel we can't bear this anymore. It might not manifest as a thought, but it's an intense feeling

in the gut informing the brain, 'I'm out! I can't stand it!' But if we truly want to realize Dhamma, we have to stay with the feeling that wants to push away what is unpleasant and cling to the pleasant. We sit and think, 'I can't bear that anymore. I can't bear that pain. I can't bear that train of thought. I'm fed up. I've had enough.' But just try saying instead, 'Okay, I've heard you, but I can still bear it' And you'll find that if we do this, before long it will cease, because attachment is dependent on conditions. Attachment is dependent on being averse to something or attracted to something. That's how attachment thrives. So if you're just observing and witnessing there is no fuel for attachment and what is left is peace.

Yet who wants peace? We do, of course. But we need to get a taste for it. Peace is an acquired taste in our culture. Not only is our society totally committed to worshipping birth, but it's also committed to worshipping distractions, to worshipping confusion and excitement. The more confused we are, the more discontented we will be – and the more we will buy! Our practice enables us to see clearly the gratification and the danger of sense pleasure, hatred, laziness, restlessness, worry, doubt in the light of impermanence, suffering and not-self (anicca-dukkha-anatta).

Our society is totally geared to developing and cultivating the Hindrances. Have you noticed that? We are taught daily to cultivate desire and hatred. Advertising is all about making us want something, compare something with something else so we can dislike one brand and like another, a 'better' one.

It makes us doubt. It makes us feel paralysed by the plethora of choices. We don't know which way to turn. It makes us worried and restless because we keep being brainwashed with the idea that what we've got now is not enough. We don't have enough of this or that. We don't know enough – we don't have enough PhDs, we don't have enough money, we don't have enough good health (though we have much better health than many people around the world). We don't even want to hear these suggestions that breed ongoing discontent, but we have a hard time not feeling brainwashed by them.

It's very important to know that we are part of a brainwashing system that doesn't want us to witness cessation. It wants us to be born again and again and again through discontent. Somebody once asked me, 'How do I witness my discontent?' I said, 'Just be content with your discontent.' Just begin with where you are. Don't try to find another teacher to work with the discontent. Don't try to find another new therapist. Just be content with that experience of discontent. Be at peace with it. Start looking at it where you are, rather than thinking, 'Oh, there's something wrong with me. I think my mother didn't give me enough love when I was young. And I had a bad school experience. And my boyfriend was nasty when I was eighteen. And I was incapable of this and that.' It goes on and on and on, and it's exhausting even just to think about. But we do that so often instead of being conscious of the experience and seeing it directly as it is.

I had a very good insight from an exercise that a teacher gave us to do recently. It was something very simple. He made us count very loudly within ourselves without speaking, just

count. He said that when we think thoughts, when we feel thoughts, we should try this out and feel where thought arises. You close your eyes, count very, very loudly up to ten and then point to the part of the body where a thought is arising. For most of us, different parts of our bodies resonate with thinking. But what really struck me was that a lot of thinking is felt in the heart. That is where it is experienced. And when we experience thinking in the heart, we realize how much weight is held there, how much burden we carry around in the heart. We notice that when we speak to ourselves gently and softly as in prayer or meditation, just repeating a gentle word like 'peace' (without too much resistance!) soothes the heart. The thought that arises in the heart is soothing and calming and appeasing.

So the insight I had was how often we carry a lot of negativity, a lot of heavy thoughts in our heart. The heart is affected by thoughts of sadness or that give rise to sadness, to jealousy, anger, frustration, irritation or whatever. The desire to overpower people, the desire to compete – all these thoughts are resonating in the heart. So we understand why we say that someone has a burdened heart. It's like a resonance echoing in the heart cave, and that's really the insight. When I realized how much we carry around I felt a deep incentive to be kind to myself, it gave me a deeper commitment to be gentle with the heart, because this is a vital part of our body. This is what's holding us together, keeping us alive. A lot of the time we may not be able to avoid the results of our past kamma, the anger and all the other negative mental states – this is just what's happening to us and we can't avoid or

repress it. We can't always move out of our predicament. But at least we can begin to receive things gently. And it takes a lot of work to receive things with a compassionate heart – with compassion, with loving-kindness, with gentleness.

To go back to cessation, most of the time when we have to bear with things which are difficult, we have a number of ways of dealing with them. We resist them or we cut them out of our experience. We distract ourselves from whatever is unpleasant or difficult to bear, we ignore it or criticize ourselves, we bring up the judge – 'Thou shalt not...' We have many ways of dealing with difficulties so heavy to the heart that we can't see anything else. That's why cessation is very rarely experienced, because to experience cessation we need a peaceful heart. We need to be able to see clearly what's happening, without any reactions. If there's any reaction, it starts being confusing. Let's say we are going through a period of depression or sadness. If we really want to see its cessation, let's not give up on ourselves. Let's give ourselves a chance by allowing the heart to feel that experience peacefully, so that it understands its impermanence and its suffering. Through this process we can begin to feel unintimidated by its presence and allow it to move on.

Our mode of understanding things is often completely out of synch with truth, out of sync with Dhamma. We try to understand conceptually. We try to understand through creating a self. But an idea of 'self' as real is what caused our problems in the first place. That is the culprit for our misery. We go back into a deluded mode again. We create a perception of a self that is bad and needs to be rescued and dealt with

by a good self. Sometimes, we even project our problem onto others and make the misery we experience somebody else's fault.

But there is another way.

The way of cessation is the way that leads to the ending of delusion, the ending of suffering, the ending of misapprehension and the realization of truth. This is the place where you need to have confidence in the Refuges. The Refuges are not just a sort of devotional mumbling. They are not just another thing to believe. They are refuges in the awakened mind, the mind that has the potential to be awake. When we're mindful, that is our refuge in the Buddha, the Buddha-nature. Our refuge in Dhamma is our refuge in the truth, in seeing things as they are. We can begin simply by seeing anicca-dukkha-anatta – 'seeing', not 'believing'. And our refuge in the Sangha is a refuge in the qualities of the Buddha's enlightened disciples and the Buddha himself – the fact that we can develop the same qualities, realize in the same way the path of purification, have confidence that there is a possibility of awakening, a possibility of realizing the truth and a possibility of liberating the heart.

These are our refuges now. We don't have anything else. If we don't take refuge in the sense of self, in the misapprehension that constantly creates a self, then we must have something else to rest in. And our rest is the Refuges. These words Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha are pointers. We don't take refuge through following desires or impulses motivated by greed, hatred and delusion. We take refuge by observing desire, studying it and understanding its nature.

That is the difference between taking refuge in the self and taking refuge in the Triple Gem. That's the only way we can realize cessation. As long as we take refuge in the sense of self, there are reaction, agitation, pain, suffering. We can see that pain and suffering when we take refuge in wakefulness, the Buddha, in truth, the Dhamma, and in the purity of our own heart, the Sangha,

Cessation leads to peace, to the ending of clinging and attachment, and the realization of peace leads us to the Fourth Noble Truth, which is the path of practice, the Noble Eightfold Path. It begins with Right View or Right Understanding – in Pali, samma ditthi, seeing things not in accordance with delusion but in accordance with Dhamma. Once we have Right View, everything falls into place. Once we have seen that clinging to suffering breeds more suffering, and letting go brings the ending of suffering, we can begin using that paradigm. We don't need to go very far. If we are mindful we don't need a very complicated teaching to realize the ending of avijja (delusion). There's a canonical explanation of Right View, the core element of which is understanding the Four Noble Truths. It's understanding that there is suffering (dukkha), a cause of suffering (samudaya), an ending of suffering (nirodha) , and a path (magga) that keeps us on track to realize the liberation from suffering.

Once we have an understanding of Right View, we move on to Right Thought or Right Intention, which in the Buddha's teaching is divided into three aspects: the intention to renounce or let go, the intention of non-ill-will, and the intention of non-cruelty. We take refuge in developing and

cultivating Right Intention. Of course, the intentions we meet in our everyday life and in our meditation do not often match the thoughts as defined in Right Intention. But these three aspects of Right Intention are a reference point, so we begin to let go by reminding ourselves that our intention is to let go, to simplify things, not to act on thoughts of cruelty or ill-will, but to be kind and loving.

And we're not likely to get it right straightaway. It's a slow process, a path of humility. It's a path that shows us when we get things wrong and leaves us in no doubt about where we are at in our practice. No matter how enlightened we think we've become, however many insights we think we've had, however many meditation retreats we've done and however many teachers we've met, however many connections with the divine powers we've made, if we still think with thoughts that are cruel, unkind, violent and greedy, we've still got some work to do.

Right View and Right Intention correspond to the paññā aspect of the path, its wisdom aspect. Right Intention leads us naturally to Right Action, Right Speech, Right Livelihood. These next three aspects are sila, the ethical or moral aspects of the path, which include the Five Precepts: refraining from killing, refraining from stealing, refraining from sexual misconduct, refraining from lying, and refraining from taking drugs and intoxicants which lead to carelessness. Thus they are the aspects of the practice that relate to our body, actions and speech. The whole spirit of Right Action, Right Speech and Right Livelihood is really compassion, harmlessness, respect for life, respect for ourselves and all beings as they manifest

in our speech and our actions. We need to pay attention to that. We can become very bogged down by the details we find written in books, but books sometimes make us lazy because reading them can make us feel satisfied in our understanding and forget the work we have to do ourselves, which is tapping into the wisdom that we already have and doing our work of transformation .

In the Forest Tradition, the spirit of training is that you're just left to simmer in your own stuff for days and months until you understand yourself. You don't go and see the teacher every five minutes. The idea of being taught is just staying there in the dukkha soup for a while, until wisdom arises, understanding arises, and you know. You have no doubt anymore because you know yourself, and that can never leave you. It's part of you. You know. So I encourage you to reflect on yourselves, rather than always going back to all these Dhamma books which fill your brains with more thoughts, concepts and ideas that perhaps make you feel inspired for a few minutes, until you fall back again into the trenches of misery, self-pity, inadequacy and all the rest of it.

People ask, 'How do I empower myself?' Just learn how to come to that place of direct experience. Without direct experience there's no empowerment. We're still at the mercy of anybody who comes along and says this or that. Without experience, every teacher will make our minds more boggled, confused, and doubtful. But when we have the experience, we know, and then when we hear somebody we can hear beyond the words. We're not so bogged down by words anymore. We can actually hear somebody's wisdom, beyond concepts.

The Buddha said that the reason why we cultivate sila is so that the mind can be free from remorse and regret. It's so simple. When we act unskilfully by speech and body, our mind is full of remorse and regret, full of anxiety, worry, restlessness and so on. The Buddha asks us to do some work, not just to wait for people to spoon-feed us so that we have nothing to do except hope to get a result without moving our little finger. There's work to do. Once there are less anxiety, remorse and regret, our whole body calms down. All the stress that comes from not acting skilfully in life decreases. Even pain in the body diminishes when we act more ethically, compassionately, kindly, wisely and so on. And as we become more calm and at peace with ourselves, the meditation aspects which are the three last aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path – Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration – come much more easily because we have a foundation of peace in the heart. If we're restless, confused, miserable, upset, doubtful, conflicted, we can't sit still for a moment. To people in a state of agitation the word 'meditation' or the concept of sitting still might sound insulting.

The Noble Eightfold Path is divided into paññā, sila and samadhi, wisdom, ethics and meditation. Its last three aspects are the samadhi aspects. This word doesn't just mean concentration, it also means the other aspects of meditation, effort and mindfulness. Effort is something really important to consider, because we often fritter our life's energy away without knowing it. We squander it as if we had endless energy. But we know that as we get older we can't tap into the same source of energy. We have to be much more careful. I realized

that when I was in my early thirties. That's what brought me to the Dhamma, when I realized that I had a lot of energy but was not using it as properly, as skilfully as I wanted to do, because I did not know how to do that. So when I found the path of practice, it became as clear as crystal to me that this was the way to transform my energy and make use of it so that my life would be a better experience, and so would the lives of others.

Meditation deals directly with the mind itself. It is a tool that develops mindfulness and clear understanding of what goes on in our heart. It takes courage to listen to our mind in a sustained way, to bear with the thoughts that go on and on forever. We might not see the results of our practice immediately, but let's not be attached to results, because that's going back into a 'self' mode, going back into wrong view. We will know results when they come. Let's give ourselves five or ten years to appreciate the results in our life. When we live skilfully, the quality of our life improves naturally and the fruits of our practice are obvious.

It's up to us to apply the teachings of the Four Noble Truths in our everyday lives, and to use them for reflection instead of spending the whole day thinking about unecessary things. We might say, 'But how can I find the time to do that?' A Thai teacher said, 'We spend a great part of our life thinking in ways that are harmful, and most of the time we are quite unaware of this' Ask somebody to do mindfulness practice with the breath for one minute, and their whole system goes crazy. That shows how strong our addiction to delusion is. We spend a lot of our time doing all sorts of things that harm our

lives, and we do them without qualms. But as soon as we're asked to do something that is just a little skilful, like being more mindful, a bit more generous, a bit more thoughtful – 'Aah! How am I going to do that? I haven't got time! How can I sit? I haven't got time to do that!' We have plenty of time to watch television, though, or chat with our friends, to keep piling up stressful waves in our brain. But one moment of silence, sitting mindfully, makes us think, 'I've got to do something else more important!' This is why the Buddha is called the physician of the mind. We have to deal with a serious illness called delusion. But that's not really what we are. We're not deluded, we just believe we are. We've attached to this condition for so long that we believe that's what we are. But the teaching is very hopeful. It says we're not this miserable lump of delusion. We are also capable of liberating ourselves from what hinders our happiness and of bringing about blessings to the world. So let's never forget the true brightness of our human heart.

TRUST AND WISDOM

Retreats are not easy, are they? Sometimes we have very charismatic leaders who make us feel bright, riding on a wave of inspiration. Other times we have teachers who just keep us in the here-and-now with the stuff of our minds. And it's not easy to stay with life as it arises within yourself, is it? You begin to get a glimpse of what you carry around all day long in your everyday life. What you see is not so different from what goes on in the background in other situations. For example, the amount of patience you have with yourself and your practice is a sign of the amount of patience you have in your ordinary life. The amount of kindness you can generate for your own body and mind as you sit is a reflection of the kindness you have in your mind in your ordinary life.

And so it goes with many other things. Having a mirror for yourself is one of the most extraordinary things in your life. We can get feedback by seeing within ourselves. We carry this capacity to see ourselves as we are. In the practice, 'seeing' or insight is the most powerful tool for transformation. As you sit you observe the misery of your knees, your thoughts

come and go. Sometimes they are happy or inspired, other times they go back to humdrum thinking about what's going to happen after the retreat, how you're going to be able to carry on our practice, or just worries about daily life, what will happen in the future and so on. You see it all.

Sometimes people tell me their practice is not developing well, or they're 'losing it'. They can practise sometimes, but sometimes they lose interest or just can't do it. They ask, 'What can I do to improve in my practice? What can I do to sustain my practice?' Well, practice is not like becoming an athlete. When you set out to become an athlete or a dancer, or want to develop your body in some way, you can see how it develops. You can see your muscles getting stronger, your turn-out getting better. You can see your leg rising higher, you can see your split getting better, and so on. You have a visible, tangible mirror of what is happening to you. But you can't really witness progress in meditation in the same way. With the practice, when you're down in the pits and everything is going wrong, your teacher will tell you, 'Stay there, you're doing very, very well!' That's interesting, isn't it? It's not something we would expect. For most of the world, especially with the New Age culture, 'practice' is all about making one's mind very happy and very positive, and it is indeed important to have confidence that we can access well-being somehow. But what's left out is the whole side of life that is working in the background, working with an agenda that's basically pretty miserable – fear of not being happy, fear of not being healthy, fear of not being a success in life, fear of not getting what you want, and so on.

So, measuring progress in practice is not easy. When you think you're progressing you might actually be going backwards, and when you think you're going backwards you might be progressing. But even though you may not be able to see progress in the same way as you'd see your leg going higher and higher when learning ballet, you can notice the quality of your being in different situations. You can begin to be aware of how reactive your ego is. It's a mass of reactions. It's constantly bouncing around, trying to make sense of things, trying to defend itself, trying to avoid giving the wrong image to others. It hates being seen in a bad light.

There is a huge investment in this ego personality. It's very tricky. There is attachment to the personal identity, but the personal identity is completely false. Yet although it's a false identity, it's determined to be seen in such a way that it will be sustained. It wants to be sustained, so it has to be seen in a good light all the time, because if the ego didn't work, we'd just want to make it redundant. This is what happens when we get depressed. Our ego is not doing a good job of sustaining itself. We have an investment in it and we want to make it very powerful and good, but the ego is a part of nature. You can only hold it up and keep it doing well for a certain amount of time. Then it goes down, like day and night. It's a natural process. The mind cannot just keep going up. As Ajahn Sumedho says, you can't only breathe in, you'd die if you did that.

So the mind has its peaks and then its troughs. That's quite bewildering because we like the peaks and we don't want to be down in the troughs, or even halfway or a quarter

of the way down. The agenda of 'self' and the agenda of real enlightenment are very different, and as we work on our practice, as we develop our meditation and interest in the Dhamma, we keep bumping into the resistances of 'self'. On one level it would be nice to be enlightened and free, and we put a lot of energy into this as meditators and Dhamma practitioners. But at the same time we become bewildered because there is also a lot of resistance, a lot of forgetfulness – a lot of not wanting to be enlightened, free, and happy.

Trying to measure your progress in accordance with your notions of worldly success is very frustrating for the ego, because when you become better at your Dhamma practice there is no guarantee that people will notice. From the worldly point of view, someone would say that when you feel happy and peaceful, really joyful, loving, caring and bright, you're doing very well, you're doing wonderfully. That's how the world views it – you're looking good and people love you because you're attractive with all your powerful peaceful energy. But from the point of view of Dhamma that may be true, but it's not certain. Progress in Dhamma is not shown through the way things appear to be. When you live close to people they may see that you're more patient, kinder, more relaxed and so on, but in my experience the really powerful and transforming moments happen when people don't look that great. They come as a result of having been very patient with an experience of 'self' grating against non-delusion. When the 'self' comes up against the mind of non-delusion, it really has a rough time.

If you watch a dead leaf clinging to a branch in the wind, you'll see that when it's just about to break off the branch, it goes into a weird whirlwind movement – it suddenly starts moving very fast, and then it breaks off and drops on the ground. I saw this once and found it very interesting. For me that image shows that when Mara is losing ground things get really tough, you really start battling with the forces of delusion. It doesn't have to be a big battle. Just notice the pain in your body or your knees. I know from my own experience that when I'm just about to let go of the pain, I can feel the vibration in my mind increasing so it's almost throbbing with pain, increasing the pressure. You feel that you won't let go of the pain, you've got to move – then suddenly it just drops and the pain is okay. When a principle works for one thing I'm interested to see if it works for others. I'm interested to find out how I can apply that principle to all other aspects of life. So I became very interested in this process, noticing that when we're just about to let go of something important in ourselves, there is a terrific resistance.

If you stay with things as they are, if you stay with the texture of life and the vibrations of the restless mind, the restless body and the desire-energy body, it's very uncomfortable. Fortunately, the energy is not so powerful when you get older. When you are young you feel so much energy coursing through your body, you're really restless. Sometimes you don't know what to do with that energy. This is one aspect of practice and it can be confusing for people, because they think that practice is just sitting on the cushion

and developing a lot of concentration and a lot of mind power. But another aspect of practice is learning how to direct your desire energy towards a good destination.

People ask how much practice they need to do, how long they need to sit. Well, do as much as you can, but practice is not confined to just formal practice. If you really want to progress in your practice, integrate it in your words and your actions. Look at the kinds of thoughts you carry in your mind, the kinds of activity that go on in your body. Observe how you look after your body, what you eat, how much you sleep. Look at whether you are prepared to give up some things to develop some better things, like cutting down on television and useless activity to focus on the Dhamma.

I often hesitate to use the word 'discipline' because it scares people. In life, people don't want to be very disciplined. In fact the ego has its own agenda to make you feel as restless and resistant to discipline as possible, and in the world, when your mind is busy with a lot of activities, discipline is not always that easy. But when we talk about discipline it really means something. It's not just an empty word. Discipline is something that requires you to use your intelligence, your wisdom, your knowledge of yourself and the mind to assess what is really important in life – to find out what the priorities are, even to write them down if necessary. What is really most important for you in this life? It's so easy to get lost in a maze of other things. Discipline means sorting out, with a clear mind, what is really worth following and what isn't. The discipline itself is to stick with what you decide is really important.

The wisdom aspect of our life is really vital. Paññā, wisdom, is the ability to think clearly, to see things clearly, the ability to understand what is what and not be fooled by our thoughts and our moods. When you do a bit of work on yourself about projections and assumptions, you will be amazed at the dream-world of which we are part. Fundamentally it's already a dream-world anyway, but then our disconnection from reality adds dream upon dream. If the dreams were nice we might never wake up, but at some point they turn into nasty nightmares. That's when we start becoming interested in getting out of our dreams.

The wisdom aspect also entails a certain amount of effort in taking care of the mind, making it a fertile ground for insight. For example, if you have a confused mind, you don't see it as a problem. The fertile ground for insight is seeing confusion as it is. It's very simple, isn't it? But the ego doesn't think like that. The ego is always saying, 'I'm confused, and I feel happy when I'm not confused, so obviously I've got to get out of my confusion quickly.' Of course the ego isn't very clever, so it usually jumps into another programme of confusion. If it was very clever it would see the way out, but it doesn't. It usually jumps into another confusion that feels just a little bit more comfortable. There are uncomfortable confusions and comfortable confusions, and we tend to choose between them. The ego's programme is often simply to ask, 'Which is the least uncomfortable?' We really are in a bit of a pickle, aren't we?

But all is not lost. Don't worry. Liberation is much closer to us than we think. It's not that far away. Liberation doesn't

have a colour or a texture. It's difficult to show anybody the parts of yourself that you have let go of. What's left is just more space.

On one level there is a world, on another level there is reality. When you're living in the world everything seems very solid but, if you look at it closely, the world is illusory. The discipline in our practice is to train the mind to see things in the way the Buddha taught, with Right View. We all want to sort the world out, to rearrange it so it's manageable, but my experience is that I can't ever control the world out there for very long. One thing I do know, though, is that I can look after myself. I can take care of this person here. I can take care of this mind, I can take care of this body. I can know whether this mind and body are out of balance. I can know what my mind is doing. I can know whether or not there is an option for me to act in a way that is going to bring happiness and kindness into the world.

Nothing happens without some kind of input. If you don't put some kind of energy and interest into your practice, prioritize your practice as important, as being the source of your life, then it won't bear a lot of fruit. We all have a vast number of reasons for not being able to practise. Ajahn Chah used to say that you can breathe twenty-four hours a day, so if you can breathe you can practise – if you have time to breathe you have time to practise. That's not so difficult. But as we know, our worldly activities, our worldly interests tend to be very geared toward getting things, going somewhere, accumulating things. This is the energy of the world. It's always about thrusting ourselves forward to get more than we

already have. The Dhamma reminds you that the real refuge is a sense of contentment and trust.

People ask me, 'What is trust? How can I trust? My mind says I need to do this and I need to do that, and another part of my mind says to do something else, and I don't know what to trust. I don't know which part of my mind to listen to.' I think this is a big human problem. Trust. Faith. This is so important. What does it mean? I remember my teacher trying to translate it in a palatable way. Saddha is Pali for 'faith'. If we try to translate it into English, for the intellectually oriented it would be 'confidence'. For the more heart-oriented it would be 'trust'. There are different translations to match different categories of people. I remember when I didn't use the words 'faith' or 'trust'. I used the word 'confidence'. The ego says you feel 'confident', not just trusting or faithful. The words 'trust' and 'faith' seem weak from the ego's point of view, because the ego is constantly worried about not being in control. For the ego, the idea of having faith and not minding what happens is seen as a complete cop-out. Notice that. Notice the copping-out feeling when you say to yourself 'I don't know.' One of the greatest teachings I learned from Ajahn Sumedho was working for many years train my mind to say 'I don't know.' It was so liberating. As my mind would struggle to find an answer, I would calmly say, 'I don't know' over and over again.

Thoroughly discipline the mind with 'I don't know' – very gently, no need to use a sledgehammer, just 'I don't know. I don't know what I'll feel tomorrow, what I'll think tomorrow, or what others will feel and think tomorrow. I really don't

know.' And that's completely in accordance with reality. Reality is very compassionate. It leaves you free to think and feel and anticipate what you want, but if you believe in it you're back on the wheel of samsara, trying to figure out what you can't figure out. So 'don't know' is an aspect of trust.

You have to be firm with the mind, because it is a very powerful force. Thoughts are very powerful energies. They can easily do all kinds of things. Don't give them a chance to take hold of you. There are not many things you can trust out there, because things out there are pretty unstable. They change and move. Agendas differ from one person to another. You can't control anything out there, it's not possible, not even your own child. We don't realize how much we are the product of other people's minds. You think you're in charge, but if you don't know yourself yet you are the product of other people's minds, because you take on board what's in their minds. They say something and you get agitated. Somebody looks at you in a particular way and pushes your 'lack of confidence' buttons – 'I'm no good, I'm not pretty, I'm not nice, he doesn't like me, she likes me but he doesn't.' All kinds of things can be triggered by just a look. Other people can have so much power over us.

But you come to the point when you realize that what's out there is not your problem. There's no need to worry about it. In terms of getting to know the Dhamma, you don't need to find out what everybody else is thinking or feeling (or not feeling) about you. That's not where to look. You just need to know what's going on in yourself, who this person is. You need to be with this being that is you, connected with yourself rather than trying to figure out what other people

are doing. What really matters is what you're doing right now. Are you trying to please somebody because you want to be accepted, because you want to be loved, because you want to be this or that? There's nothing wrong with that as far as I'm concerned, but get to know it, be aware of it. Then you can learn. If you don't know it, if you don't see it, you will learn nothing. Seeing the pattern of your habits is an important part of practice. It's not that you have to have perfect patterns that look like enlightenment. The perfect pattern is the one you see. The one you see through is the one that has done its job, so to speak. It has fulfilled its purpose. It has brought you a bit more enlightenment, a bit more freedom. So if you see it, you can start working with it.

The sense of self is quite competitive. It doesn't want to be seen failing, it wants to be seen succeeding. It loves success. But the trusting heart doesn't worry about not fulfilling the ego's intense wish to outdo everybody. During the Olympic Games for the Handicapped there was a group of Down's Syndrome children who were doing a run. They all started on the line, ready to run, and the signal came – three, two, one, bang! They all ran, but a few fell backwards. All the others came back and picked up the ones who had fallen, and then they all ran together, holding hands. I find this such a touching story. It's a great image for our life too. When we don't have much heart we're always trying to outdo somebody. It's just the habit of wanting to outdo somebody else. So think of these Down's Syndrome children and see the heart energy manifesting – some of them fell down, and the others picked them up and started again.

We move in a world where success, praise, love, and fame play out in our mind. We're just receptors of those forces. We live in a world that is driven by them. The shadow side of those forces is being unloved, being hated, losing fame, being unsuccessful and so on. If you're going through this shadow side and I can help you in any way, I give you this – the strength, the power, the joy, the peace, the intelligence, the wisdom of your human heart remain not just intact, but strengthened by this death to worldly values. Strengthened.

I wanted to bring up how the aspects of wisdom and trust work together and how they balance each other, and I also want to speak about them in their context as two of the Five Spiritual Faculties. In addition to wisdom and trust, you also have the faculties of concentration and energy, which you are developing in your practice right now. They are together on one side, with the faculties of faith and wisdom together on the other side. Acting as a balance is the faculty of mindfulness. This is where your real life lies – in developing those faculties. A Pali word that is sometimes used for 'faculties' is bala, which means 'power'. You have these five powers or faculties of the mind. Develop them and your mind becomes very strong, powerful, but in a selfless way. If wisdom is there you're not constantly trying to get something for yourself in a selfish way. You begin to see that we are all interconnected. What you do for somebody else comes back to you. What you do for yourself affects others.

For me, knowing we are really interconnected brings trust. I am not alone. For a long time I had a feeling that I was somehow connected to others, but now that feeling is much

more real. You can really see how people affect you and you affect them, and you take responsibility for that. At first we don't even notice this and we don't want to take responsibility for it, but when you discover this interconnection it enhances your own life and the lives of others. It's very joyful to see this. It's a very playful energy. What brings joy to you brings joy to others, and then their joy infects you.

If there is wisdom, when others are miserable you don't feel you have to sort them out immediately. You know how to help them in a better way than by asking them to get rid of their misery quickly, which is the worldly way. When things are difficult in our community, we don't try to get rid of the difficulties straightaway. We try to understand, knowing that any reactions which are too quick, without a sense of waiting and seeing, will bring the wrong results. So when you have a problem in life, don't rush. Don't push. If you really want to know where you are, just go back into the refuge of stillness in yourself, the refuge of a calm mind in which you can ask questions like – what do I do? But don't expect a good response from a mind that is agitated and in turmoil.

We do have a way of knowing. It might not be clear straightaway, but this 'here and now' is the only place we have, so we might as well go there. Everything else is always a bit untrustworthy. When you're really at peace, calm and detached, you may find a friend comes and tells you what you should do and how you should do it. You find that suddenly life manifests around you in a way you never expected. Something just happens, you know? A situation turns up on your doorstep and you wonder why. It can seem like life is

taking care of you, rather than following the habit of relying on 'me' and 'mine', and desires based on fear and reactivity. In that place of stillness and quiet and balance of awareness, you can obtain the information that you need in life.

Trust and wisdom – bring them together. And you need the other faculties or powers to strengthen the mind. You can't have trust and wisdom without them – to be able to focus rightly, to have the energy to focus, to be present with what is going on. Mindfulness needs to be ever-present – the mind that is reflective and bright and already without problems.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ajahn Sundara was born in France in 1946. She studied dance in England and in France. In her early thirties, after working for a few years as a dancer and teacher of contemporary dance, she had the opportunity whilst living and studying in England to 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. Before long this led to a visit to Chithurst Monastery in England, where in 1979 she asked to join the monastic community 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 spending five years at Chithurst Monastery, she went to live at Amaravati Monastery, where she participated in the establishment of the nuns' community. From 1995 until 1998 she spent three years deepening 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 came to the United States where she was based at Abhayagiri Monastery. She lives at present at Amaravati Monastery.

She is interested in exploring ways of practising, sustaining and integrating Buddhist teachings in Western culture. Since the late 1980's she has taught and led meditation retreats worldwide.

FURTHER CONNECTIONS

For Internet connections to articles, books and places within Theravada Buddhism, we recommend:

www.accesstoinsight.org

www.buddhanet.net

www.forestsangha.org
(the umbrella website that includes many of Ajahn Chah's monasteries)

www.amaravati.org
(the website of the monastery where I live, which also has teachings you can download)

www.forestsanghapublications.org
(a place where this book as well as many more sangha publications can be found)

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