Teachings of a BUDDHIST MONK & NOW IS THE KNOWING

Ven. Ajahn Sumedho

TEACHINGS OF A BUDDHIST MONK

&

NOW IS THE KNOWING

VEN. AJAHN SUMEDHO

Printed and donated for free distribution by
The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation
11F., 55 Hang Chow South Road Sec 1, Taipei, Taiwan, R.O.C.
Tel: 886-2-23951198 , Fax: 886-2-23913415
Email: overseas@budaedu.org
Website:http://www.budaedu.org

Teachings of a BUDDHIST MONK

Ajahn Sumedho

Edited by
Diana St Ruth

Illustrated by
Marcelle Hanselaar

BUDDHIST PUBLISHING GROUP

Buddhist Publishing Group Sharpham North
Ashprington Totnes Devon TQ9 7UT England

British Cataloguing
in Publication Data

Ajahn Sumedho
  Teachings of a Buddhist monk.
  1. Buddhist life
  I. Title II. St.Ruth, Diana
  294.3444

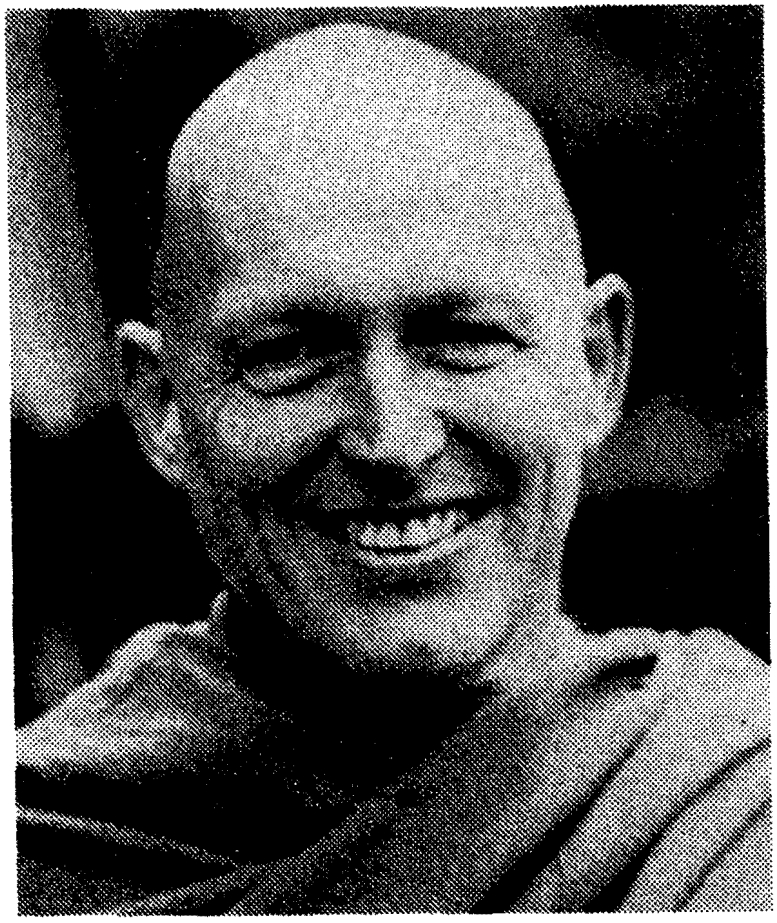
ISBN 0-946672-23-7

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful thanks go to Ajahn Sucitto as well as to Don Whitbread for looking through the manuscript and offering helpful suggestions.

CONTENTS

Foreword	9
Let go of Fire	17
Tools to Use	29
One Inhalation	38
Taking a Stand	54
It's Not Fair	63
An Ugly Sand Grain	79
Being the Knowing	90
He Did Not Pass the Cakes	97



AJAHN SUMEDHO

Robert Jackman (now known as Ajahn Sumedho) was born in Seattle, Washington in 1934. He was brought up in an Anglican family with one elder sister. Between 1951 and 1953, he studied Chinese and history at the University of Washington. Then he served as a medic in the US Navy for four years, and in 1959 he returned to the University to complete his BA degree in Far Eastern Studies.

The studies introduced him to Buddhism through books, while the period of naval service brought him into contact with the Buddhist society of Japan. His desire to help people made him take up a year's service with the US Red Cross as a social worker. After that, in 1961 he undertook a master's degree in South Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where he graduated in 1963.

He was drawn again to take up service, this time in Sabah, Borneo, where he worked as a teacher in the Peace Corps between 1964 and 1966.

In 1966 he went to Thailand, took up meditation and was ordained as a novice. In May 1967 he received full ordination.

On encountering a disciple of Ajahn Chah, he

sought out this meditation master in the forest monastery of Wat Nong Pah Pong. He then became a disciple of Ajahn Chah and remained under his guidance for ten years.

During this period (1967-1977), the now Venerable Sumedho underwent training in several of Ajahn Chah's branch monasteries, and undertook a pilgrimage in India late in 1973. In 1975, Ajahn Chah authorized him to lead a small community of monks in establishing a forest monastery for Western monks.

In 1976, Venerable Sumedho went to visit his parents in America, and during a stop-over in England was invited to stay at a small Buddhist monastery in Hampstead, London. A second visit followed a year later which, though it had not been his intention, was the beginning of his residency in England. Since that time, with much hard work and a lot of good will, two large and impressive establishments have come into being in England: a Forest Monastery in Chithurst, West Sussex, and the Amaravati Buddhist Centre in Great Gaddesden, Hertfordshire. Venerable Sumedho (the honorific 'Ajahn' means 'teacher' or 'master') presently resides as Abbot at the Amaravati Centre.

FOREWORD

I met Ajahn Sumedho in 1967 on a mountain top in Sakolnakorn Province, Northeast Thailand. He was living together with another monk in a cottage in the ruins of an ancient Cambodian mountain temple, after completing his first rains retreat as a fully ordained bhikkhu with Ajahn Chah. There he sat on the corner of the porch of his tiny wooden cottage wearing the dusty robes of a forest monk. The first thing I noticed, after paying respects, was that he was covered with bees. He greeted me and we began talking about the monk's life and the Dharma as if nothing special was happening. Apparently there was a bee's nest at the corner of this cottage and, after his own reflection on this fact, he had simply made his peace with the bees and let them walk all over him. Already I knew I had met a remarkable man. As our conversation about Dharma progressed from my interest in Buddhism to his experiences of practice, my respect for him grew. After a long and lonely first year, sitting as a novice at a temple in Nong Kai Province, he had met a monk from Wat Pah Pong, one of the great forest monasteries, and followed him to meet the teacher, Ajahn Chah. In the forest he had found a way of

practice, harder but truer than isolated retreat, and even in a short time I could sense how the integrity and depth of this path of practice had touched him. He said it had not been easy and that Ajahn Chah had not treated him in any special way – which is unusual, since Western monks usually received rather grand treatment in Thailand. He even expressed some doubts about going back again, but the spirit of his words and his connection to the commitment of discipline, honesty and simplicity in the forest life made it sound like he was hooked. I was also hooked by the inspiration of his descriptions. Sometime shortly thereafter I went on the first of many visits to Wat Pah Pong and, after completing my American Peace Corps tenure, I too became a monk with Ajahn Chah.

The climb up to this Cambodian temple at Wat Pupek was, as I recall, about two thousand steps. Ajahn Sumedho tells the story of how in the months following my visit, during the hottest of the hot season in Thailand, he got very sick. He had dysentery and fevers and god knows what other tropical ailments, and became far too weak to walk down the mountain several miles to a nearby village and then up the mountain again simply to collect his day's food. Instead he lay sick, stuck on the wooden floor of a small hut at the foot of the mountain several miles from the next village. This hut, as many in Thailand, had a corrugated tin roof which made it function as a particularly fine oven under the punishing rays of

the hot-season sun. I visited him also in this hut and he told me that his weakness and fevers had made it so impossible for him to collect alms food that devoted villagers from the nearby villages were coming and dropping off food for him so that he might eat each day. As he describes it, he lay there sick, feverish, isolated, roasting hot and miserably unhappy. All of the doubts that could and do assail a young monk or beginning meditator took over his mind. Why was he doing this to himself, anyway, living in such a wretched condition in these strange Buddhist robes – for what purpose, to what benefit? He questioned for himself: 'Why did I ever ordain, why did I start meditating?' Why did he not simply disrobe and return to the West to enjoy good health, easy living, music, camaraderie of friends, and a full and happy life? The sicker and hotter he got, the stronger became the doubts. He says these doubts more than doubled his misery. The heat and the sickness of the body were bad enough, but having the mind filled with doubts, with resentment, agitation and confusion, was much worse. Somehow, looking at himself in the height of his misery, he saw and understood that it was HE who was creating most of the suffering he was experiencing at that moment. It was he who was creating the suffering of doubting, restlessness, agitation and confusion. And then he simply decided to commit himself to the monk's life and end the suffering of doubting, restlessness and confusion. He let go of

the suffering of his mind and accepted his situation as a monk, even in these difficulties, and has not turned back for the nearly twenty-five years that have followed.

It is just the qualities of strength, straightforwardness and perseverance illustrated in this story that Ajahn Sumedho has brought to his practice and his teachings. He urges us to live with things as they are, directly, simply and mindfully. He teaches the freedom of having no preferences, and he has amply demonstrated the wisdom of this way of life over and over again in the difficulties of his own training and teaching as a monk.

As did the Buddha and Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho teaches suffering and its end. In the first year-long retreat he did as a novice, alone in a hut in Nong Kai Province, he had faithfully practised the art of meditation. In these long months of solitary intensive practice, he experienced many of the traditional insights and samadhi states that are the fruit of such retreats. But then, under his teacher, Ajahn Chah, he discovered a wisdom beyond all states and all conditions, a spirit of the Dharma of attaining nothing. His practice and teaching became focused on just what is here and now in this moment. Whatever arises in this moment is the place of our suffering and bondage and is the place of our liberation.

All his teaching points to an immediate mindfulness of this very body and mind. It is not

through philosophy or special practices, but here, that wisdom arises. Ajahn Sumedho has brought the simplicity of the forest life and the freedom of the Dharma that grasps at nothing, and offered it to students in the West. To live the holy life, the life of freedom, is to stand nowhere, to possess nothing, to take no fixed position, to open to what is, moment after moment.

This freedom is in him. As a teacher, he brings a spontaneity, wonderful humour and warmth, a terrible, self-revealing honesty, and a clear and uncompromising wisdom. In his years of practice and teaching, he describes wrestling with his own loneliness and weakness, with his anger, fear and pride and, in doing so, invites us all to look most honestly at our own hearts and minds.

In many ways, Ajahn Sumedho has become the most successful abbot of any Western Buddhist monastery and a cornerstone in the development of the ordained Sangha in the West. He teaches the monk's life without a spirit of grasping or rigidity. Instead he brings to this ancient form a tremendous sense of joy and freedom. He loves the monastic life and so people gather around him to enjoy his joy and love and to let the practices of the Dharma that have transformed him transform them as well. Often the monk's life has been used as a vehicle to attain meditative states, jhanas, psychic powers, stream entry, and more. But for Ajahn Sumedho (and for the Buddha as well), the holy life of the monks

and nuns is not just a vehicle to be used to grasp after or attain something. It is actually an expression of enlightenment. The joy and simplicity, the letting go into its forms, are what Ajahn Sumedho invites his ordained followers to participate in. He invites them to use the form as a means of coming home to themselves, of making peace with what is.

Spiritual life is not about becoming someone special but discovering a greatness of heart within us and every being. It is an invitation to inwardly drop our opinions, our views, our ideas, our thoughts, our whole sense of time and ourselves, and come to rest in no fixed position. Ajahn Sumedho invites us all, ordained and lay people alike, to enjoy the freedom beyond all conditions, a freedom from fears, from gain and loss, from pleasure and pain. This is the joy and happiness of the Buddha.

Perhaps this is too exalted a description of his way of practice. I dare not praise him too much – he would just make fun of it. Yet so many of us who know him feel blessed, delighted, instructed, and profoundly fortunate to have Ajahn Sumedho in our lives. This book that follows is one small part of the wealth of Dharma that Ajahn Sumedho has brought and offered to the West.

Jack Kornfield
Spirit Rock Center
California, March 1990

Teachings of a BUDDHIST MONK

Let go of Fire

The Buddha's teaching is all about understanding suffering – its origin, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. When we contemplate suffering, we find we are contemplating desire, because desire and suffering are the same thing.

Desire can be compared to fire. If we grasp fire, what happens? Does it lead to happiness? If we say: 'Oh, look at that beautiful fire! Look at the beautiful colours! I *love* red and orange; they're my favourite colours,' and then grasp it, we would find a certain amount of suffering entering the body. And then if we were to contemplate the cause of that suffering we would discover it was the result of having grasped that fire. On that information, we would, hopefully, then let the fire go. Once we let fire go, then we know that it is something not to be attached to. This does not mean we have to hate it, or put it out. We can enjoy fire, can't we? It is nice having a fire, it keeps the room warm, but we do not have to burn ourselves in it.

When we really contemplate suffering, we no longer incline towards grasping hold of desire, because it hurts, is painful, there is no point in doing it. So, from that time on, we understand: 'Oh! That's why I'm suffering; that's its origin.

Ah! *now* I understand. It's that grasping hold of desire that causes me all this misery and suffering, all this fear, worry, expectation, despair, hatred, greed, delusion. All the problems of life come from grasping and clinging to the fire of desire.'

The human habit of clinging to desire is ingrained. We in the West think of ourselves as sophisticated and educated, but when we really begin to see what is going on in our minds, it is rather frightening – most of us are horribly ignorant. We do not have an inkling of who we are, or what the cause of suffering is, or of how to live rightly – not an inkling. Many people want to take drugs, drink, and do all kinds of things to escape suffering – but their suffering increases. How conceited and arrogant we Western people can be, thinking of ourselves as civilized! We are educated, it is true, we can read and write, and we have wonderful machines and inventions. In comparison the tribal peoples in Africa, for example, seem primitive, superstitious, don't they? But we are all in exactly the same boat! It is just that *our* superstitions are different. We actually believe in all kinds of things.

For instance, we try to explain our universe through concepts, thinking that concepts are reality. We believe in reason, in logic – which is to say we believe in things we do not know. We have not *really* understood how it all begins and ends. If we read a book and believe what it tells

us, believe what the scientists say, we are just believing. We think: 'We're sophisticated. We believe in what the scientists say. People have PhDs – we believe in what *they* say. We don't believe in what witch-doctors say; they're stupid and ignorant.' But it is all belief, isn't it? We still do not know – it just sounds good. The Buddha said we should find out for ourselves and then we do not have to believe others.

We contemplate the universe as impermanent; we can see the impermanent nature of all conditions. From this contemplation, wisdom arises. There is nothing we can find in changing conditions that has any kind of self-continuity. All things begin and end; they arise out of the void and they go back into the void. And wherever we look we are not going to find any kind of permanent personality, or self. The only reason we think we have a personality is because we have memories, ideas and opinions about ourselves. If we are intellectual, we are always up in the head, thinking about everything. Emotionally we might not be developed at all – throw temper tantrums, scream and yell when we do not get our own way. We can talk about Sophocles and Aristotle, have magnificent discussions about the great German philosophers and about Ramakrishna, Aurobindo, and Buddha, and then somebody does not give us what we want and we throw a tantrum! It is all up in the head; there is no emotional stability.

There was a monk I knew once who was quite

sophisticated compared to some of the other monks. He had lived in Bangkok for many years, been in the Thai navy, could speak pidgin English. He was quite intelligent and rather impressive. But he had this terrible health problem and felt he could no longer exist on one meal a day. In fact his health was so bad that he had to disrobe [leave the Buddhist Order]. After that he became an alcoholic! He could give brilliant talks whilst being smashed out of his mind. He had the intellect, but no morality or concentration.

On the other hand, we can have very strict morality and not have any wisdom. Then we are moral snobs, or bigots. Or we can become attached to concentration and not have any wisdom. 'I'm on a meditation retreat and I've developed some concentration, some insight, but when I go home, oorh! I don't know if I'll be able to practise any more, or even if I'll have time. I have so many duties, so many responsibilities.' But how we live our ordinary lives is the real practice. Retreats are opportunities for getting away from all those responsibilities and things that press in on us, so as to be able to get a better perspective on them. But if the retreats are just used to escape for a few days and that is all, then they are of no great value. If, on the other hand, they are used for investigating suffering – 'Why do I suffer? Why am I confused? Why do I have problems? Why is the world as it is?' – then we

shall find out if there is anything we can do about suffering. We shall find that out by investigating this body and this mind.

Ignorance is only the scum on the surface, it does not go deep; there is no vast amount of ignorance to break through. That ignorance here and now, that attachment to the fire here and now – we can let it go. There is no need to attach to fire any more – that is all there is to it. It is not a question of putting out the fire. But if we grasp it, we should let it go. Once we have let the fire go, then we should not grasp it again.

In our daily lives, we should be mindful. What does it mean to be mindful? It means to be fully aware right here, concentrating on what is going on inside. We are looking at something, for instance, and we try to concentrate on that; then a sound comes, and then a smell, then this and then that – distractions, changes. We say: 'I can't be mindful of this environment; it's too confusing. I have to have a special environment where there are no distractions, then I *can* be mindful. If I go to one of those retreats, then I can be mindful; no distractions there – peace and quiet – noble silence! I can't be mindful in Edinburgh or London – too many distractions. And I've got family, children, too much noise!'

But mindfulness is not necessarily concentrating on an object. Being aware of confusion is also being mindful. If we have all kinds of things coming at our senses – noises, people demanding

this and that – we cannot concentrate on any one of them for very long. But we can be aware of the confusion, or the excitement, or the impingement; we can be aware of the reactions in our own minds. That is what we call being mindful. We can be mindful of confusion and chaos. And we can be mindful of peace and tranquillity.

The path of mindfulness is the path of no preferences. When we prefer one thing to another, then we concentrate on it: 'I prefer peace to chaos.' So, then, in order to have peace, what do we do? We have to go to some place where there is no confusion, become a hermit, go up to the Orkneys, find a cave. I found a super cave once off the coast of Thailand. It was on a beautiful little island in the Gulf of Siam. And it was my sixth year as a monk. All these Westerners were coming to Wat Pah Pong – Western monks. And they were causing me a lot of sorrow and despair. I thought: 'I don't want to teach these people; they're too much of a problem; they're too demanding; I want to get as far away from Western monks as possible.' The previous year I had spent a Rains Retreat* with five others. Oh, what a miserable Rains Retreat that was! I thought: 'I'm not going to put up with that! I didn't come here to do that; I came here to have

*A time when a monk remains in his monastery for meditation.

peace.' So I made some excuse to go to Bangkok and from there I found this island. I thought it was perfect. They had caves on the island and little huts on the beaches. It was the perfect set-up for a monk. One could go and get one of those huts and live in it. And then go on alms-round in the village. The village people were all very friendly, especially to Western monks because to be a Western monk was very unusual. We could depend on having all the food we could possibly eat, and more. It was not a place that was easy to get to, being out in the Gulf of Thailand, and I thought: 'Oh, they'll never find me out here, those Western monks; they'll not find me here.' And then I found a cave, one with a path*, and it was beautiful. It had an inner chamber that was completely dark and no sounds could penetrate. I crawled in through a hole and inside there was nothing. I could neither see nor hear anything. So it was ideal for sensory deprivation: 'Oh, this is exactly what I've been looking for; I can practise all these high *jhanic* states. I can go in this cavern and just practise for hours on end with no kind of sense stimulation.' I really wanted to see what would happen. But there was this old monk living in this cave who was not sure whether he was going to stay. Anyway, he said I could have the grass hut on the top of the hill. I went up there and

*A path suitable for walking meditation (jongrom in Thai).

looked, and down below was the sea. I thought: 'Oh, this is also nice because now I can concentrate on the sea, which is tranquillizing.'

There was a Thai monk on the island who was a very good friend of mine and he said: 'Well, if they find you here, there's an island about fifteen miles further out – they'll never find you there. There's a little hut there, and a little village; the people in the village would love to take care of a monk.' So I was thinking: 'You know, possibly after the Rains Retreat, I will go out to that further island.'

I really was determined to escape. I wanted peace and I found the Western monks very confusing. They would always ask lots of questions and were so demanding. So I was all set to spend the Rains Retreat in this idyllic situation. And then – this foot! My right foot became severely infected and they had to take me off the island into the local hospital on the mainland. I was very ill. They would not let me go back to the island and I had to spend the Rains Retreat in a monastery near the town. Sorrow, despair and resentment arose towards this foot – all because I was attached to tranquillity. I wanted to escape the confusion of the world; I really longed to lock myself in a tomb where my senses would not be stimulated, where no demands would be made on me, where I would be left alone, incognito, invisible. But after that I contemplated my attitude; I contemplated my greed for peace. And I did not seek tranquillity any more.

I never did return to that island. The foot healed fairly well and I had a chance to go to India. Then, after that I went back to Wat Pah Pong, and by that time I had decided not to make preferences. My practice would be 'the way of no preferences'; I would just take things as they came. On my return to Wat Pah Pong I was put in the responsible position of being a translator for Ajahn Chah. I detested having to translate for Westerners, but there I was. I had to do it, and I also had to teach and train monks. A year or so after that they even sent me off to start my own monastery! Within two years there were about twenty Western monks living with me. Then I was invited to England.

And so I have never escaped to that cave because I no longer made preferences. The responsibilities and teaching seem to be increasing, but it is part of the practice of 'no preferences'. And I find, through this practice, my mind is calm and peaceful. I no longer resent the demands made on me, or dwell in aversion or confusion about the never-ending problems and misunderstandings that arise in human society. So the practice is – just mindfulness. No longer do I long for tranquillity. Tranquillity comes and I see it as impermanent. Confusion comes – impermanent; peacefulness – impermanent; war – impermanent. I just keep seeing the impermanent nature of all conditions and I have never felt more at peace with the world than I do now, living in Britain – much more so than I ever did

when I was, say, those few days on that island. At that time I was clinging desperately to ideals of what I wanted and there was the accompanying fear of having them taken away – I was afraid that Westerners would come and bother me and that my peaceful environment would be interfered with. There was a real selfishness involved in that rejection and shutting out of others, and a real fear that others might ruin it for me. So this attachment to peace and conditions inevitably brings fear and worry along with it, because all conditions can easily be taken away or destroyed. The kind of peace that we can get from 'no preferences', however, can never be taken away. It can never be taken away because we can adapt; we are not dependent upon the environment for tranquillity; we have no need to seek tranquillity, or long for it, or resent confusion. So, when we reflect on the Buddha's teaching (seeing suffering, its origin, its cessation and the path to its cessation), we can see that he was teaching the path of 'no preferences'.

The Buddha was enlightened. He spent six years as an ascetic, doing tranquillizing practices, attaining the highest states of absorption, and he said: 'No! This isn't it! This is still suffering. This is still delusion.' And, from that realization he found the Middle Way, the path of 'no preferences', the path of awareness.

We should not expect high degrees of tranquillity if we are living in an environment

where people are confused or not tranquil, or where we have a lot of responsibilities and duties. We should not think: 'Oh! I want to be somewhere else; I don't want to be here.' Then we are making a preference. We should observe the kind of life that we have, whether we like it or not – it is changing, anyway; it does not matter.

In life 'like' tends to change into 'dislike'; 'dislike' tends to change into 'like'. Even pleasant conditions change into unpleasant ones, and unpleasant conditions eventually become pleasant. We should just keep this awareness of impermanence and be at peace with the way things are, not demanding that they be otherwise. The people we live with, the places we live in, the society we are a part of – we should just be at peace with everything. But most of all we should be at peace with ourselves – that is the big lesson to learn in life. It is really hard to be at peace with oneself. I find that most people have a lot of self-aversion. It is much better to be at peace with our own bodies and minds than anything else, and not demand that they be perfect, that we be perfect, or that everything be good. We can be at peace with the good and the bad.

Tools to Use

There are two basic practices of Buddhist meditation. The first one is the way of developing concentration and tranquillizing the mind. And the second one is the way of developing insight.

Through watching the breath, the mind clears and one becomes absorbed into the sensation of breathing. Then the mind is tranquil and clear. This is the first practice and is a very good thing to develop. Initially, of course, we may find it difficult, or we may even find we have an aversion towards it, but through practice we can become skilful.

The second practice, insight meditation, is simple, but those of us who are impatient do not always find it so. We may have ideas of what should be happening and try to *make* it happen; we may get deluded by our doubts, not knowing what to do next; we may feel bored and restless; we may get caught in changing phenomena. If we find ourselves getting caught in this way, we should stop, detach from it, observe and investigate. Great feelings are sometimes very hard to detach from – so much energy aroused – and the body has a strong reaction. So we should observe the body.

What does the body feel like – the sensations in the heart, in the stomach, in the abdomen? We should bring our attention to the body itself, reflecting on its nature. The body is changing; it was born and it will die. This is the characteristic of all phenomena, mental or physical. Thought, memory, consciousness, all have the same characteristic of beginning and ending, being born and dying. The body is the coarsest thing we have; it seems to be our most solid and permanent possession. Thoughts – they are always changing. And sound – can you keep a sound? Is there such a thing as a permanent sound, or a permanent odour that we can say is really ours? Pain, physical pain sometimes seems like an eternity, but it is not. Pleasure, of course, goes much too quickly; we would like it to stay longer. Fear, worry, remorse, guilt, mental dullness, torpor, sleepiness, happiness – all these things change. No permanency is to be found in any of them. The body, seemingly, is the most stable of them all. But it too changes.

Any form of suffering has a feeling of eternity about it; anything that is painful – despair, anguish, sorrow – these all seem as though they will go on forever. But 'forever' is impermanent, it is a concept. An hour of pleasure is like five minutes. Five minutes of pain is like an hour. Time is relative. We think of time as twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, something objective and scientific, but mentally it is a very emotional kind of thing.

There is that which is beautiful, lovely to the eye, to the ear, beautiful fragrances, tastes, pleasurable sensations to the body, beautiful thoughts – fascinating, romantic, lovely, altruistic. Then there is the reverse of all that – the ugly, the unharmonious, the stinking, the unpleasant, pain, hunger, thirst, unpleasant thoughts and memories. We should observe these, note their nature, note their characteristics – whether pleasant or unpleasant, lovely or hideous. Whatever they are like, they all have the characteristic of change, impermanency. Unless we are terribly wise to begin with, we really do not notice this. The Buddha pointed it out to his disciples: 'Look and see for yourselves. Can you find anything permanent? Investigate! Look into things. Be the one who observes, who is aware. Don't be the blind one, the one who just follows his habits,' winds up like a mechanical toy and then runs down.

As human beings we have the ability to reflect. We do not have to be mechanical; there is no need for us to be victims of habit. But we shall be if we do not bring awareness to our lives, if we do not investigate, enquire, look directly into the present moment: 'Who am I? Why was I born?' These are the unanswerable questions we ask ourselves. 'What happens when I die?' Human beings can ask these questions, can reflect and can observe. Wisdom is within each one of us; it is not something that is far away, or something that we have to get hold of or

accumulate. There is not one of us lacking in perfect wisdom.

As human beings we have the misfortune of habitually identifying with changing phenomena as 'me' or 'mine': 'This body is me, it's my body.' And we spend a lot of time identifying with it and trying to preserve it. Somebody insults it, we feel offended. Somebody praises it, we feel happy. Somebody hits it, we get angry: 'They're hitting me!' Somebody we like gives us a loving pat, we feel happy and joyful: 'They love me! They love my body.' We cling to this coarse body as 'ours': 'I am a man;' 'I am a woman;' 'I am beautiful;' 'I am young;' 'I am old and ugly;' or whatever. However it may appear to us, we consider it to be ours.

The price we pay for identifying with this body in this way is that we suffer. Even though we might have the illusion of being young, beautiful, intelligent – eventually it all changes. No matter how much we do not want the body to age and get sick and die, it does it anyway. So can we really say: 'It's my body; this is me'?

We should look at this body, investigate it: 'What is it?' Ajahn Chah would say that the body is just a place you are temporarily renting: 'It doesn't belong to you, so don't get upset about what happens to it. Take proper care of it; don't mistreat it; feed it properly. But don't regard it as your possession. Don't get infatuated or attached to it. Because if you do, you'll suffer.'

This also applies to our emotions, thoughts and

memories: 'Ten years ago . . . ;' 'Fifteen years ago . . . ;' 'Five years ago . . . ' – our personal history. We identify with it. We have diaries and pictures, photographs taken of when we were babies and when we were in school. We like to look and think: 'I looked like that ten years ago. That was *me*.' We feel safe and warm when we think that we existed in the past. But what are memories? Can we keep a memory for any length of time? Does it come and go? Does it have any solid substance to it? Is it a reality? What is it? And what is thought? If we think a very high thought: 'Save all the suffering beings in the world!', or a low, mean one: 'Exploit! Hurt! Be cruel to all the living beings in the world!' what these two kinds of thought have in common is that they are only thought. They begin and they end – both of them. One gives pleasure; one gives pain. One is beautiful; one is ugly. But beauty and ugliness, pleasure and pain, high thinking and low thinking all have the same characteristic of impermanence. So we keep reflecting, investigating, noticing, being aware. Sensations in the body, physical pain – we can look at these as well. There is no need for us to habitually react to these things by running away. We can look at pain, and at pleasure. What do we feel like when we are upset? What is it like when we are depressed? We can look at what it does to our bodies, and we can learn.

These thoughts, emotions and sensations are our teachers, and through the practice of

awareness, we shall be allowing wisdom to function. We shall not find 'the wise one', we shall never be able to *find* wisdom, but we shall *be* wise. Wisdom is something we *are* already. Being wise means being aware; it does not mean indulging in emotions and moods; it means being aware of them as they come and go, allowing them to be as they are, not trying to analyse them, or figure them out, saying: 'What does this fascinating sign mean?'

Some people get fascinating signs in their practice. They see lights or have strange visions, and they immediately get fascinated by them, thinking: 'This is a special sign; I'm a special person!' It is all just mad memories, mad perceptions.

The Zen Buddhists have a saying: 'If you see the Buddha, kill him!' So, some people have these mad perceptions: the Buddha comes down and says: 'Listen, friend, you're enlightened. I'm the Buddha and I'm saying this to you.' This has happened, but such things are nothing but creations. We can create anything we want – Jesus Christ, Buddha, Mohammed, Krishna. I met a man in India once, an Englishman, who thought he was Lord Krishna.

We are not trying to become Krishna or Buddha; we are not trying to conceive things and then make ourselves into images of those things, or model ourselves into forms again – that is more birth and death. We may be Lord Krishna for awhile, but then we die again. It does not

really matter if we are Lord Krishna or Buddha, or Jim, or Jane. They all have the same characteristic of impermanency. So let us not get fascinated with exotic names and concepts. They are all the same, and just the same as the mundane ones. Jim, Jane, Buddha, Krishna – they are only concepts and names, conventions.

So being the wise one is being the one who knows. We can be wise right now. We never *become* wise; we never *attain* wisdom. How can we attain what we have already? We just start using it, that is all. And we use it by bringing awareness to our lives, reflecting on our bodies and on our mental conditions, on our moods, feelings, emotions, physical sensations, and on our consciousness through the senses – through the ear, eye, nose, tongue, and body.

The body and mind that we have, that we are renting temporarily, is our teacher. It is teaching us about the nature of all compounded phenomena. This is a lesson we have to learn. And we can learn it in this lifetime. If we do learn it, we shall not have to go through all of this again. If we do not learn it, we *shall* have to go through it again, some other time. So, people who have the good fortune to be bored with the whole process already, if they are bored with being attached to changing things, identifying with all the pieces, the fragments that are experienced through the senses, bored with clinging possessively to things of no value, bubbles . . . , if they are bored with doing those

things, then they are Buddhists. And to be a Buddhist means to be wise, to live with awareness, mindfully, reflecting on what is present.

These two practices – concentration and insight – are tools that we can use. We can use them in a formal way, but we can also use them when we are walking, working, standing still, or lying down. We can learn to interfere with our habits, mental and physical. There is no point in just indulging blindly in our emotions, in attraction or aversion; we should STOP. We should learn to interfere, learn to look into, learn to confront. Everything in us is being pulled outward through our senses. We look at something beautiful – a beautiful car, a beautiful house – and we want it. This is the desire to grasp, to identify with, to possess. This is what desire does; it pulls us outward all the time. When we just follow desire, we are always identifying with the objects of our senses, grasping at them, or rejecting them. That which is ugly or unpleasant to the senses is rejected, destroyed or repressed. This is the way nature works. If we identify with desire then we are always going to be enslaved by it. It will always pull us this way and that, drive us absolutely mad! There is no end to desire, it just goes on and on and on. Is there any way to completely gratify a desire? If we satiate ourselves – if, for example we eat so much that we stuff ourselves full of food – then suddenly we have no more

desire for food, we have an aversion to it. But before long the desire is there again and so we eat more, and then we do not want any more . . . And we keep going on like that – gratifying desire without understanding it.

Sometimes meditators think they should not have desires or should not have greed or lust, or they think they should not like beautiful things, or should not be this way or that way. But these are more concepts. Thinking we should *not* be, we should *not* have, we should not be the way we are – the moods, the faults, or whatever – this is wrong view. Things are just as they are. The body is as it is. Thoughts come and go according to conditions. Good thoughts, bad thoughts, fine ones, mean ones, whatever – they are a part of nature, all of them. But none of them belongs to us. These things are conditions that arise and pass away, they are born and they die from moment to moment.

Through awareness we no longer identify and attach to such thoughts – this is liberation into immortality. And this we cannot conceive. Can we conceive of anything that does not begin and end? What is the beginning of immortality? And what is the end of it? We can philosophize about it till doomsday – it will not help at all. So we bring our practice down to practical living, right now in the present moment, to awareness in the present moment, from one moment to the next. It is through resolute, constant awareness that we develop.

One Inhalation

The mental world is so powerful and strong, and our minds get so confused, that we get carried away by emotions or by the appearance of things. We really need to establish a point that we can use for meditation, such as our breathing. We are always breathing wherever we are, whether in a quiet place, or in Piccadilly Circus. So, even if we cannot stay anywhere for very long, at least we can stop the mind wandering and being pulled into everything going on around us. We may not get really good concentration in a place like Piccadilly Circus, but at least we can stop ourselves from being attracted to or repelled by extreme sensory impingements. We can bring our attention to the inhalation and the exhalation of the breath.

Some people assume that the purpose of mindfulness of breathing is in order to get high levels of concentration. We should note, however, that the assumptions we make about this practice are just assumptions. The practice itself is as it is; it is for nobody; it is for its own reward – as it is. When we are with the breath, our minds are not thinking about other things, so we are just with the breath. And if we keep with the breath, then our minds will calm down.

Breathing, just ordinary breathing, is a calming kind of rhythm; it tranquillizes. So mindfulness of breathing is, in itself, its own reward.

We may not realize that each moment with the breath is a tranquil one and so tend to get caught up in trying to acquire something, in trying to get more from it than it can offer us. So we miss the actual result as it is happening. This is human ignorance. We expect something, so we are unaware of what really happens. Now, if we just contemplate what an inhalation is like, we shall see it is not exciting, thrilling, interesting, or fascinating; but neither is it painful, repulsive, or unpleasant. We shall probably consider it to be boring, because we tend to demand a high level of interest and excitement from everything in life. We tend to regard something that is neutral to be boring. But it is not really boring. If something is interesting, it means it holds our attention. If we are reading a book and it interests us, we just sit there; we can hardly tear ourselves away. We do not want to answer the telephone; we do not want to talk to anybody; we just want to remain absorbed in that fascinating, interesting book. If we are reading a boring book, on the other hand, then we shall use every excuse there is to get away from it. The telephone rings; we gladly get up and answer it. The milkman comes; we run to the door, try to chat to him for a bit. If it is boring, there is nothing to hold our attention, so our attention will go to anything, even to things

more boring than the book – to get away from one boring thing, we go to another boring thing.

So we try to make life interesting – interesting friends, interesting things to think about, interesting things to do. I am not criticizing, I am just pointing out that we spend much of our lives in search of interest. And when something is no longer interesting, then we tend to reject it. If a friend is going through a bad time, say, and he is pretty boring and uninteresting, we tend not to want to be bothered with him. When he is fascinating and scintillating, we enjoy his company because it keeps us interested. But then when he gets boring again, we just want to get away!

Mindfulness of breathing is not interesting and we do not need to make it such. An inhalation is just that, an inhalation. If we say it is interesting or boring, these are judgements we make according to our moods. But in itself, it is just suchness, it is just the way it is. When we reflect in this way, then an inhalation is just that way, and an exhalation is just that way. And when we are not demanding that they be otherwise or looking for something more than is there, then our attitudes are developing in the right direction. So we can use just this one thing, this one practice of mindfulness of breathing, for concentration, for reflection, for understanding, for understanding the way things really are, for understanding why the world is the way it is.

Why *is* the world the way it is? Why is there

so much contention, divisiveness, quarrelling and ingratitude? Everything is divided into groups, factions, individuals, each demanding all kinds of things from themselves and from others. We get confusion and depression when people's minds operate on that level. It is winter, the snow is on the ground, and here at Amaravati we have certain emergency situations when the water mains burst. But that is not what happens all the time, is it? Even though yesterday I began to think it was! Sitting here, it is just the way it is. Most of our lives are not incredibly exciting or interesting, they are just ordinary, just the way they are – walking from here to the dormitories, sitting in meditation, getting up, lighting incense sticks, going to the loo, doing some work, eating the meal and so forth. The day goes on like that. Whether we like it or not depends on whether we are inspired, or expecting a lot, or whether we are fed up. If we are fed up, then we can make a big scene. Washing dishes, for example – if we are inspired and really want to work for the welfare of the community, then we go at the dishes with all the energy that comes from love and inspiration. But when we are fed up and do not care any more, then the rota comes up and we do the dishes – we do it, but with no love at all – get there late, break a dish, do not clean up very well. But actually washing dishes is just as it is, isn't it? There is nothing overly pleasant or unpleasant about it; it is just the way washing dishes is. Beyond that we can make anything out

of it. Whether we love or hate to do the dishes is something we create, something we superimpose, onto the actual event. The same with an inhalation or an exhalation – it is just that way.

If we try to get high by thinking: 'I'm going to wash these dishes because of my great love for the monks, nuns, and community, and because this is the greatest place in the world,' then inevitably we shall go to the other extreme. But when we can just move towards the way it happens to be – washing dishes, cleaning the room, walking from here to the dormitory, sitting in meditation and watching the breath – that is all right. And then the extreme situations like a water main bursting is also just the way it is. But if we are not expecting any interference in our lives, and we are sitting there, and then someone comes up and says: 'The water main's burst.' I think: 'Damn it! The water main's burst. They're interfering with my meditation. This is a meditation retreat and the water main's burst and it's interfering with my tranquillity!' Then I am feeling that water mains should somehow only burst when I am not on retreat! When they do burst, therefore, it is frustrating; it seems like a kind of plot against me, to give me a bad time. Actually, of course, whether the water main bursts when I am on a retreat or not is still just the way it is. We can always have a place for whatever happens, because it is never something that should not happen.

Through wise reflection, we need not suffer

from any turn of events. If we adapt wisely to situations in life, then we do not create the conditions for unnecessary misery. There is always going to be a certain amount of natural suffering, of course, from having been born as a human being. Birth, growing up, sickness, old age and death – these are the results of having been born as a human being. The body, the seasons of the year – such things cannot satisfy us. When we contemplate them and meditate on them, however, then we can be at peace with them.

But then there is also the suffering which *we* create. If I am sitting here thinking: 'Damn it! it's snowing again. These blasted English winters! I want to go to South Africa with Venerable Anando,' – now, that is something I have created right now, just sitting here. I am not contemplating, I am just reacting: 'It's snowing again, blast it!' If I contemplate, however, I can be quite peaceful. White snow on a bleak landscape is calming to the mind. I can look out there and contemplate; it is quite tranquillizing, it does not excite; it is not a stimulating landscape; it is all quite colourless and subdued, quiet, silent. If, on the other hand, we want interesting, fascinating life styles, we might find all this a bit boring. We think: 'How boring it is! White snow, few colours, no leaves on the trees, no flowers in the garden, just kind of colourless shades, sepia tones.' And then we think: 'Remember those beautiful, fascinating gardens in Borneo – wild colours of orange, red and yellow – beautiful

parrots in the trees, flamingoes.' And then immediately we are sitting here in the middle of an English winter – there are no flamingoes! We are creating suffering because we are thinking about something that is not here, and resenting the fact. Now, as contemplators of life, we have to open up to this sepia-toned bleak English winter just like the inhalation and the exhalation.

I saw a film on an aeroplane, *Flash Dance*. It was the story of a lady. Whenever she heard a certain kind of music, her whole body started going all over the place, no matter where she was. If she heard this music, she just started leaping into the air. That kind of music can excite the mind. But mindfulness of breathing will not do that! It is a different kind of rhythm. Jungle rhythms are exciting; the body, the mind, gets all excited. I am not saying excitement is bad; do not misunderstand me. I am saying that that is what it is like. Mindfulness of breathing, however, is a tranquillizing slow rhythm. And it is something we do not make up; we do not create it.

Now, if we are not feeling tranquil throughout this mindfulness of breathing, it is because we are expecting more from it than it can give us – we do not understand it yet, we are not really *giving* ourselves to it; we are just using it to get some state that we want. But when we start reflecting that mindfulness is about just being with an inhalation, just being with an exhalation, then it is its own reward. While we are

concentrating on that, being aware of it, our minds for that moment are calm, even though our bodies may not be. But the more we calm the mind, the more the body calms. The body demands a lot of patience. From just little things like this, tremendous wisdom arises in our lives.

We could spend thirty years reading philosophy at Oxford University. We could read Bertrand Russell and all that – the head would be chock-a-block full of ideas, views and opinions. The brain would be bursting with information. I would say: 'Watch your breath.' You would say: 'Can't be bothered; a waste of time. I'm writing an important paper for an important journal.' If we look in the University archives, we shall see all the doctoral theses that have been written over the past one hundred years. All the hard work that has gone into writing those things, and the headaches and the anxiety and a lot of it is worthless! Now, we do not get PhDs for watching the breath. If I wanted to write a doctoral thesis on one inhalation, they would say: 'Don't be facetious, can't give you a PhD for that.'

If we find ourselves being overwhelmed by things in life, we can just take the time to use mindfulness of breathing. We should not use it to try to get out of things, but just as a place to compose ourselves. So, some exciting, difficult situation is happening around us – one inhalation! For that moment, at least, we can compose ourselves; we need not be whirled away by things that happen. It is a very useful thing to do, very

skilful. It does take practice, however. We have to put forth the effort into going towards that mindfulness because it is not interesting enough to attract us. Jungle rhythms ***will*** attract us, but not mindfulness of breathing. That is the way it is. It does not attract, but it can tranquillize. Then, when we realize the result, get good results from mindfulness of breathing, ***then*** we shall find it attractive, ***then*** we shall ***want*** to do it; then we would rather go to that than to the jungle rhythm.

The mind can get scattered and dull, but just fifteen minutes, say, of concentrating on the breath can sharpen it up again. We can see where we tend to lose the mind; it is where it wanders. Then we can put forth a special effort to really hold the mind to an inhalation, to an exhalation. And that is a suppression of other things; we are suppressing all other sensory impingement in order to concentrate on one sensory impingement. But that is not an end in itself; it is merely a skilful means.

We can also listen to the sound of silence; and we can do that at the same time as being mindful of breathing. Now, if we notice, when our minds wander, we no longer hear the sound of silence. We forget about it and go off into thoughts and moods.

When our minds wander, there are ways of bringing our attention back to the moment. We can, however, become attached to ideas about these ways – the idea of emptiness, for example,

or the idea of bringing ourselves back to the moment. Any idea we attach to will take us to doubt again. People say: 'Bring yourself back to the moment.' But that can become a fixation, an obsession, rather than a skilful composing of their minds. We are very keen on attaching to techniques, words, ideas, or to anything. We tend to say: 'Give me the formula, give me the technique, give me the magic word,' as if there was one magic word, or one technique which was going to do everything for us.

We should note the opinions that arise if any of these things become compulsive. We may tell ourselves to 'Let go! let go!' Then soon we find ourselves using it for anything and everything; it becomes just a perfunctory, habitual statement. Something goes wrong – one of the buildings catches fire. We say: 'Let go!' and don't bother to report it because reporting a fire might mean we are attached to the idea of fire. That is the ultimate absurdity.

At Chithurst there used to be the 'watch your mind' habit. We would say: 'Watch your mind!' It was a way of saying: 'Shut up!' Something would go wrong in the kitchen, somebody would get upset and say: 'Watch your mind!' They were not watching theirs, obviously.

And yet all these things are skilful means – watching the mind and letting go. Letting go of 'the house on fire' does not mean we should not do anything about it; it does not mean we just pretend it does not exist – that would be

impossible. It would be very foolish too. We 'let go of fire' by following the insight into doing what is *appropriate* at that moment.

Some people do not know the difference between 'mindfulness' and 'concentration'. They concentrate on what they are doing, thinking that is being mindful. I knew someone once who was always complaining about other people not being mindful. He would be absorbed in what he was doing and then perhaps someone would go and ask him a question and he would blow up, have a temper tantrum! Now, he *could* concentrate. We can concentrate on what we are doing, but if we are not mindful at the same time, with the ability to reflect on the moment, then if somebody interferes with our concentration, we may blow up, get carried away by anger at being frustrated. If we are mindful, we are aware of the tendency to first concentrate and then to feel anger when something interferes with that concentration. With mindfulness we can concentrate when it is appropriate to do so and not concentrate when it is appropriate not to do so. If we are concentrating on what we are doing and then something else happens, we can reflect on how to solve that other problem, or do that other thing, without getting into a terrible state about it and without upsetting others.

Reflecting is being mindful. Yesterday is the past, a memory. Tomorrow is the unknown. This is the moment. Reflecting is bringing into consciousness the way things are – we are sitting

here; we are aware of our intentions; we are aware of what is going on and of what is happening inside ourselves; we are aware of anything influencing us, like a feeling of anger with somebody; we observe any feelings of resistance – sometimes we do not want to do something; we observe it all. That is mindfulness, being aware of the forces that are being experienced, externally and internally, emotionally and physically.

We can also be aware of assumptions. We may have idealistic natures so that we are always thinking about how things *should* be, wanting everything to be the way it *should* be, not wanting anything to be as it should not be, not wanting anything to get in our way or frustrate us, not wanting to hear bad news, not wanting to have problems, quarrels or disharmony, wanting everybody to be happy and grateful and devoted! We can learn a lot about ourselves through all this. We can learn because we can reflect on the way things happen to be, now.

We do not feel exactly the same every day at this time, do we? Things change, like the weather. There may be an emergency. Somebody has to go to the hospital, or somebody comes suddenly, and we say: 'Let go!' We can adapt according to change, rather than rigidly try to make everything a certain way. This does not mean we become wishy-washy, just going all over the place without any kind of starch in the material, without any real strength, to the point

where we say: 'Oh, I'm learning to adapt to everything,' so that when we feel a bit tired, we crash down on the floor: 'I'm just learning to adapt to tiredness.' If we do not have any strength, if we do not observe how things are, but just have ideas of letting go, we can be very fixed. Ideals can make us very rigid beings. Instead of being rather wishy-washy, we may be so resolute that we become downright stubborn and difficult. Then we become insensitive, troublesome nuisances. Yet somebody who does not have any resolutions at all, just floats about in the wind.

The Buddhist way is a way of 'no fixed position'. There is no position that one takes as a Buddhist. That is a strange one isn't it? We are not asked to ***believe*** in Buddha, there is no ***for*** or ***against***, no ***affirming*** or ***denying***. We watch any attachments to Buddhism. We may think: 'Buddhism is the best!' Or: 'It's probably worthless.' From the ideal position we may think: 'I shouldn't have any opinions at all; one shouldn't have opinions or views.' But that is another opinion. Having no fixed position is not ***another*** position, but a reflection on ***any*** position. It is a great relief to the heart, really, not to feel that we have to know everything or have everything, and not to have to defend our actions. I have found myself being very defensive about my way of life, trying to justify it, trying to make people understand, trying to prove that it is right. Some opinions may be right, some

wrong, but when we grasp them as absolutely right or absolutely wrong, then we are deluded by them.

Grasping, trying to make absolutes out of relative truths, makes everything go wrong. We need to know what is absolute and what is relative, what is ultimate reality and what is relative reality. By fixing on a particular doctrine, for example, we make what is relative into an absolute. And because it can never be absolute, we have to defend it, try to convince ourselves and everyone else that it ***is*** so. I say: 'This is absolutely true and you'd better believe it.' And someone else says: 'No, it's not; it's only relative.' And I say: 'IT'S TRUE! IT'S ABSOLUTELY TRUE!' My voice gets louder to drown him out because he is putting a doubt into my mind. Then someone else agrees with me: 'Venerable Sumedho, that's absolutely true! You're absolutely right!' 'Good, good. He agrees with me.' Then I say: 'Don't talk to that other person because he might put doubts into your mind.'

Once we have a fixed view, we can get ourselves so deeply involved, it just mushrooms into enormous problems. If we do not have a fixed position and yet find ourselves attaching to viewpoints and arguing about them, then we can reflect on the anxiety and insecurity which arises when someone threatens our position. The skilful thing is not to argue, because we are just spouting views and opinions that other people have given us.

Ideals can, of course, be used skilfully as guides, goals and inspiration, but as soon as we attach to any of them, then we are fixed. And what happens when we are fixed to even the highest ideal? We become critical of ourselves and others. We talk about universal compassion: 'We must have compassion for all sentient beings.' Then somebody annoys me, and I say: 'Shut up and get out of here!' Sometimes it is easier to have compassion for all sentient beings than for one annoying one.

Why is that? Because ideals are not emotions; they are high-minded and refined. Our emotions can be very coarse. To have compassion for a mass of people we are never likely to meet – there is no emotion in that, there is no threat. But if millions of people were to suddenly come and live here at this centre, then it would be a real trial! To have to feel compassion for millions of them all squeezing in might bring about a few uncompassionate thoughts and feelings! As long as they remain over there, it is easy. So, we can feel compassion for all beings and the next moment want to murder someone. The ideal is still there, even in the mind that wants to murder. Ideals, you see, do not have blood in their veins. Millions of people we are unlikely to meet are not people with blood in their veins. The person threatening us with a knife – that is someone with real blood in his veins, and we have real blood in ours that can get very disturbed and violent.

If we reflect in this way, we get a perspective into hypocrisy. I have seen it in myself. A fixed view: 'I'm right! I'm right! The other's wrong!' And I have to prove I am right; I will not give an inch. That kind of position just breeds conflict. All I can do is try to drag people into agreeing with me and try to defend myself against those who do not agree. What is that? That is a war, isn't it? And usually it is about some unimportant thing. I decided some time ago that there was no point in spending my life trying to do that any more – it seemed to be just an endless thing, endless opportunities for conflict in the sensual world. One day I decided it would be better to live a moral life and not to make problems about things. There are certain things worth standing up for and upholding even to the death, and there are other things that are not worth the bother. And yet we can spend our lives trying to defend not very important things.

By reflecting, we can see our own weaknesses. This takes honesty and truthfulness; we have to be willing to look at our own fears and anxieties. There are warning signs, of course. As soon as I feel depressed, negative, worried, frightened, anxious, that is the messenger sent to warn me of attachment. Old age is also a warning sign, and sickness, weakness, pain. When someone dies, that is a warning sign. These are heavenly messengers, warning us. A wise person will heed these warnings, will go right to the feeling itself.

Taking a Stand

At Wat Pah Pong in Thailand we used to spend hours out in the hot sun, the boiling hot sun in the afternoon, sweeping the leaves. It was really unpleasant to have that sun on you. We had to make our own brooms. We would get a long bamboo pole, some strips of bamboo and branches, and then put the strips of bamboo around the branches to hold them onto the pole. If you were really good at it, you could make a very nice broom with a kind of spring to it. And once you became an expert, sweeping leaves was very pleasant. But I considered it to be totally unimportant and unnecessary. I did not put any effort into learning how to make a decent broom – just went through the motions because I had to, and because I knew I would be criticized if I did not. So I would go out there with a broom that was no good and just go through the motions of sweeping. I hated the whole thing, complained inwardly, went on like a little brat: 'I'm fed up with this; don't want to do this. After all, I came here to study the Buddha's teaching and to practise, and here I am just sweeping leaves to no purpose . . . in the hot sun . . . blah, blah, blah.' I had this kind of awful character in me; he was called 'the whining complainer'. I looked

at the other monks and thought: 'They're just rice farmers. They're stupid illiterate boys from paddy fields; they'll just do what they're told.' I was talking to myself: 'I am so intelligent and so gifted and such a great gift to the monastery, how could they possibly expect me to carry on like this?'

One day I was going through the motions, really depressed, and Ajahn Chah came along. He smiled and said: 'Where is the suffering? Is Wat Pah Pong a lot of suffering?' It was just the right thing to say. Suddenly I understood very clearly and realized what an indulgent, childish, foolish, little brat I was at thirty-two! I thought: 'You know this is all right – sweeping leaves. Wat Pah Pong is all right. People are nice. The Ajahn is wise. The sun is bearable. I'm not all that bad. I'm not dying; I'm not getting sick from it.' Then I realized what misery I had created in my mind. And I started reflecting: 'I can do this job; it's really not much of a request at all. They don't expect very much from me here, and yet what they do ask me to do, I complain about.' I saw what a really unpleasant kind of person I could be, and yet I had considered myself to be quite a good person actually. I had been blaming the other monks, blaming Ajahn Chah, not liking the sun, not liking the leaves, not liking the broom, not wanting to be bothered about making a decent broom and so having to scratch the ground with a miserable little thing. If I had made a nice broom with a

good spring to it, I could have got some wonderful sweeps; with one swipe I could have got all the leaves to go in a nice way and make lovely piles. The soil was sandy, so it was possible to get nice sweeping patterns in the sand. I began to quite enjoy it – the aesthetic quality of it, and the pleasure of just using the body. When the mind was right, the other was right. Before that I had just wanted to sit and meditate on my own terms, which I found quite easy to do, and which I could really enjoy. When asked to do something which I did not like, I created miserable thoughts.

We can reflect on the suffering of life. Where is that suffering? Now, does it arise? Where does it end? Yesterday is a memory; tomorrow is the unknown; now is the knowing – this is the pattern of reflection. Now is the knowing. Sitting in meditation, what is the mood? What is the feeling? This is the time.

It takes a lot of wisdom to live rightly. If we take the world for granted and never reflect on it, then of course we are carried to old age, sickness, death, despair and anguish. Bodies are all getting older. Just reflecting on age, without getting carried away by the thought, without indulging in it – what is it like? 'Fifty years old.' What is my perception of being fifty? And what is the physical feeling of a body that is fifty? Often there is a great discrepancy between the mind and body. The mind is still thirty and the body is fifty!

Moreover we can have an idea of what a man is and of what a woman is. The modern trend is that there should not be any differences. Men say: 'Women take advantage of every situation – try to get the upper hand, use their charm to manipulate men and get anything they want; and then they want everything else! Not only do they use their feminine wiles, but they also want the advantages of masculinity. They're just insatiably greedy, ungrateful wretches!' Then the feminist movement goes on about how God is a man; how everything that is good is named masculine; how men dominate, are aggressive, get higher wages, and have completely humiliated women throughout the ages to the ultimate degree! One can justify both positions.

When you take a fixed position, however, then you see all the faults of the other side, because the fixed position does not allow you to see in perspective, or to understand yourself at all. But in the 'knowing', in awareness, we recognize the position we happen to be taking. It is not that we cannot take positions, but that we recognize what we are doing. We recognize, perhaps, that sometimes we are just frightened of men or of women. We can get a lot of energy by hating or taking a strong stand against something, without understanding what we are doing. And we can become fanatical.

Reflection is the recognition that that is the way it is. We do not have to understand in a rational way. We begin to give space in the mind

for all conditions to arise and pass away, whether they are intellectual, rational, sensible, thoroughly understandable, or just emotional. We open the mind to the way it is, not to the way *I* want it to be. Even though we may be fully mature – the body may be thirty, sixty, eighty – the emotions could still be childish. We begin to listen to 'the whining complainer', the frightened little child. When we cannot get on with someone, we tend to feel frightened or threatened by that person. Then we tend to have bad thoughts about him and be jealous of him. We can bring that up into consciousness. We can hear it: 'He's this way; he's that way. I can't stand the way he does this. I don't like the way he does that.' When we are obsessed with aversion, or fear of someone, it is important to go to the place where that feeling arises.

If you live alone, it is possible to get away with a lot; you can live on your own terms. But in a community things are thrown back at you very quickly. From my own experience, being in a position of authority, I notice that some people are just very frightened of me, which used to surprise me. I would think: 'I've a good heart, I've a very kind heart. I wouldn't hurt a fly, and yet some people seem to be absolutely terrified of me.' Then someone would say: 'Well, it's the way you look. You know, you have a very stern look sometimes. You're big, and you have this stern look – it's absolutely frightening!' Well, I did not know that. I cannot see myself. I do not

look big to myself and I do not feel stern, yet that is how other people see me. So I listen to that. I watch the results of my presence on others, rather than just blindly going through life wondering why people act the way they do 'when I haven't done anything – always tried my hardest – work hard, kind heart, nobody fully appreciating me.' And I think they must be bad people because I am certainly all right! But, you know, even though we may have golden hearts, sometimes we have very annoying habits! So I put some effort into not annoying others out of heedlessness, and I try to live in a way that is helpful to those around me, not becoming obsessed by it, but reflecting and learning. And I see that I do actually have some annoying traits that maybe I can change if I am more careful, more considerate.

If something is always coming back at you in a community, then you really have to investigate it. Sometimes it is just the constant little annoying habits that drive people up the wall, really get under their skins. Somebody does the same foolish thing over and over and over again, and you think: 'Say, stop it!' And then you think: 'Well, I'll learn to be more patient.' I have learned to be very patient with a lot of very annoying things, which is good for me. But also, in a community, we try to live in a way which is more skilful. We do not really know the effect we are having on others. Sometimes we do not care! Someone has a terrible annoying habit. I

am really upset and I say: 'Shut up and watch your mind!' That is the meditator's way of saying: 'Drop dead!' To become obsessed with *not* being annoyed, or to become obsessed with trying to please everybody, is one extreme. The other extreme is not to care what others think and not to put any effort into doing other than just what one wants to do. These are the two extremes – to say: 'Watch your mind! Drop dead!' or to say: 'Oh, I'm sorry, did I? I hope I didn't do anything to upset you. Oh, I try so hard not to offend anybody.' We can listen to these forces in ourselves. I can listen to that in me which is callous and insensitive and wants to say: 'Don't bother me! Get lost!' I can also hear the thing in me that wants to say: 'I hope I'm not hurting anyone. I hope I'm not doing anything to offend anyone here. I hope I haven't done anything to upset you.' To reflect on these two extremes is to make conscious these very feelings.

Being male or female, young or old, middle-aged, American, English, Swiss, French, Spanish, whatever, these are what we reflect on. We can watch and learn from these conditions. Being the Abbot of a monastery is an important position in worldly terms. So I reflect on those terms without identifying or attaching to them. To say: 'I'm the Abbot of a monastery,' is appropriate at certain times and in certain situations. It is not an absolute, though; it is not a person. If we are really stupid we shall hold on to a qualification

as a kind of fixed identity. And then we become rigid, foolish types of beings. There is nothing more unpleasant than seeing someone always carrying his qualifications around with him, and imposing them on every situation for personal advantage.

Then there is the other extreme: 'I'm nobody. I'm just nobody. I'm . . . just a monk of no importance. I've no special qualities; I'm not President, not in charge of anything, just a junior insignificant nothing.' That is really another way of boasting. I say I do not boast about being this or that because I know I am just an insignificant nobody of no importance. But I am proud of that! And then there are those with the kind of mentality that resents authority and always has to knock it down, because, for them, people with authority are a threat, while people at the bottom, without authority, are no threat. 'There's the *really* humble one, the one at the end, the one without *anything*.' This tendency is in us. When reflecting we can observe the positioning of beings in relationship to us, this hierarchical structure, not justifying or condemning it, but observing it as a condition of the mind, and then being aware of the sense of self in relationship to others. It is not that we should have certain reflections, and not have others, but we should know them for what they are. Whatever arises passes away and is not self. That is how to skilfully use the situations we are in, whether sitting, standing, walking, lying down, working, or drinking tea!

It's Not Fair

A woman came to the monastery once with a sick baby. The baby was in great agony. She said: 'Why does this sweet little boy have to suffer? He hasn't hurt anyone. He has trouble breathing and he nearly died. Why does he have to suffer? What did he do to deserve this?' I said: 'He was born! You wanted to have a baby; the baby was born, it got sick.' That was not being cold-hearted or brutal; it was pointing to the truth. What did the little boy do to deserve that sickness? If we want to make a personal assessment, we can speculate: 'Maybe in a previous life he stepped on a caterpillar!' But that is speculation. What we actually *know* is that he was born and birth means being subject to pain. These bodies are *going* to feel pain; they are *going* to get illnesses; they are *going* to get old; they are going to die.

Admittedly, some people are more inclined to sickness than others, but we all have our share of it and we shall all get old and die. We could say: 'What did I do to deserve this? Why do I have to suffer?' 'What did she do to deserve cancer? She's always given to charity. She's a good mother, a good wife. She's kind. But she's got cancer! Why? It's not fair! Only old biddies,

selfish, mean, nasty old bags, should get cancer! Nice good-hearted ladies like this one shouldn't get it.' 'Why should the innocent suffer? If we want things to be fair, only the guilty should suffer. As in a war – it's fair, if only the bad ones suffer – those who start the wars and support them. If *they* suffer, then it's all right. But in wars most of those who suffer aren't the ones who start them – the ones who suffer are those who just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time – innocent bystanders, women and children and all those who'd like the war to end. IT'S NOT FAIR.'

We were all glad when Hitler was done in; he was such a bad lot. Everybody rejoiced when he died. But a lot of innocent, very nice people can die too, in terrible ways, being tortured and brutalized – why? Why does this happen? Because they were born! We were all born and are therefore open to the possibility of being tortured. A Buddhist monk, living under the rules of the Order for twenty years, could be kidnapped by a terrorist organization and tortured to death in the most horrendous way. What did he do to deserve it? It was the result of birth.

Contemplating in this way, we no longer whine about things not being fair, and why the world has to be *this* way. It is not that we justify the crime and atrocities that beings experience; it is merely an acceptance of the fact that this is the way it is. If we do not accept the way things

are, then we create suffering. We worry, blame, condemn, and create all kinds of misery in our minds, simply because the world is not the way we would like it to be.

A body is born into the world as a separate being. It is conscious; there are sense organs; there are feelings. Even the newest baby feels; it feels hunger, cold, heat and so forth. Its feelings are not developed all that much, still, it definitely feels – instinctual feeling, sensory feeling. However, a baby does not seem to have any concept of a self. Most babies I know do not seem to have a 'self' view. They do not think 'I am' until they are older.

I have a sister two years older than myself and I remember feeling very unhappy when she did not want to take baths with me any more. I did not understand the difference between boys and girls at that time and we used to have lots of fun in the bathtub, my sister and I – innocent fun. But then she reached an age when she refused to take baths with me, and I could not understand why. I thought she was just being difficult, or perhaps did not like me any more. But actually she was developing a sense of 'I am a girl and he's a boy' with the resultant feelings.

When a baby is born, it has no sense of being male or female, does it? It does not think: 'I am a boy', or 'I am a girl'. That sort of thing is conditioned into it later on. The mind is conditioned according to culture, family, class and the times we live in. All of the conditioning

is added, instilled into the mind; it is something which is not the mind itself: 'Little boys should be *this* way; little girls should be *that* way.' We get all kinds of suggestions from our families and peers about ourselves and begin to think: 'I'm a good boy. I'm clever,' or: 'I'm stupid.' These are suggestions that we get from the people around us. And we form the 'self' view. Because we are naughty and do certain things parents say: 'You're a bad boy!' There is this little rhyme I remember from when I was a child: 'Girls are made of sugar and spice and everything nice. Boys are made of frogs and snails and puppydogs' tails.' And I certainly remember feeling quite put out about that! I liked sugar and spice.

Little boys were supposed to be difficult and little girls were supposed to be sweet, good, obedient. These were the perceptions I acquired from that early part of my childhood. Maybe it is true! Still, the 'self' view is formed by all these little rhymes, old wives' tales, and cultural attitudes.

When we meditate we begin to realize the mind itself, where there is no condition, where there is no sense of 'I am', 'I am a boy', 'I am a girl'. In meditation we can notice what the unconditioned mind is. As unawakened individuals we tend to not notice this; we are just caught in the reactions of 'I am *this*;' 'I am *that*;' 'I *should* be . . . ;' 'I *shouldn't* be . . . ' And we go around with the 'I am', believing it to be true and real – the 'real world'. To live in the 'real

world' is to do what is considered normal by the society or class into which we have been born. But in meditation, mental formations and conceptualizations, cease in the mind. And we do not dissolve into thin air! We do not become unconscious! Nothing has been annihilated! And we can reflect on this fact. What does take place is a cessation of the conditioned world – that which arises.

This is the practice of 'letting the world cease'. What is left is awareness, mindfulness, knowing. And that, we say, is not an 'I am'; it is not a 'self'; it is not 'a personal quality'; and it is no more 'mine' than it is 'yours'. When there is nongrasping and awareness, the mind is not 'my' mind or 'your' mind. 'Boys' and 'girls' arise and cease *in* the mind. If we look into a mirror, of course, we may still think of ourselves as our bodies: '*My* appearance, *my* body – this is *me*; this is *my* face. Would you like a picture of me? I'll give you a picture of my face. That's me . . . ' But in awareness we do not think that much about the body in the sense of it being 'me' and 'mine'. So the body as being 'me' and 'mine' ceases in the mind.

When we practise mindfulness of breathing, we do not think: 'This is *my* inhalation and this is *my* exhalation.' Trying to keep the 'me' going in respect to our breathing would drive us crazy; it would be absurd. Breathing is not a self, but breathing is going on – bodies are breathing. If we think: 'I'm breathing,' then somebody is born

who is breathing. When there is no such thought, there is still breathing, but nobody is doing it. It is a kind of paradox. These bodies breathe; it is their nature to do so. Whether we think the body is ours or not, whether we are aware of it or not, it is still breathing because that is its nature. As long as it is alive, it breathes. The thought 'I breathe' is something we create. To say 'I breathe' is just a statement – a statement, however, fraught with a sense of 'me' and 'mine'.

When I was a child I was asthmatic and I remember how difficult it was to breathe. There was real panic as I tried to catch my breath. 'I can't breathe any more!' I used to turn blue. My mother would go into a panic. She said I could turn blue instantaneously. The sense of 'me', 'I can't breathe,' 'I want to breathe,' arose. But when there was no problem with asthma, when the breathing was normal, then there was not a self. Natural functions are not persons. And yet we create all kinds of problems around them – around eating, around sexual desire, excretory functions, even perspiration.

In the Victorian days women were not supposed to sweat; it was unladylike. There were all kinds of perceptions that somehow sweating was a vulgar and disgusting thing to do. Men could get away with it, but not women. People were attached to the perception that femininity was something refined, with nothing coarse about it whatsoever. So a coarse, unpleasant aspect of

the human body had to be suppressed and rejected. That was a cultural perception, a hang-up of Victorian Britain a hundred years ago.

The common attitude these days is that we should have a good ego before we practise insight meditation – we should have a highly developed ego, then we can let it go. People have spoken to me about this. They think I should not be teaching the doctrine of no-self because the egos of some of us have not developed to the point yet where we can let them go. But I am not trying to destroy anyone's ego. What I am saying is that whether we have a positive view of ourselves or not, the ego is just a conditioned thing. To accept – rather than to judge – even a wretched ego, can only help. It can only help to accept it, rather than to feel we should be trying to look upon ourselves as the ***best*** instead of the ***worst***.

Sometimes people will come and say: 'I've realized my true nature. I'm wonderful! I'm a miracle of God! I'm beautiful and lovable, and I'm the happiest, the most wonderful person.' When people make statements like that, it makes me wonder what they are really trying to say. To go around talking like that is just the opposite of saying: 'Oh, I'm a hopeless case, a failure. I'm an unlovable old tramp and I can't see how anyone could possibly like me.' There are those of the view that we should think the best of ourselves, that we should think of ourselves as absolutely wonderful, lovable, beautiful creatures. But I have learned a lot from thinking of

myself as hopeless, from seeing the ego, not as something to develop and grasp at, but as something to understand and know. And from that understanding a sense of self-respect has come about. I am not trying to convince myself that I am an absolutely wonderful man, but I do respect myself because I live in a way that I respect, and I try to do things and act in a way that I find I *can* respect. So, as an individual being, as a monk, as this being here, I respect it; I do not feel ashamed or averse to it. Really that is an ego, but it is not an ego in the sense that I have to think about myself in a positive way, to go from thinking that I am a hopeless case to thinking that I am the most wonderful creature on the planet. It is not an ego in the sense of affirmations of self or negations of self. 'No-self' does not mean annihilation of a self; it means seeing self for what it is and no longer identifying with it, or clinging to a 'self' view.

As we realize a state of being awake and calm, we can contemplate: 'Is there a self?' And we can be aware that 'self' is the ability to reflect on the way it is – not judging, not criticizing, not creating anything, but just observing, noticing. We can be aware of the 'I am' arising – what 'I' think, what 'I' feel, what 'I' want; 'If you want *my* opinion . . . ' These are concepts that arise and cease in the mind and we can observe them.

I used to take the 'I am' and just listen to it. I would call it 'the space around "I am"' and

with deliberate intention think: 'I AM.' Before I thought it, I would notice that there was no thought there. Then I would think: 'I AM.' That is so simple, but we do not notice it; we do not notice that before the 'I am' there is nobody. There is awareness, there is mindfulness, there is an intention in the mind to think, but there is no thought. Then the thought 'I am' arises, and then it ceases.

We are pointing at the emptiness rather than at the thought, at the mind wherein the 'I am' arises and ceases, rather than at the condition of 'I am'. In this way we see 'I am' in perspective; it is neither an obsession nor a habit-formation. 'I am a Buddhist monk;' 'I am a wonderful man;' 'I am a hopeless case!' These all arise and then cease.

I used to deliberately think all the worst possible thoughts: 'What can I think that's the worst possible thing to think?' And then I would think it. It would arise and cease in the mind. 'What is the best, the highest, the most altruistic, the finest thought that a human being can possibly think?' And that would also arise and cease. As an experiment, we can take thoughts – the worst and the best – with the deliberate intention of examining and investigating our reactions to them.

'I shouldn't think bad thoughts, I should only think good ones.' And then we would have bad thoughts and think: 'I shouldn't be thinking like this. I wish I didn't have these kinds of thoughts;

I wish I were someone who had beautiful thoughts; I wish I were a loving person with a generous heart; I wish I could be just full of love and joy, but instead I'm frightened and jealous, get angry, upset, have bad thoughts and it's terrible . . . !' And this goes around and around. 'What's wrong with me that I should be like this?' This is a case of being caught in the whirlpool of 'self' again, isn't it?

When we look at thought itself, the finest as well as the meanest, it just arises and ceases. We can notice the space, the empty mind, rather than the thought. And we do not have to make anything out of thought. It can be seen as a condition that begins and ends. This is one way of really getting to know the emptiness of mind, the mind that is clear and bright and not personal, not 'me', not 'mine', not a man or a woman, not clean or dirty, not high or low, not good or bad. To realize this is to abide more and more in emptiness, less and less in thought.

We may be angry with somebody: 'He said *that* to me and I'll never forgive him!' 'And then last week, you know what he did?' 'And last year, five years ago, you know what he did?' The mind just connects with all the bad things that that person had done. The anger stimulates these thoughts. But when we like that person again, we love them: 'I really love you; you're wonderful.' And the person says: 'But you know what I did last week?' And we say: 'Oh, never mind, it's nothing really. Don't even mention it!'

When we love somebody we do not want to remember the bad things he or she has done; we want to go along with the nice things and the good things. When we are in love and somebody is critical of the person we are in love with, we do not want to hear. We say: 'Go away! Get lost!' But if someone comes along and talks about how wonderful that person is, we are just so happy: 'Your friend is a wonderful person who's really sensitive. You know what she did last week? She helped an old lady across the street.' 'That's my sweetheart – a *wonderful* person.' We find ourselves having memories of something that happened before, a kind of *déjà vu* experience, because of this ability to associate and remember.

If we are great thinkers and like to study logic, we have a particular way of thinking, a particular jargon that we use. We may hear sociologists talking about 'patrilineal' and 'matrilineal' this and that societies. It does not mean much to anyone who is not a sociologist; it is just a jargon which that particular discipline has developed. It is conditioned into the mind and is associative. Within the conventions of the jargon, the mind goes from one concept to the next. However, all of the thoughts arise and cease – and this is what unawakened people do not notice. It is not that they are thinking all the time; it is just that they do not notice when they are *not* thinking; they are only conscious through thought.

The thought 'I am ' and the absorption into conditions makes us feel alive. When there is nothing happening, most of us are not really conscious any more; we do not feel alive; we are not absorbed into anything, and we kind of float around in a fog. So we look for something to absorb into, something interesting, pleasant, sensual, exciting, something to make us feel alive again, something which will lead to our being reborn again as a person. The unawakened, ignorant human being is constantly having to be reborn. And that rebirth takes place through sensual pleasures, through becoming something, or through getting rid of something.

Asceticism, for example, is the 'self' that feels alive when it is being tortured, when it is being denied something. There is a strong sense of self in that: 'I feel alive when I'm fasting and when I'm on my bed of nails . . . my hair shirt and the whip . . . Beat me so that I can feel alive!' You wonder about sadomasochists – why people do things like that. It is probably because it makes them feel alive. If nobody is persecuting them, nobody is paying attention to them. If nobody is beating them and they do not have a bed of nails, a hair shirt, something nice to eat, or something interesting to do, then they tend to fall asleep! The realms of stimulation are very important to such people.

Why do so many of us watch these soap operas on the television? It is because we actually *become* these people. A successful film will

absorb our attention so that we forget ourselves; we forget everything and become completely absorbed into the story.

We can notice the subtlety when we pay attention to where there is no self, to where there is silence, stillness and calm. When we begin to appreciate the realization of emptiness, it becomes our natural inclination; we feel more peaceful and at ease at being with the way things are – the breathing of the body, the silence.

Because of physical birth there is breathing, feeling, and consciousness; there is also sickness and ageing, and there will be death. One thing leads on from another. Because there are eyes, there is eye-consciousness. It is not a personal thing. We can reflect on eye-consciousness, contemplate it, reflect on what eye-consciousness is, rather than just reacting: 'Oh, look at that beautiful Buddha-rupa!' That is a reaction as the eye contacts the Buddha-rupa. We think: 'Oh, I'd really like that Buddha rupa; that's beautiful.' And then we start looking: 'Oh, look at those flowers.' 'Look, they still haven't washed the curtains in this place yet!' But when we contemplate eye-consciousness, we can observe that there is just consciousness. There is then no question of thinking of the Buddha-rupa as being beautiful or ugly, or of thinking about the flowers, or of thinking that the curtains need washing – criticizing. We do not perceive what we see as actually being anything; we do not

make any comment, or judge it, or call it anything. Then we can perceive it as . . . a box, a blue box. That is a reflection on consciousness.

The sense of 'I am' says: 'This is *my* box.' I may just make the assumption that you put this box here for me, and if someone takes it away I say: 'You can't have *my* box – get your own!' But really, to say: 'This is my box, not yours,' is a convention. The unawakened mind, operating from an assumption of a self, assumes that the box belongs to 'me' in a kind of absolute way. In reflective meditation we look at such assumptions; we contemplate the way things are, so that we can be wise and clear, so that we are not deluded by what happens and get caught in immature reactions, fears, and desires.

It is like getting a cold. It could be a form of suffering: 'I don't want a cold; I hate colds; I want to get rid of it.' Or it could be a reflection. We can contemplate the fact that colds happen sometimes as a result of being born as a human being. Human beings catch colds. That is a reflection on the way things are – not a judgement, not blaming anybody or taking it personally.

We can really look at the 'I am'. We can practise listening to the space around the thought, to the silence. What do we have to do to notice the space in this room? We must take our attention off the objects. If we focus on an object, then we absorb into it and are not aware of space until we attend to space. We need to

contemplate space and form, and use them as visual experiences, or as mental experiences. We can see thought and we can see emptiness – 'I am' and emptiness – form and space. We can notice when there is no self and we can notice when there is self. Self arises and ceases, it is not absolute, there is no permanent self; self is 'self' views. 'I am' is merely a condition that comes and goes according to other conditions.

An Ugly Sand Grain

When we are not alert we tend to get caught up in the momentum of our habits. Worry is the big one, isn't it? To worry a lot drives people crazy. Also people believe that if they are not worrying, they are not being responsible – 'worrying means caring'. But worry is just the result of obsessive thought.

When we are alert we put energy into the mind. It is the same with the body. To hold the body upright takes energy, effort. Where does that effort come from? When the body dies, it falls apart, decays, disintegrates. No one can put effort into a corpse because the life force has gone. The life force is something filling out the body; it is a mental energy which does not come from the body itself. We can fill the body with energy. We can also fill the mind with energy and be alert, attentive.

In the moment of alertness, there is no thought. Unless I deliberately want to think of something right now, there is no thought. There is alertness. I can see people in front of me and I can talk, but there is no worry about anything right now – no fear, no lust, no doubt – just the recognition of the moment. Now, if I am heedless, my mind starts wandering this way and

that, taking things personally, feeling averse, feeling greedy, thinking: 'I don't want to give a talk; I want to go to sleep. Fed up with giving talks!' But if I empty the mind, then there is awareness of the situation and a relating to what is useful and valuable at this moment.

We start meditating by making life very simple for ourselves -- taking the moral precepts and being mindful of breathing. We see the habit of the mind, wanting to talk, wanting to eat and drink. We tie ourselves up in morality, awareness of breathing, and silence. Then we begin to relax within that restriction. We begin to surrender to the limitations, the boundaries. What happens when we give up to these limitations? We feel peaceful, much more peaceful than if we dance and sing and allow desires to pull us this way and that. Being limited to watching the body and the sensations, and then just being awake and aware, is enough. Aware of what? Of the moment. At first we have an object of awareness – we can watch the breath or sensations within the body. And then we just attend to what is happening within the moment. We are moving towards letting go, ultimate simplicity, Nirvana, unconditioned realization.

Suddenly all the rubbish of our lives starts taking a conscious form. Many of us like to think of ourselves as rather sensible, rational human beings – at least I do! 'A sensible and reasonable man – kindly, good-natured!' But we get caught up in foolishness, stupidity, irrationality,

emotion, and really we are just downright rubbish! We cannot always be rational and sensible. To be able to do that we would have to keep rejecting anything that was not sensible, wouldn't we? But we do not want to know about all the rubbish that appears, preferring to turn to something interesting or exciting. In the restricted situation of morality, awareness, and silence, the image of being totally sensible and rational is difficult to maintain. The irrational, repressed rubbish surfaces. Surprising, isn't it? We did not know it was there. Our lives had been so conditioned, so managed and controlled, that the rubbishy side had not been seen, or if it had been seen, had immediately been turned away from: 'I want nothing to do with that!' When the rubbish starts surfacing, it is to be taken as a good sign. We should not act on the rubbish, however, nor repress it, nor follow it. We should observe it – fear, foolishness, stupidity, irrational feelings, repressed anger, and all the rubbish that we might have previously repressed; we can become fully conscious of it all, which means that we have a way of letting it go rather than of pushing it back. Our meditation, then, can sometimes be just peacefully coexisting with a chattering mind, with stupidity, with irrational thinking. We just patiently watch it as a silent witness. We are not watching a self; it is not a personal thing; it is just a series of conditions that have never been allowed to become conscious.

In the past, conditions which had never been allowed to become conscious had always been stored away. In other words, they still had their karmic force, they still affected us. When we allow these conditions to take conscious form, then the karmic force ends. This means that we free ourselves from the burden of that repressed karmic force. We no longer hold anything back and run away, but allow ourselves to see conditions. These conditions are not seen as personal things; we do not see some corny, maniacal being!

The mind is like a mirror; it has the ability to reflect things. Mirrors reflect anything – beautiful or ugly, good or bad. And those things do not harm the mirror. No matter what the mirror reflects, the mirror is all right. Reflections pass in front of the mirror. They are there – and then they go. They are not the mirror itself. No matter how hideous or horrid the reflections might be, they are only reflections and we need not punish the mirror.

We must be very patient, willing to endure the smell of rubbish until it passes away. A skilful way of enduring the unpleasant, that which we tend to be averse to or frightened of, is by loving-kindness. The practice of loving-kindness is a skilful means. Now, this kind of love is kindly endurance. We usually use the word 'love' interchangeably with the word 'like' as though it were the same thing. If we like something, we often say we love it. But in this practice of

loving-kindness, we do not necessarily have to like a thing – we just do not feel any aversion for it. This is more like 'love' in the Christian sense of the word; it is an acceptance of a situation, without any dwelling on what is wrong, without dwelling on any flaw. Loving kindness is the ability to be kind and gentle with that which we do not like.

It is easy to be kind and gentle with that which we do like – not difficult, quite pleasant. As far as people are concerned, it is difficult being nasty to those we like, whereas it may not be at all difficult to be nasty to those we do not like! The same with things or conditions. Some ugly, nasty thing appears in our minds. We think: 'I hate that. Get out of here!' That is not loving-kindness, is it? But if some ugly, nasty thing appears in our minds and we apply kindness, we can then accept it consciously and let it go. We do not hit it, have a go at it, and get upset by its presence. So, loving-kindness is a skilful way of enduring what we would not normally endure.

First of all, we must start practising loving-kindness with ourselves. If we hate ourselves, we tend to hate others. And any kindness we might feel for others is only superficial sentimentality. It is not real kindness because it comes from an idea. We establish loving-kindness with ourselves by not creating burdens out of what we have done in the past. Nor do we create burdens out of the foolishness of our thoughts, or our

opinions and views. No guilt is created, no remorse or self-hatred. We can even practise loving-kindness for the pain in our bodies when we sit for a long time in meditation. This is kindness towards pain, not an aversion towards it, or wanting to get rid of it, or worrying about it. We may make a mistake, perhaps say something wrong, and instead of feeling guilty about it and hating ourselves, we can forgive ourselves for having weaknesses – not justifying them, but not creating problems around them either. Having a kindly patience towards the rubbish in our minds is a willingness to allow the unpleasant to exist, a willingness to allow it to take its natural course to cessation.

When we have loving-kindness for ourselves, we can have loving-kindness for others. We can exist with others without having aversion for those who are not very nice or whom we do not approve of. Without loving-kindness, we may think: 'I wish they wouldn't be that way – wish they wouldn't do that.' But when we have loving-kindness, we can endure the problems of the world while remaining fully aware of them. It is not a question of liking that which we do not like; it is a question of allowing it to exist and being willing to peacefully coexist with it. And then letting it go.

To practise loving-kindness does not mean to use sentiment. Just thinking about loving-kindness is not enough. Practising means enduring – allowing something unpleasant to be unpleasant, being alert to unpleasantness without

allowing the mind to go into aversion. Now, how do we do that? We experiment with physical pain. When we have discomfort, we can have loving-kindness for it. We can allow pain to exist and we can actually peacefully coexist with it, not creating anything around it in our minds. We can concentrate on that pain and be with it, without an attitude of wanting to get rid of it. Some people have a big caveman's club with 'loving-kindness' written across it. They think: 'If I hit that pain with this loving-kindness, it'll go away.' But we should not use loving-kindness in that way to get rid of things; we should use it to remind ourselves to be extremely patient with all the unpleasantnesses of existence – the ugliness of life, the pain, the disappointments, the disillusionments, the failures.

When we do not create anything in it, the mind becomes clear. The mind itself, the original mind, the unconditioned, is clear, bright and peaceful, and can contain anything. We can allow all the rubbish in the universe to pass through this original mind and no harm will come to it. Nothing can soil or damage the original mind.

When we are not aware, we get caught in the way things seem to be. We think: 'I shouldn't be like that.' 'The world shouldn't be this way. I don't like it this way.' 'I don't want to be here; I want to be over there.' We become possessive, envious, jealous, averse, angry, hateful, greedy, lustful, frightened, miserly; we anticipate, dread and so forth, endlessly on and on. The chitchat,

the rubbish that churns around, the bubbling inside – it will never end. We think: 'That's my real character; my real character is just rubbish; I must be rubbish myself with all that rubbish in there.' But actually all that rubbish is just what we are not. When we are kindly, very gentle, very patient, not rushing, we shall realize that. We say: 'But I've got to do this, got to develop concentration, got to develop loving-kindness, got to develop all that and then I want to astral travel! So many things I've got to do. Be with pain and rubbish? I don't want to waste my life peacefully coexisting with rubbish! I want to get rid of rubbish – astral travel, do something worth while, achieve something, and attain! Can't be peaceful with this foul rubbish gurgling around inside.' When we react like this, when we have the idea of wanting to get rid of rubbish, we add more rubbish to the rubbish. The rubbish needs to come to consciousness; it is not going to go away on a clandestine path, disappear suddenly out of the back door; we have to allow it to come up into the mind and then out. When we establish the moral precepts and become really mindful, then the channel for this rubbish to flow through is very clear and safe. What we need to do is patiently endure and wisely reflect until the way out is clearly developed. With this attitude the conditions do not matter any more, good or bad.

Whether conditions are important, trivial, clean or dirty, they are all still conditions. We

have no need to look through the rubbish inspecting it, because it is all just rubbish! We can let it go. Now, it takes equanimity not to get caught in conditions. We have given so much of our lives to doing just that, to being caught up, because we are, in fact, attached to the quality of conditions – choosing this, trying to get rid of that, a lifetime of picking and choosing, filtering, collecting, annihilating, hoarding, trying to hold onto, trying to possess.

Suppose we were to go to a river, look at a sand grain and say: 'Isn't that gorgeous! Isn't that a magnificent little sand grain. But isn't that one disgusting! I can't stand him.' All those sand grains, billions of them, and we are picking them out and liking or disliking each one according to its appearance, going into ecstasies over the beauty of one sand grain, or becoming depressed over the ugliness of another – ridiculous! If you saw someone doing that, you would think he was a real nut. And he would be depressed if he was holding on to an ugly sand grain! But most of us do that sort of thing, we do it with the conditions of the mind. We are elated or depressed by sand grains or conditions – they are much the same thing. When we see conditions as sand grains, we do not feel the need to compare one with another, or go into ecstasies or depressions over their appearance. So it is worth seeing conditions as sand grains. There is no need to dwell in aversion on the ugly, or become possessive and ecstatic over the

beautiful. We can have equanimity, coolness, detachment and see conditions as just that – conditions.

To be mindful of the whole is a real possibility. All we have to do is free ourselves of constantly attaching to different conditions that come and go – grabbing this, rejecting that. How do we do this? We just become aware! At first the habitual tendency to grab is a real problem. So, when we find ourselves grabbing at something, we have to remind ourselves to leave it alone and let it be. After a while, our tendency to pick things up diminishes.

We can use words like 'letting go' to remind ourselves to put things down, leave them alone and not create problems around them. When we become attached to something and start worrying and suffering over it, that is the time to let it go. We should really investigate this attachment, observe what we are doing. We may, of course, be frightened of letting go because we do not know what will happen to us as a result. So we may have a lot of fear: 'If I let go of my desires and worries, there won't be anything left. Might dissolve! Might just disappear!' We have been carrying the burden for so long, we actually believe that the burden is us and so we cannot imagine life without it. The idea of letting the burden go is similar to the idea of killing ourselves. When we think about letting go of all our desires and fears, there is a feeling of annihilating ourselves. But once we do let go of

the burden, we then know what it is like to not have problems! Then we are able to see clearly – minds alert to the moment, adaptable to time and place, no longer caught up in the momentum of habit and conditions.

So many people in the world, so much danger, so much misery! To learn from the rubbish of our minds is within our capability, but it does take determination and confidence. We may find ourselves sometimes on a plateau of dreariness, seemingly endless plains that go on, one after the other: 'Why did I ever start meditating?' 'Wish I had never thought of it.' But if we do not turn back, if we cross that plateau, that desert, enduring the monotony of our minds, then we shall know what it is like on the other side.

Being the Knowing

If I say 'yesterday' you remember something. And that is a perception conditioned into the mind. We carry all kinds of things around with us from the past, believing in them. How many of us give life to the past in the present? We have this ability to remember. When we are heedless, we do stupid things which we then have to remember. And we think: 'Maybe I should be more careful about what I do, so that when I remember, it won't be so dreadful.'

A young lady came to see me once who was really upset. She had had an abortion and was worried about the result of it, karmically. 'What will happen to me? When I die, what will happen then?' I said: 'I don't know. But you can observe the results here in this life. You have to remember these things, and wonder about them – that is the karmic result.'

When we do things like that, we have to remember them. And we have to wonder: 'Was it an evil thing to do? Was it all right? Should I have . . . shouldn't I?' We want to be told it is all right to do certain things, to have abortions. We want some kind of security. Or we want to have the living daylights scared out of us, and be told that what we have done is evil and wicked

and we shall suffer in hell. But we do not know, do we? We do not know how wicked we are. Abortion is certainly not something one is going to advise people to have, unless there is some medical reason. One does not go around praising it as a noble, fine thing, holding it up and saying that it is the ultimate in attainment for a woman.

This is the kind of thing in life which always leaves the mind a little insecure or frightened – because we do not know. What we *can* know is that we *do not* know and that maybe we should live a little more carefully in the future so as not to have to make these kinds of decisions again, or have this kind of fear generated into our lives.

If we open the mind, wisely reflect, then we know how to live. There is no question of being told that we shall go to hell if we do this or that. People do go to hell, of course; they create it out of fear, doubt and anxiety – the results of living heedlessly. We remember the evil things we do; we do not forget those things, ever. We also remember the good things. But the point is, we *have* to remember. Indifferent things, ordinary things – we do not remember much of these. But anything extreme – a bit frightening or threatening – we do remember. This is the way the mind works.

The Buddha advised wise consideration – to wisely learn from life rather than just blindly living it as a creature of habit, or as a

conditioned moral being. To be moral out of fear is better than being immoral, but still there is no wisdom in it.

So, the past is a memory NOW. But tomorrow? What is tomorrow? Tomorrow is the unknown, isn't it? How many things can happen tomorrow, in the unknown? We might think: 'Tomorrow I'll do this.' But things change and we may not be able to do this tomorrow. We can project into the future all possibilities from our experiences in the past: 'Maybe I will become a billionaire.' 'Maybe I will lose everything, have cancer, be deserted by everybody, have no friends left, live in some old slummy part of London – depressed and alone.' We can imagine the worst possible scenario, or the best, or anything in between. If it is suggested, say, that tomorrow will be the beginning of the Third World War, we may think: 'Oh, I dread that. Tomorrow! Oh, I hope tomorrow never comes.' Or someone might say: 'Tomorrow is going to be the Great Aquarian Age, the golden age for mankind where we'll actually grow up a bit and live like decent beings.' Then we might think: 'Oh, wouldn't that be wonderful! Tomorrow everything is going to be all right.' So, will there be a nuclear war tomorrow? Will it be the fulfilment of the Aquarian Age where everything will be wonderful?

What actually is waiting for us in the future? Death is waiting. We say: 'I don't want to think about that. I'll think about the past, look through

my photograph album, look at videos of the wedding, the children getting their university degrees, me winning the golf tournament, me on a camel by the pyramids, me at the Vatican.' We are like that, aren't we? Why? Because the future is the unknown and rather than looking at that, we seek the past – memories, sentiment. In meditation we need to establish ourselves in the present – the known and the unknown.

The Buddhist teaching is that all that arises passes away and is not self. So death, what we call death, is nothing but the ending of a body. And yet this idea of dying is frightening to most of us because it is what we do not know: 'When I don't have this body any more, what will happen to me?' It is the unknown and we cannot imagine what will happen to us. Maybe we have perceptions about going to heaven, living happily ever after, living in a state of eternal bliss, joining the Father in heaven, playing a harp, radiating light. Or maybe going to hell: 'I'm just one of those people they send down to the pits.' We do not know the future. But we do not *need* to know. We can let the future be the mysterious unknown, the infinite potential – the possibility for pleasure, the possibility for pain, the possibility for peace. As we let go of the fear of the unknown, we find peace.

There is the 'now', and the 'knowing' that the past is a memory and the future is the unknown. This is the way to get the proper perspective on everything in the universe. We actually believe in

time – yesterday and tomorrow – as solid realities. But they are just perceptions taking place in the present. We bring awareness to the way things are in the present. Each day can be taken as it comes, as a completely new experience, the perception of the date being seen as a convention for getting through time.

We know a lot *about* things from conditioned perceptions which we call education. We get our minds filled with a lot of ideas, facts, statistics – 'The population of Britain is 55 million.' We think we really know something about Britain when we have that – '55 million people'. We say: 'Britain has 55 million people in it! That is an awful lot of people. It's overcrowded!' All this is just perception. We think we *really* know Britain because we know facts about it. But what is this knowledge actually? It is just a perception in the moment. That particular perception comes into consciousness, then it goes. We look upon 'Britain' as a reality, as solid, dependable, secure. Yet, when we *really* look at it, what is it? It is just a perception that comes and goes according to conditions. Unless we are obsessed, or crazy, we do not think 'Britain, Britain, Britain,' all the time. When certain conditions arise, then that particular perception comes into consciousness. And yet there is the proliferating tendency, the reactions if one is pro or anti, or has a lot of opinions and views: 'Britain – 55 million people – overcrowded!' One thing goes on to the next. We say: 'America – Ronald Reagan

– California.' There is an association of thought: 'Egypt – Pyramids – Cleopatra – Sadat.' When I was a child learning about China, we were told that Chinese women bound their feet. Even to this day, though Chinese women no longer bind their feet, that thought still comes up in my mind. So we can see how conditioned the mind is.

When meditating, we look at the habits of mind, the opinions, views and prejudices that we are conditioned with. We all have them. It is part of being human, part of human ignorance, to be caught in fixed positions about everything, about ourselves, religion, politics, all these things. We can see them as perceptions in the mind. In meditation we recognize the limits of the mind. To do so is *being the knowing here and now*. Being the knowing – that which knows; knowing the limits of our human condition, of what we can know and what we cannot know; knowing what a memory is, what a concept is, or what a mental creation is – knowing conditions of the mind. The only certainty is right now – *this* is the way it is at this moment in time.

In the mornings I say: 'Today is the beginning of a new day. Yesterday is a memory. Tomorrow is the unknown. Now is the knowing.' This is a way to remember these things.

He Did Not Pass the Cakes

We get so busy, don't we? 'I just don't have time; I'm so busy, I don't have time to meditate.' We think that life is many important things to do. One time at Wat Pah Pong a Thai lady came from Bangkok to see Ajahn Chah and she said: 'I want to meditate but I just don't have time; I'm so busy.' He looked at her and said: 'Do you have time to eat?' She said: 'Well of course!' Eating is something we can always make time for; meditation we put off.

What is really important in our lives? What are the priorities? We have to decide what is more important, what it is that we really have to do. Worldly values are ones where the pull is to enjoy and participate in all that goes on; we think *that* is the real world. The spiritual world we may consider to be not so real. But everything that arises passes away and is not self – that is the Buddha's teaching. It is not a teaching to make us *believe* we do not have a self: 'I believe I don't exist, don't have any self.' It is not that. But body and mind just are not self. Schizophrenia is not self; depression is not self; anger is not self; paranoia is not self; fear is not self; desire is not self; greed is not self; jealousy is not self; the body is not self;

being a man is not self; being a woman . . . the whole thing – not self.

Fear crosses our minds: 'I'm a terrible coward; that's the problem with me.' And we believe it! So we become cowardly. But if a cowardly thought goes through our minds and we say: 'Not self! That is not me,' it is like a fly crossing – there it goes! However, we tend to hold onto fear: 'That's me; that's what I really am. I'm that cowardly, weak, awful thing. That is what I really am.' And that is called 'self', 'ego'. But we do not want to be like that, so we think: 'Maybe I should be something else.' And we try to become what we would like to be.

We try to get praise; we try to get someone out there to come and reinforce our worth. We learn to be charming, clever. People say: 'You're charming, clever and witty!' We say: 'That's me. Life's a party. I'm a delight to the world. I'm a gift to humanity.' So then we become conceited and arrogant. But that too is insecure. We have to keep getting the reinforcement all the time, and then we become a nuisance. People can only take so much of our charm and wit; it becomes boring after awhile. They say: 'Won't he ever stop?'

Or we may have an image of ourselves as being sensitive: 'I am a sensitive, spiritual being.' We can go around thinking that, reciting lovely little bits of poetry, talking about flowers. We all have these little games we play, these identities we try to act out in public, things we

would like to be. What we actually are, of course, might be very different and beneath the facade, there is the fear of being discovered: 'I'm worthless, boring, nobody, nobody important; nobody could possibly love me.' We hope not to be found out. There is aspiration in our lives – wanting to become a noble being, somebody worthy of respect. But sometimes we do not know how to go about it. We may think that if we dazzle people with a few clever things and a charming appearance, that will do it. But it is all easily seen through.

In all human societies – tribal, civilized, or whatever – there is aspiration for the truth. Even in modern materialist societies, the aspiration is towards being very rational. We can look at all the injustices and things wrong with the present situation. We can think of how it should be, write it out and publish it – according to a rational ideal of how we would like the world to be. And when we read it, we think: 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if it were like that. It'd be great. That's the way it should be.' We can all agree on that; we have these ideals.

University life is filled with ideals. When I was a student in an American university, we spent a long time drinking beer and criticizing everything – American government, American economy, American civilization, American values; we knew how America *should* be. I could tell you how Britain should be. I could tell you how *you* should be. Do you want to hear? Then you can tell me

how I should be. It is easy, isn't it? All of us are good at that. I can tell you how I think women should be – they should be kind, generous, loving, obedient, faithful, intelligent, hard-working, courageous, brave, noble-hearted, delicate, sweet, never a cross word, never a frown! That is how I would like all women to be, just for my sake. Men should be strong, brave, noble beings, hard-working, intelligent, enduring! I can tell everyone how they should be according to how I would like them to be for me, how I would like the British government to be, or the American government, the French, the Soviet.

No matter how much we want things to be otherwise, they are as they are. We know how we would like to sit in meditation, for example, as an ideal meditator. But how are we really? What goes on? Whatever it is, that is what we have to observe and learn from. Meditation is not a kind of analysis, putting a judgement on things, but a recognition of the way things are *at this moment* – not believing that things are like 'this' in a permanent way, but just recognizing them as they are *in the moment.*

You think how you would like to be at home, and how you would like everybody else to be at home. Your mind is quiet, and you want everybody else to be quiet. You go to work feeling very kind and calm, and you want everybody to respect that, not to say harsh things or stir you up, or make you angry. It takes a lot of energy, doesn't it, just trying to

stop yourself from hitting somebody at the office! The world is an irritating, frustrating place; there is an incredible amount of friction in society, in families, in situations.

We can be irritated with each other even when sitting quietly in meditation! How many of us have felt really irritated by the habits of those around us – just wanting to bash them, wishing they would go away, leave? They might scratch themselves at a time when we do not want them to and we find that very annoying. Or they might move, or say something and we do not want to listen to it. So even in the most idyllic conditions we can get very irritated.

We need to take into account the conditions we have to exist with, not condemning or judging them, but just recognizing them. These are the people; they are 'this' way – the people at the office, in the factory, in the hospital, at home. This is what we have to exist with, be patient with, reflect on, these kinds of people, these kinds of situations. 'I don't want it like this. I hate it!' With this attitude we make a suffering situation for ourselves. But we can reflect and allow the friction that arises in the mind to become a fully conscious experience – just frustration, or anger, or resentment. Then we know what it is and do not push it aside, trying to repress it, or we do not indulge in it. We may go to the office on Monday morning and somebody says something very irritating: 'I'm going to leave! I'm going to quit this! I'm . . .

I'm not going to put up with this any more!' We get carried away. Alternatively, we can just watch, reflect on the feeling that arises in the mind, the irritation. What is that irritation? We can observe it, have the time, the patience, to just observe the feeling that arises from friction.

Sitting in meditation is the same; after a time – physical pain! We should observe that pain rather than try to get rid of it. An itch: 'I hate that itch! I want to scratch it.' Then: 'But I shouldn't scratch it.' After that we get caught in wanting to scratch, then wanting *not* to scratch. What do we do? Scratch? Not scratch? We can make a real problem out of it. Or we can go right to the sensation itself, go right to the itching – with the mind, that is, not with the hand. We can concentrate right on that itching feeling, that unpleasant sensation that we want to get rid of, and just be patient with it. This state of: 'Maybe I should scratch? No, no, I should just be patient with it,' that is suffering, isn't it? But actually going right to the sensation itself, concentrating on it, is quite bearable, it is all right.

The same applies to irritations in our minds. We go to the office. Somebody has done something all wrong; he is being really stupid. We want to blow up. Now, we can go right to that feeling of anger or frustration; as with the itch, we can concentrate on it, right in the heart, listen to it, make it a fully conscious thing – and then let it go. It goes away. And we

have not been foolish, we have not said anything, done anything, that we would later regret. We can easily get caught up in depression or the desire to run away. But we should take into account that the world is like this. There is always going to be plenty of friction, irritation, wherever we go. There is plenty in the monastery, and there is plenty in family life – even in happy marriages.

The sensory world is one of irritation and friction. But if we use it, we shall become very patient, gentle, mellow creatures, lovely, wise beings. Anyone who practises with that friction wisely becomes gentle and soft. The friction grinds away all the hard edges, the nastiness and harshness of our minds.

There was a monk I knew once. He kept all the cakes for himself! I was sitting in the line of monks at the meal with my little bowl of sticky rice and bamboo shoots, waiting for some cakes to be passed down. Talk about friction in the mind! I looked up after awhile and saw that monk at the head of the line with a mischievous gleam in his eye – he was not going to send those cakes down. I observed the desire to murder – the frustration, the wanting, the resentment at someone stopping me having something I thought I deserved: 'Those cakes were given for *all* the monks; they weren't given for just that *one* monk. That is a dirty trick to play on the lay people. Those generous kind lay people came; they brought those cakes, and they

want to see us ***all*** eating them, not just ***him***!' I really got indignant, righteously indignant, because I was right: 'If those people had brought cakes for just that one monk, they would not have brought so many.' I sat there fuming; and I had indigestion for the rest of the day – all because I lacked the ability to concentrate on friction. Actually in the long run it has made a very good story.

The point is, I did not die; nobody was deprived of nourishment that day. We all survived. These things are really silly things in our lives. And we can get very upset even to the point of murder over some foolish little thing. I was amazed to find how easy it was to get so overwhelmed with anger over such a trivial matter.

In daily-life meditation we use the difficult situations – the irritations, the unsatisfactoriness, the dreariness, the disappointments, all that is negative and unpleasant about life – for wise reflection. It is an opportunity to concentrate, to develop. We can turn to the sensation itself, rather than trying to straighten out the world by telling it how it should be.

'You know that monk? Well, he shouldn't be that way. That isn't the right way for a good monk. A good monk should share everything – in fact, maybe give up his share for someone else. A good monk shouldn't be one that keeps everything for himself and doesn't pass down the cakes!' We can all agree on what a good monk

should be. 'Is a good monk one who hoards up food for himself? No! Is a good monk one who looks after himself at the expense of everyone else? No! Is a good monk one who doesn't care about himself, just takes what he needs and shares the rest? Yes! That is a good monk!' So I could go and tell that monk what he should be. But he already knows! He knows what he should be. He knew at the time, and he knew what I was thinking – that was obvious from the glint in his eye. All there is left for me to do is go to the sensation, the anger, the heat, where it really hurts – here, inside. That kind of practice makes us very soft; we become very, very patient.

Thai monasteries are not terribly efficient; that, of course, is not their purpose. And for years Ajahn Chah would not allow electricity. The wealthy people came and wanted to put electric pumps on the wells to make it easier for us, but Ajahn Chah declined the offer. And he made sure we went out every day with ropes, pulleys and buckets to draw the water, carry it on poles, and distribute it to containers in the kitchen and to the bathing areas. Primitive, wasn't it? And very inefficient. But it demanded a lot of patience, a willingness to do routine things – day after day after day – until eventually we found them to be quite peaceful activities. 'It is certainly primitive out here. No mains water, no electricity. It's backward, inefficient!' I could think of how it *should* be,

but that was not the point. The patience, the willingness to endure, the willingness to do routine things over and over again, the willingness to endure the mosquitoes and all the other things – that was the point. The weather is hot, the mosquitoes are biting, I am sitting in meditation: 'I'm going to get malaria! I know it!' Maybe six or seven of them are biting at once. Horrible feeling. Aversion arises, incredible anger and frustration. What is there to do? The only thing worth doing is going to the aversion itself, to the sensation, and investigating it. That was how I began to endure what was seemingly unendurable. And I found that kind of practice to be very helpful. I did not like it at the time, of course, but it was very beneficial.

Frustrations, difficulties in our daily lives – we can use them for meditation. We can just keep facing the things that come up in our minds, the fears and desires. And we become someone who reflects and learns from life, not someone who always complains and feels disappointed when life fails to come up to expectations. Being able to work with life as it is, with ourselves, with the people we live with, with the society we live in – that is meditation in daily life.

We have the opportunity to become enlightened beings. We can concentrate, observe, understand, really know what desire is, know what fear is, know what is present, know that whatever is present is an impermanent condition,

and know that impermanent conditions are not self. We can keep penetrating our fears and desires, and then we shall no longer be deluded by them.

It takes constant practice, of course, because most of us operate from conditioning. We have a way of living at home, at the office, or wherever, out of habit, and have become used to living and acting in certain ways. We have found security and safety in that routine, in things we feel we can depend on. But that very sense of security and safety is dangerous! The things that we think are safe really are not; they can be changed, disrupted or taken away from us at any time. Then we feel distraught, resentful, upset. What can we do? We can go to the source, go right to where it is, where we can witness it, know it, concentrate on it, really see it as it is. And then, if we no longer blindly follow our feelings of the moment, we shall begin to realize the peace of our minds. We can turn to that peacefulness, the unconditioned, the continuous silence of the mind; we can just turn to that instead of to the sensation. An itch now comes; we turn to the silence rather than to the sensation. If we try to turn to the silence out of aversion for the sensation, however, it will not work. We have to be scrupulously honest and patient. At first we have to turn to the sensation, be fully with it, patiently, being willing to endure, allowing it to be as it is, allowing it to be our meditation until it stops.

Even in the midst of agony, despair, or restlessness, we can get to the source of it, rather than running away from it. Then, when we know these things beyond doubt, we just go to the silence of the mind.

If we are really willing to allow that which is most upsetting to be there, or that which is most boring, or most frightening, concentrating on it, welcoming it even, then we shall be taking an opportunity to be patient, gentle, wise. And this is the way to develop the path in our lives as human beings from now until the death of our bodies. I look back over my life as a monk. I really resented some of the most difficult situations at the time, but now I view them with affection; I realize now that they were strengthening experiences. At the time I thought: 'I wish this wasn't happening, I wish I could get rid of this.' But now I look back with enormous gratitude because they were beneficial experiences.

Anguish, despair, sorrow can be transmuted into patient endurance, into wise reflection. Life is as it is. Some of it is going to be very nice, some of it awful. A lot of it is going to be neither nice nor awful, just boring. Life is like that. We observe: 'This is how our lives have to be.' Then we wisely use what we have, learn from it, and free ourselves from the narrow limits of self and mortality.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS BY
BUDDHIST PUBLISHING GROUP

THE ZEN TEACHING OF
INSTANTANEOUS AWAKENING
by Hui Hai
Trans. John Blofeld
An eighth-century T'ang Dynasty Zen text. A record of the teachings of Master Hui Hai who was of the same tradition as Hui Neng, Ma Tsu and Huang Po.

FINGERS AND MOONS
Trevor Leggett
A collection of humorous and instructive Zen stories and incidents.

AN INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM
A comprehensive account of Buddhism and its teachings.

BUDDHISM NOW
A bimonthly journal of Buddhist articles, stories, interviews, practical advice, translations, verse, etc.

For information on obtaining any of the above, please write to:

Buddhist Publishing Group
Sharpham North Ashprington Totnes
Devon TQ9 7UT England

Sabbadanam Dhammadanam Jinati
The Gift of Truth Excels All Other Gifts

Dedication of merits

~ * ~

To our parents, virtuous teachers
brothers, sisters, children, relatives
friends, associates
all devas and all sentient beings

May all merit gained by printing and
distribution of this book go
to the liberation of all sentient beings
from the wheel of Samara

NOW IS THE KNOWING

Ven. AJAHN SUMEDHO

FOREWORD

The Buddha said that the greatest gift is the gift of Dhamma. This small book represents the wish of some of those fortunate enough to have received Dhamma teachings from Venerable Ajahn Sumedho to share them with others.

A certain amount of editing of the talks was felt necessary : some repetition was deleted, personal pronouns and tenses rearranged etc, so as to translate the free form of direct speechinto a more ordered printed record. This was always done judiciously and with great respect. The second section, 'Ānāpānasati', is in fact composed of passages from three or four different talks on the subject of 'Mindfulness of Breathing'. It seemed very useful to have so much pertinent advice gathered in a single place.

It is by sincerely using the Ajahn's teachings as 'tools to reflect on the way things are' that we can begin to repay our great debt of gratitude to him. May we all constantly do so.

The Compiler

Yesterday is a memory.
Tomorrow is the unknown.
Now is the knowing.

BUDDHA DHAMMA SANGHA

When people ask 'What do you have to do to become a Buddhist?' we say that we take refuge in Buddha Dhamma Sangha and to take refuge we recite a Pāli formula :

Buddhaṁ saranaṁ gacchāmi (I go to the Buddha for refuge)
Dhammaṁ saranaṁ gacchāmi (I go to the Dhamma for refuge)
Saṅghaṁ saranaṁ gacchāmi (I go to the Sangha for refuge)

As we practise more and more and begin to realize the profundity of the Buddhist Teachings it becomes a real joy to take these refuges and even just their recitation inspires the mind. After sixteen years as a monk I still like to chant *'Buddhaṁ saranaṁ gacchāmi'*, in fact I like it more than I did fifteen years ago because then it didn't really mean anything to me, I just chanted it because I had to, because it was part of the tradition. Merely taking refuge in the Buddha verbally doesn't mean you take refuge in anything, a parrot could be trained to say *'Buddhaṁ saranaṁ gacchāmi'*, and it would probably be as meaningful to a parrot as it is to many Buddhists. These words are for reflection, looking at them and actually investigating what they mean : what 'refuge' means, what 'Buddha' means. When we say 'I take refuge in the Buddha' what do we mean by that? How can we use that so that it is not just a repetition of nonsense syllables but something that really helps to remind us, gives us direction and increases our devotion, our dedication to the path of the Buddha.

The word Buddha is a lovely word, it means 'the one who knows', and the first refuge is in Buddha as the personification of wisdom. Unpersonified wisdom remains too abstract for us, we can't conceive a bodiless, soulless wisdom, and so as wisdom always seems to have a personal quality to it, using Buddha as its symbol is very useful.

We can use the word Buddha to refer to Gotama, the founder of what is now known as Buddhism, the historical sage who attained *Parinibbāna** in India 2500 years ago, the teacher of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, teachings from which we today still benefit. But when we take refuge in the Buddha it doesn't mean that we take refuge in some historical prophet but in that which is wise in the universe, in our minds, that which is not separate from us but is more real than anything we can conceive with the mind or experience through the senses. Without any Buddha-wisdom in the universe life for any length of time would be totally impossible, it is the Buddha-wisdom that protects. We call it Buddha-wisdom, other people can call it other things if they want, these are just words. We happen to use the words of our tradition. We're not going to argue about Pāli words, Sanskrit words, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, English or any other, we're just using the term Buddha-wisdom as a conventional symbol to help remind us to be wise, to be alert, to be awake.

Many forest bhikkhus in the North-East of Thailand use the word 'Buddho' as their meditation object. They use it as a kind of *koan,* firstly they calm the mind by following the inhalations and exhalations using the syllables BUD-DHO and then begin to contemplate "What is Buddho, the 'one who knows'?" "What is the knowing?" When I used to travel around the North-East of Thailand on *'tudong'* I liked to go and stay at the monastery of Ajahn Fun. Ajahn Fun was a much-loved and deeply respected monk, the teacher of the Royal Family, and he was so popular that he was constantly receiving guests. I would sit at his kuti and hear

* The dissolution of the Five Aggregates, in common parlance the 'death', of an enlightened one.

him give the most amazing kind of Dhamma talks all on the subject of Buddho, as far as I could see it was all that he taught. He could make it into a really profound meditation whether for an illiterate farmer or an elegant Western-educated Thai aristocrat. The main part of his teaching was to not just mechanically repeat 'Buddho' but to reflect and investigate, to awaken the mind to really look into the 'Buddho', the 'one who knows', really investigate its beginning, its end, above and below, so that one's whole attention was stuck onto it. When one did that, 'Buddho' became something that echoed through the mind. One would investigate it, look at it, examine it before it was said, after it was said and eventually one would start listening to it and hear beyond the sound until one heard the silence.

A refuge is a place of safety and so when superstitious people would come to my teacher Ajahn Chah, wanting charmed medallions or little talismans to protect them from bullets and knives, ghosts and so on he would say "Why do you want things like that? The only real protection is taking refuge in the Buddha. Taking refuge in the Buddha is enough." But their faith in Buddha usually wasn't quite as much as their faith in those silly little medallions. They wanted something made out of bronze and clay, stamped and blessed. This is what is called taking refuge in bronze and clay, taking refuge in superstition, taking refuge in that which is truly unsafe and cannot really help us. Today in modern Britain we find that generally people are more sophisticated. They don't take refuge in magic charms, they take refuge in things like the Westminster Bank, but that is still taking refuge in something that offers no safety. Taking refuge in the Buddha, in wisdom, means that we have a place of safety. When there is wisdom, when we act wisely and live wisely we are truly safe. The conditions around us might change. We can't guarantee what will happen to the material standard of living or that the Westminster Bank will survive the decade, the future remains unknown and mysterious, but in the present taking refuge in the Buddha we have that presence of mind now to reflect on and learn from life as we live it.

Wisdom doesn't mean having a lot of knowledge *about* the world, we don't have to go to university and collect information about the world to be wise. Wisdom means knowing the nature of conditions as we're experiencing them. It is not just being caught up in reacting to and absorbing into the conditions of our bodies and minds out of habit, out of fear, worry, doubt, greed and so on, but using that 'Buddho', that 'one who knows,' to observe that these conditions are changing. It is the knowing of that change that we call Buddha and in which we take refuge. We make no claims to Buddha as being 'me' or 'mine'. We don't say 'I am Buddha' but rather 'I take refuge in Buddha'. It is a way of humbly submitting to that wisdom, being aware, being awake.

Although in one sense taking refuge is something we are doing all the time, the Pāli formula we use is a reminder because we forget, because we habitually take refuge in worry, doubt, fear, anger, greed and so on. The Buddha-image is similar, when we bow to it we don't imagine that it is anything other than a bronze image, a symbol. It is a reflection and makes us a little more aware of Buddha, of our refuge in Buddha Dhamma Sangha. The Buddha image sits in great dignity and calm, not in a trance but fully alert, with a look of wakefulness and kindness, not being caught in the changing conditions around it. Though the image is made of brass and we have these flesh-and-blood bodies and it is much more difficult for us, still it is a reminder. Some people get very puritanical about Buddha-images, but here in the West I haven't found them to be a danger. The real idols that we believe in and worship and that constantly delude us are our thoughts, views and opinions, our loves and hates, our self-conceit and pride.

The second refuge is in the Dhamma, in ultimate truth or ultimate reality. Dhamma is impersonal, we don't in any way try to personify it to make it any kind of personal deity. When we chant in Pāli the verse on Dhamma we say it is *'sanditthiko akāliko ehipassiko opanayiko paccattaṁ veditabbo viññūhi'*. As Dhamma has no personal attributes we can't even say it is good or bad or anything that has any superlative or comparative

quality, it is beyond the dualistic conceptions of mind. So when we describe Dhamma or give an impression of it we do it through words such as *'sanditthiko'* which means imminent, here-and-now. That brings us back into the present, we feel a sense of immediacy, of now. You may think that Dhamma is some kind of thing that is out there, something you have to find elsewhere, but *sanditthiko dhamma* means that it is imminent, here and now.

Akālikodhamma means that Dhamma is not bound by any time condition, the word akāla means timeless. Our conceptual mind can't conceive of anything that is timeless because our conceptions and perceptions are time-based conditions, but what we can say is that Dhamma is *akāla,* not bound by time.

Ehipassikodhamma means to come and see, to turn towards or go to the Dhamma. It means to look, to be aware. It is not that we pray to the Dhamma to come, or wait for it to tap us on the shoulder, we have to put forth effort. It is like Christ's saying 'knock on the door and it shall be opened'. *Ehipassiko* means that we have to put forward that effort, to turn towards that truth.

Opanayiko means leading inwards towards the peace within the mind. Dhamma doesn't take us into fascination, into excitement, romance and adventure, but leads to *Nibbāna,* to calm, to silence.

Paccattaṁ veditabbo viññūhi means that we can only know Dhamma through direct experience. It is like the taste of honey, if someone else tastes it we still don't know its flavour. We may know the chemical formula or be able to recite all the great poetry ever written about honey but only when we taste it for ourselves do we really know what it is like. It is the same with Dhamma, we have to taste it, we have to know it directly.

Taking refuge in Dhamma is taking another safe refuge. It is not taking refuge in philosophy or intellectual concepts, in theories, in ideas, in doctrines or beliefs of any sort. It is not taking refuge in a belief in Dhamma, or a belief in God or in some kind of force in outer space or

something beyond or something separate, something that we have to find sometime later. The descriptions of the Dhamma keep us in the present, in the here and now, unbound by time. Taking refuge is an immediate, imminent reflection in the mind, it is not just repeating *'Dhammaṁ saranaṁ gacchāmi'* like a parrot, thinking 'Buddhists say this so I have to say it'. We turn towards the Dhamma, we are aware now, take refuge in Dhamma, now as an immediate action, an immediate reflection of being the Dhamma, being that very truth.

Because our conceiving mind tend always to delude us it takes us into becoming. We think 'I'll practise meditation so that I'll **become** enlightened in the future. I will take the Three Refuges in order to **become** a Buddhist. I want to **become** wise. I want to get away from suffering and ignorance and **become** something else'. This is the conceiving mind, the desire mind, the mind that always deludes us. Rather than constantly thinking in terms of becoming something we take refuge in being Dhamma in the pressent.

The impersonality of Dhamma bothers many people because devotional religion tends to personify everything and people coming from such traditions don't feel right if they can't have some sort of personal relationship with it. I remember one time a French Catholic missionary came to stay in our monastery and practise meditation. He felt at something of a loss with Buddhism because he said it was like 'cold surgery', there was no personal relationship with God. One cannot have a personal relationship with Dhamma, one cannot say 'Love the Dhamma !'or 'The Dhamma loves me!', there is no need for that. We only need a personal relationship with something we are not yet, like our mother, father, husband or wife, something separate from us. We don't need to take refuge in mother or father again, someone to protect us and love us and say 'I love you no matter what you do. Everything is going to be alright' and pat us on the head. The Buddhadhamma is a very maturing refuge, it is a religious practice that is a complete sanity or maturity, in which we are no longer seeking a mother or father, because we don't need to become anything

anymore. We don't need to be loved or protected by anyone anymore because we can love and protect others and that is all that is important. We no longer have to ask or demand things from others, whether it is from other people or even some deity or force that we feel is separate from us and has to be prayed to and asked for guidance.

We give up all our attempts to conceive Dhamma as being this or that or anything at all and let go of our desire to have a personal relationship with the truth. We have to be that truth here and now. Being that truth, taking that refuge calls for an immediate awakening, for being wise now, being Buddha, being Dhamma in the present.

The Third refuge is Sangha, which means a group. 'Sangha' may be the *bhikkhu-Sangha* or the *ariya-Sangha,* the group of the Noble Beings, those who live virtuously, doing good and refraining from evil with bodily action and speech. Here taking refuge in the Sangha with *'Saṅghaṁ saranaṁ gacchāmi'* means we take refuge in virtue, in that which is good, virtuous, kind, compassionate and generous. We don't take refuge in those things in our minds that are mean, nasty, cruel, selfish, jealous, hateful, angry, even though admittedly that is what we often tend to do out of heedlessness, out of not reflecting, not being awake, but just reacting to conditions. Taking refuge in the Sangha means on the conventional level doing good and refraining from evil with bodily action and speech.

All of us have both good thoughts and intentions and bad ones. *Sankhāras* (conditioned phenomena) are that way, some are good and some aren't, some are indifferent, some are wonderful and some are nasty. Conditions in the world are changing conditions, we can't just think the best, the most refined thoughts and feel only the best and the kindest feelings : both good and bad thoughts and feelings come and go, but we take refuge in virtue rather than in hatred. We take refuge in that in all of us that intends to do good, which is compassionate and kind and loving towards ourselves and others. So the refuge of Sangha is a very practical refuge for day-to-day living within the human form, within this body, in relation to the bodies of other beings and the physical world that

we live in. When we take this refuge we do not act in any way that causes division, disharmony, cruelty, meanness or unkindness to any living being including ourself, our own body and mind. This is being *'supatipanno'*, one who practises well.

When we are aware and mindful, when we reflect and observe, we begin to see that acting on impulses that are cruel and selfish only brings harm and misery to ourself as well as to others, it doesn't take any great powers of observation to see that. If you've met any criminals in your life, people who have acted selfishly and evilly, you'll find them constantly frightened, obsessed, paranoid, suspicious, having to drink a lot, take drugs, keep busy, do all kinds of things because living with themselves is so horrible. Five minutes alone with themselves without any dope or drink or anything would seem to them like eternal hell, because the kammic result of evil is so appalling mentally. Even if they're never caught by the police or sent to prison don't think they're going to get away with anything. In fact sometimes that is the kindest thing, to put them in prison and punish them, it makes them feel better. I was never a criminal but I have managed to tell a few lies and do a few mean and nasty things in my lifetime and the results were always unpleasant. Even today when I think of those things it is not a pleasant memory, it is not something that I want to go to announce to everybody, not something that I feel joy when I think about.

When we are meditating we realize that we have to be completely responsible for how we live. In no way can we blame anyone else for anything at all. Before I started to meditate I used to blame people and society, 'If only my parents had been completely wise, enlightened *arahants* I would be alright. If only the United States of America had a truly wise compassionate government that never made any mistakes, supported me completely and appreciated me fully. If only my friends were wise and encouraging and the teachers truly wise, generous and kind. If everyone around me was perfect, if the society was perfect, if the world wise, perfect, then I wouldn't have any of these problems. But all have failed me.'

My parents had a few flaws and they did make a few mistakes but now when I look back on it they didn't make very many. At the time when I was looking to blame others and I was desperately trying to think of the faults of my parents, I really had to work at it. My generation was very good at blaming everything on the United States and that is a really easy one because the United States makes a lot of mistakes. But when we meditate it means we can no longer get away with that kind of lying to ourselves. We suddenly realize that no matter what anyone else has done or how unjust the society might be or what our parents might have been like we can in no way spend the rest of our lives blaming anyone else, that is a complete waste of time. We have to accept complete responsibility for our life and live it. Even if we did have miserable parents, were raised in a terrible society with no opportunities, it still doesn't matter. There is no one else to blame for our suffering now but ourselves, our own ignorance, selfishness and conceit.

In the crucifixion of Jesus we can see a brilliant example of a man in pain, stripped naked, made fun of, completely humiliated and then publicly executed in the most horrible, excruciating way, yet without blaming anyone: "Forgive them for they know not what they do". This is a sign of wisdom, it means that even if people are crucifying us, nailing us to the cross, scourging us, humiliating us in every way it is our aversion, self-pity, pettiness and selfishness that is the problem, the suffering. It is not even the physical pain that is the suffering, it is the aversion. Now if Jesus Christ had said 'Curse you for treating me like this!" he would have been just another criminal and would have been forgotten a few days later. Reflect on this, because we tend to easily blame others for our suffering and we can justify it because maybe other people are mistreating us or exploiting us or don't understand us or are doing dreadful things to us. We're not denying that but we make nothing of it any more. We forgive, we let go of those memories because taking refuge in Sangha means here and now doing good and refraining from doing evil with bodily action and speech.

So may you reflect on this and see Buddha Dhamma Sangha as really a refuge. Look on them as opportunites for reflection and consideration. It is not a matter of believing in Buddha Dhamma Sangha, not a faith in concepts but a using of symbols for mindfulness, for awakening the mind here-and-now, being here-and-now.

ĀNĀPĀNASATI

We tend to overlook the ordinary. We are usually only aware of our breath when it's abnormal, like if we have asthma or when we've been running hard. But with *ānāpānasati* we take our ordinary breath as the meditation object. We don't try to make the breath long or short or control it in any way but to simply stay with the normal inhalation and exhalation. The breath is not something that we create or imagine, it is a natural process of our bodies that continues as long as life lasts, whether we concentrate on it or not, and so it is an object that is always present, we can turn to it at any time. We don't have to have any qualifications to watch our breath, we do not even need to be particularly intelligent, all we have to do is to be content with and aware of one inhalation and exhalation. Wisdom does not come from studying great theories and philosophies, but from observing the ordinary.

The breath lacks any exciting quality or anything fascinating about it and so we can become very restless and averse to it. Our desire is always to get something, to find something that will interest and absorb us without any effort on our part. If we hear some music we don't think, "I must concentrate on this fascinating and exciting rhythmic music" — we can't stop ourselves, because the rhythm is so compelling that it pulls us in. The rhythm of our normal breathing is not interesting or compelling, it is tranquillizing, and most beings aren't used to tranquillity. Most people like the idea of peace but find the actual experience of it disappointing or frustrating. They desire stimulation, something that will

draw them into itself. With *ānāpānasati* we stay with an object that is quite neutral, we don't have any strong feelings of like or dislike for our breath, and just note the beginning of an inhalation, its middle and its end, then the beginning of an exhalation, its middle and end. The gentle rhythm of the breath, being slower than the rhythm of thought, takes us to tranquillity, we begin to stop thinking. But we don't try to get anything from the meditation, to **get** *samādhi* or **get** *jhāna,* because when the mind is trying to achieve or attain things rather than just being humbly content with one breath, then it doesn't slow down and become calm, and we become frustrated.

At first the mind wanders off. Once we are aware that we have wandered off the breath then we very gently return to it. We use the attitude of being very, very patient and always willing to begin again. Our minds are not used to being held down, they have been taught to associate one thing with another and form opinions about everything. Being accustomed to using our intelligence and ability to think in clever ways, we tend to become very tense and restless when we can't do that, and when we practise *ānāpānasati* we feel resistance, a resentment to it. It is like a wild horse when it is first harnessed getting angry with the things that bind it.

When the mind wanders we get upset and discouraged, negative and averse to the whole thing. If out of frustation we try to force the mind to be tranquil with sheer will we can only keep it up for a short while and then the mind is off somewhere else. So the right attitude to *ānāpānasati* is being very patient, having all the time in the world, letting go or discarding all worldly, personal or financial problems. During this time there is nothing we have to do except watch our breath.

If the mind wanders on the in-breath then put more effort into the inhalation. If the mind wanders on the exhalation then put more effort into that. Keep bringing it back. Always be willing to start anew. At the start of each new day, at the beginning of each inhalation, cultivate the beginner's mind, carrying nothing from the old to the new, leaving no traces, like a big bonfire.

One inhalation and the mind wanders, so we bring it back again and that itself is a moment of mindfulness. We are training the mind like a good mother trains her child. A little child doesn't know what it is doing, it just wanders off, and if the mother gets angry with it and spanks and beats it the child becomes terrified and neurotic. A good mother will just leave the child, keeping an eye on it, and if it wanders she will bring it back. Having that kind of patience we're not trying to bash away at ourselves, hating ourselves, hating our breath, hating everybody, getting upset because we can't get tranquil with *ānāpānasati.*

Sometimes we get too serious about everything, totally lacking in joy and happiness, with no sense of humour, just repressing everything. Gladden the mind, put a smile on your dial! Be relaxed and at ease, without the pressure of having to achieve anything special - nothing to attain, no big deal, nothing special. And what can you say you have done today to earn your board and keep? Just one mindful inhalation? Crazy! But that is more than most people can say of their day.

We're not battling the forces of evil. If you feel averse towards *ānāpānasati* then note that too. Don't feel it's something you have to do, but let it be a pleasure, something you really enjoy doing. When you think "I can't do it" then recognize that as resistance, fear or frustration and then relax. Don't make this practice into a difficult thing, a burdensome task. When I was first ordained I was dead serious, very grim and solemn about myself, like a dried-up old stick and I used to get in terrible states thinking "I've got to .... I've got to .....". At those times I learned to contemplate peace. Doubts and restlessness, discontent and aversion - soon I was able to reflect on peace, saying the word over and over, hypnotizing myself to relax. The self-doubts would start coming "I'm getting nowhere with this, its useless, I want to get something" and I was able to be peaceful with that. This is one method that you can use. So when we're tense we relax and then we resume *ānāpānasati.*

At first we feel hopelessly clumsy like when we're learning to play the guitar. When we first start playing our fingers are so clumsy it seems

hopeless, but when we've done it for some time we gain skill and it is quite easy. We're learning to witness what's going on in our mind, so we can know when we're getting restless and tense or when we're getting dull. We recognize that, we're not trying to convince ourselves that it's otherwise, we're fully aware of the way things are. We sustain effort for one inhalation. If we can't do that then we sustain it for half an inhalation at least. In this way we're not trying to become perfect all at once. We don't have to do everything just right according to some idea of how it should be, but we work with the problems that are there. If we have a scattered mind then it's wisdom to recognize the mind that goes all over the place - that is insight. To think that we shouldn't be that way, to hate ourselves or feel discouraged because that is the way we happen to be - that is ignorance.

We don't start from where a perfect yogi is, we're not doing Iyengar* postures before we can bend over and touch our toes. That is the way to ruin ourselves. We may look at all the postures in the 'Light on Yoga' book and see Iyengar wrapping his legs around his neck, in all kinds of amazing postures, but if we try to do them ourselves they'll cart us off to hospital. So we start from just trying to bend a little more from the waist, examine the pain and resistance to it, learn to stretch gradually. The same with *ānāpānasati,* we recognize the way it is now and start from there, we sustain our attention a little longer and we begin to understand what concentration is. Don't make Superman resolutions when you're not Superman. You say 'I'm going to sit and watch my breath all night' and then when you fail you become angry. Set periods that you know you can do. Experiment, work with the mind until you know how to put forth effort and how to relax.

We have to learn to walk by falling down. Look at babies, I've never seen one that could walk straight away. Babies learn to walk by crawling, by holding onto things, by falling down and then pulling themselves up again. It is the same with meditation. We learn wisdom by observing ignorance,

* B.K.S. Iyengar is a well-known contemporary Hatha Yogi

by making a mistake, reflecting and keeping going. If we think about it too much it seems hopeless. If babies thought a lot they'd never learn to walk, because when you watch a child trying to walk it seems hopeless, doesn't it? When we think about it, meditation can seem completely hopeless, but we just keep doing it. It is easy when we're full of enthusiasm, really inspired with the teacher and the teaching, but enthusiasm and inspiration are impermanent conditions, they take us to disillusionment and boredom. When we're bored we really have to put effort into the practice; when we're bored we want to turn away and be reborn into something fascinating and exciting. But for insight and wisdom we have to patiently endure through the troughs of disillusionment and depression. It is only in this way that we can stop reinforcing the cycles of habit and come to understand cessation, come to know the silence and emptiness of the mind.

If we read books about not putting any effort into things, just letting everything happen in a natural, spontaneous way, then we tend to start thinking that all we have to do is lounge about and then we lapse into a dull passive state. In my own practice when I lapsed into dull states I came to see the importance of putting effort into physical posture. I saw that there was no point in making effort in a merely passive way. I would pull the body up straight, push out the chest and put energy into the sitting posture, or else I would do head stands or shoulder stands. Even though in the early days I didn't have a tremendous amount of energy, I still managed to do something requiring effort. I would learn to sustain it for a few seconds and then I would lose it again, but that was better than doing nothing at all.

The more we take the easy way, the path of least resistance, the more we just follow our desires, the more the mind becomes sloppy, heedless and confused. It is easy to think, easier to sit and think all the time than not to think, it is a habit we've acquired. Even the thought "I shouldn't think" is just another thought. To avoid thought we have to be mindful of it, to put forth effort by watching and listening, by being attentive to the flow in our minds. Rather than thinking about our mind we watch it. Rather than just getting caught in thoughts we keep recognizing them. Thought is movement, it is energy, it comes and goes, it is not a permanent condition

of the mind. Without evaluating or analysing, when we simply recognize thought as thought, it begins to slow down and stop. This isn't annihilation, this is allowing things to cease. It is compassion. As the habitual obsessive thinking begins to fade, great spaces we never knew were there begin to appear.

We are slowing everything down by absorbing into the natural breath, calming the *kammic* formations, and this is what we mean by *samatha* or tranquillity, coming to a point of calm. The mind becomes malleable, supple and flexible and the breathing can become very fine. But we only carry the *samatha* practice to the point of *upacāra samādhi* (neighbourhood concentration), we don't try to completely absorb into the object and enter *jhāna*. At this point we are still aware of both the object and its periphery. The extreme kinds of mental agitation have diminished considerably but we can still operate using wisdom. With our wisdom faculty still functioning we investigate, and this is *vipassanā* - looking into and seeing the nature of whatever we experience : its impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality. *Aniccaṁ, dukkhaṁ* and *anattā* are not concepts we believe in, but things we can observe. We investigate the beginning of an inhalation and its ending. We observe what a beginning is, not thinking about what it is but observing, aware with bare attention at the beginning of an inhalation and its end. The body breathes all on its own, the in-breath conditions the out-breath and the out-breath conditions the in-breath, we can't control anything. Breathing belongs to nature, it doesn't belong to us, it is not-self. When we see this we are doing *vipassanā*.

The sort of knowledge we gain from Buddhist meditation is humbling - Ajahn Chah calls it the earth-worm knowledge - it doesn't make you arrogant, it doesn't puff you up, it doesn't make you feel that you are anything or that you have attained anything. In worldly terms this practice doesn't seem very important or necessary, nobody is ever going to write a newspaper headline "At eight o'clock this evening Ven. Sumedho had an inhalation!". To some people, thinking about how to solve all the world's problems might seem very important, how to help all the people in the Third World, how to set the world right. Compared with these things watching our

breath seems insignificant and most people think "Why waste time doing that?". People have confronted me about this, saying: "What are you monks doing sitting there? What are you doing to help humanity? You're just selfish, you expect people to give you food while you just sit there and watch your breath. You're running away from the real world". But what **is** the real world? Who is really running away and from what? What is there to face? We find that what people call the 'real world' is the world they believe in, the world that they are committed to or the world that they know and are familliar with. But that world is a condition of mind. Meditation is actually confronting the real world, recognizing and acknowledging it as it really is, rather than believing in it or justifying it or trying to mentally annihilate it. Now the real world operates on the same pattern of arising and passing as the breath. We're not theorizing about the nature of things, taking philosophical ideas from others and trying to rationalize with them, but by watching our breath we're actually observing the way nature is. When we're watching our breath we're actually watching nature, through understanding the nature of the breath we can understand the nature of all conditioned phenomena. If we tried to understand all conditioned phenomena in their infinite variety, quality, different time span and so on, it would be too complex, our minds wouldn't be able to handle it. We have to learn from simplicity.

So with a tranquil mind we become aware of the cyclical pattern, we see that all that arises passes away. That cycle is what is called *saṁsāra,* the wheel of birth and death. We observe the *saṁsaric* cycle of the breath. We inhale and then we exhale, we can't have only inhalations or only exhalations, the one conditions the other. It would be absurd to think 'I only want to inhale. I don't want to exhale. I'm giving up exhalation. My life will be just one constant inhalation', that would be absolutely ridiculous. If I said that to you, you'd think I was crazy but that is what most people do. How foolish people are when they want only to attach to excitement, pleasure, youth, beauty and vigour. "I only want beautiful things and I'm not going to have anything to do with the ugly. I want pleasure and delight and creativity but I don't want any boredom or depression". It is

the same kind of madness as if you were to hear me saying "I can't stand inhalations. I'm not going to have them any more". When we observe that attachment to beauty, sensual pleasures and love will always lead to despair then our attitude is one of detachment. That doesn't mean annihilation or any desire to destroy but simply letting go, non-attachment. We don't seek perfection in any part of the cycle but see that perfection lies in the whole cycle, it includes old age, sickness and death. What arises in the uncreated reaches its peak and then returns to the uncreated, and that is perfection.

As we start to see that all *sankhāras* have this pattern of arising and passing away we begin to go inwards to the unconditioned, the peace of the mind, its silence. We begin to experience *suññatā* or emptiness, which is not oblivion or nothingness, but is a clear and vibrant stillness. We can actually turn to the emptiness rather than to the conditions of the breath and mind. Then we have a perspective on the conditions and don't just blindly react to them anymore. There is the conditioned, the unconditioned and the knowing. What is the knowing? Is it memory? Is it consciousness? Is it me? I've never been able to find out but I can be aware. In Buddhist meditation we stay with the knowing, being aware, being awake, being Buddha in the present, knowing that whatever arises passes away and is not-self. We apply this knowing to everything, both the conditioned and the unconditioned. It is transcending, being awake rather than trying to escape and it is all in the ordinary. We have the four normal postures of sitting, standing, walking and lying down - we don't have to stand on our heads or do back-flips or anything. We use four normal postures and the ordinary breathing because we are moving towards that which is most ordinary, the unconditioned. Conditions are extraordinary but the peace of the mind, the unconditioned, is so ordinary nobody ever notices it. It is there all the time but we don't ever notice it because we're attached to the mysterious and the fascinating. We get caught up in the things that arise and pass away, the things that stimulate and depress. We get caught up in the way things seem to be and forget. But now we're going back to that source in meditation, to the peace, in that position of knowing. Then the world is understood for what it is and we are no longer deluded by it.

The realization of *Saṁsāra* is the condition of *Nibbāna*. As we recognize the cycles of habit and are no longer deluded by them or their qualities we realize *Nibbāna*. The Buddha-knowing is of just two things : the conditioned and the unconditioned. It is an immediate recognition of how things are right now without grasping or attachment. At this moment we can be aware of the conditions of the mind, feelings in the body, what we're seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling and thinking and also of the emptiness of the mind. The conditioned and the unconditioned are what we can realize.

So the Buddha's teaching is a very direct teaching. Our practice is not to become enlightened but to be in the knowing now.

HAPPINESS, UNHAPPINESS AND NIBBĀNA

The goal of Buddhist meditation is *Nibbāna*. We incline towards the peace of *Nibbāna* and away from the complexities of the sensual realm, the endless cycles of habit. *Nibbāna* is a goal that can be realized in this lifetime, we don't have to wait until we die to know if it's real.

The senses and the sensual world are the realm of birth and death. Take sight for instance, it's dependent on so many factors: whether it's day or night, whether or not the eyes are healthy, and so on. Yet we become very attached to the colours, shapes and forms that we perceive with the eyes and we identify with them. Then there are the ears and sound, when we hear pleasant sounds we seek to hold onto them and when we hear unpleasant sounds we try to turn away. With smells we seek the pleasure of fragrances and pleasant odours and try to get away from unpleasant ones. Also with flavours, we seek delicious tastes and try to avoid bad ones. Then touch - just how much of our lives are spent trying to escape from physical discomfort and pain and seeking the delights of physical sensation. Finally there is thought, the discriminative consciousness. It can give us a lot of pleasure or a lot of misery. These are the senses, the sensual world. It is the compounded world of birth and death. Its very nature is *dukkha,* it is imperfect and unsatisfying. You'll never find perfect happiness, contentment or peace in the sensual world, it will always bring despair and death. The sensual world is unsatisfactory and so we only suffer from it when we expect it to satisfy us. We suffer from the sensual world when we expect more from it than it can possibly give; things like permanent security and happiness, permanent love and safety, hoping that our life will only be one

of pleasure and have no pain in it, "If we could only get rid of sickness and disease and conquer old age." I remember 20 years ago in the States people had this great hope that modern science would be able to get rid of all illnesses. They'd say 'All mental illnesses are due to chemical imbalances. If we can just find the right chemical combinations and inject them into the body schizophrenia will disappear'. There would be no more headaches or backaches. We would gradually replace all our internal organs with nice plastic ones. I even read an article in an Australian medical journal about how they hoped to conquer old age! As the world's population keeps increasing we'd keep having more children and nobody would ever get old and die. Just think what a mess that would be! The sensual world is unsatisfactory and that's the way it's supposed to be. When we attach to it, it takes us to despair because attachment means that we want it to be satisfactory - we want it to satisfy us, to make us content, happy and secure. But just notice the nature of happiness - how long can you stay happy? What is happiness? You may think it's how you feel when you get what you want. Someone says something you like to hear and you feel happy. Someone does something you approve of and you feel happy. The sun shines and you feel happy. Someone makes nice food and serves it to you and you're happy. But how long can you stay happy? Do we always have to depend on the sun shining? In England the weather is very changeable, the happiness about the sun shining in England is obviously very impermanent and unsatisfactory.

Unhappiness is not getting what we want, wanting it to be sunny when it's cold, wet and rainy, people doing things that we don't approve of, having food that isn't delicious and so on. Life gets boring and tedious when we're unhappy with it. So happiness and unhappiness are very dependent on getting what we want and having to get what we don't want. But happiness is the goal of most people's lives; in the American constitution I think they speak of 'the right to the pursuit of happiness'. Getting what we want, what we think we deserve, becomes our goal in life. But happiness always leads to unhappiness because it's impermanent. How long can you really be happy? Trying to arrange, control and manipulate

conditions so as to always get what we want, always hear what we want to hear, always see what we want to see, so that we never have to experience unhappiness or despair, is a hopeless task. It's impossible, isn't it? Happiness is unsatisfactory, it's *dukkha*. It's not something to depend on or make the goal of life. Happiness will always be disappointing because it lasts so briefly and then is succeeded by unhappiness. It is always dependent on so many other things. We feel happy when we're healthy but our human bodies are subject to rapid changes and we can lose that health very quickly. Then we feel terribly unhappy at being sick, at losing the pleasure of feeling energetic and vigorous. Thus the goal for the Buddhist is not happiness, because we realise that happiness is unsatisfactory. The goal lies away from the sensual world. It is not a rejection of the sensual world but understanding it so well that we no longer seek it as an end in itself. We no longer expect the sensory world to satisfy us. We no longer demand that sensory consciousness be anything other than an existing condition that we can skillfully use according to time and place. We no longer attach to it or demand that the sense-impingement be always pleasant or feel despair and sorrow when it's unpleasant. *Nibbāna* isn't a state of blankness, a trance where you're totally wiped out. It's not nothingness or an annihilation, it's like a space. It's going into the space of your mind where you no longer attach, where you're no longer deluded by the appearance of things. You are no longer demanding anything from the sensory world. You are just recognising it as it arises and passes away.

Being born in the human condition means that we must inevitably experience old-age, sickness and death. One time a young woman came to our monastery in England with her baby. The baby had been badly ill for about a week with a horrible racking kind of cough. The mother looked totally depressed and miserable. As she sat there in the reception room holding the baby, it turned red in the face and started screaming and coughing horribly. The woman said, 'Oh, Venerable Sumedho, why does he have to suffer like this? He's never hurt anybody, he's never done anything wrong. Why? In some previous life what did he do to have to suffer like this?' He was suffering because he was born! If he hadn't

been born he wouldn't have to suffer. When we're born we have to expect these things. Having a human body means that we have to experience sickness, pain, old-age and death. This is an important reflection. We can speculate that maybe in a previous life he liked to choke cats and dogs or something like that and he has to pay for it in this life, but that's mere speculation and it doesn't really help. What we can know is that it's the *kammic** result of being born. Each one of us must inevitably experience sickness and pain, hunger, thirst, the ageing process of our bodies and death,- it's the law of *kamma*.* What begins must end, what is born must die, what comes together must separate. We're not being pessimistic about the way things are, but we're observing, so we don't expect life to be other than it is. Then we can cope with life and endure it when it's difficult and delight when it's delightful. If we understand it, we can enjoy life without being its helpess victims. How much misery there is in human existence because we expect life to be other than what it is! We have these romantic ideas that we'll meet the right person, fall in love and live happily ever after, that we'll never fight, have a wonderful relationship. But what about death! So you think 'Well may be we'll die at the same time'. That's hope isn't it? There's hope and then despair when your loved one dies before you do or runs away with the dustman or the travelling salesman.

You can learn a lot from small children because they don't disguise their feelings, they just express what they feel in the moment; when they're miserable they start crying and when they're happy they laugh. Some time ago I went to a layman's home. When we arrived his young daughter was very happy to see him and then he said to her, 'I have to take Venerable Sumedho to Sussex University to give a talk'. As we walked out of the door the little girl turned red in the face and began screaming in anguish so that her father said, 'It's alright, I'll be back in an hour. But she

---

* 'Kamma' refers to volitional actions of body, speech and mind. All such actions give rise to appropriate results. The 'Law of Kamma' is the law of cause-and-effect, seen on the ethical plane.

wasn't developed to that level where she could understand 'I'll be back in an hour'. The immediacy of separation from the loved was immediate anguish. Notice how often in our life there is that sorrow at having to separate from something we like or someone we love, from having to leave a place we really like to be in. When you are really mindful you can see the not-wanting to separate, the sorrow. As adults we can let go of it immediately if we know we can come back again, but it's still there.

From last November to March I travelled around the world... always arriving at airports with somebody meeting me with a 'Hello!' and then a few days later it was 'Goodbye!' And there was always this sense of 'Come back' and I'd say 'Yes, I'll come back'...and so I've committed myself to do the same thing next year. We can't say, 'Goodbye forever' to someone we like can we? We say, 'I'll see you again', 'I'll phone you up', 'I'll write you a letter' or 'until next time we meet' - we have all these phrases to cover over the sense of sorrow and separation.

In meditation we're noting, just observing what sorrow really is. We're not saying that we shouldn't feel sorrow when we separate from someone we love, it's natural to feel that way isn't it? But now, as meditators, we're beginning to witness sorrow so that we understand it rather than trying to suppress it, pretend it's something more than it is or just neglect it. In England people tend to suppress sorrow when somebody dies. They try not to cry or be emotional, they don't want to make a scene, they keep a 'stiff upper lip'. Then when they start meditating they can find themselves suddenly crying over the death of someone who died fifteen years before. They didn't cry at the time so they end up doing it fifteen years later. When someone dies we don't want to admit the sorrow or make a scene because we think that if we cry we're weak or it's embarassing to others, and so we tend to suppress and hold things back, not recognizing the nature of things as they really are, not recognizing our human predicament and learning from it. In meditation we're allowing the mind to open up and let the things that have been suppressed and repressed become conscious, because when things become conscious they have a way of ceasing rather

than just being repressed again. We allow things to take their course to cessation, we allow things to go away rather than just push them away.

Usually we just push certain things away from us, refusing to accept or recognize them. Whenever we feel upset or annoyed with anyone, when we're bored or unpleasant feelings arise, we look at the beautiful flowers or the sky, read a book, watch TV, do something. We're never fully consciously bored, fully angry. We don't recognise our despair or disappointment because we can always run off into something else. We can always go to the refrigerator, eat cakes and sweets, listen to the stereo. It's so easy to absorb into music, away from boredom and despair into something that's exciting or interesting or calming or beautiful. Look at how dependent we are on watching TV and reading. There's so many books now that they'll all have to be burnt, useless books everywhere, everybody's writing things without having anything worth saying. Today's not-so-pleasant film stars write their biographies and make a lot of money. Then there are the gossip columns, people get away from the boredom of their own existence, their discontent with it, the tediousness, by reading gossip about movie stars and public figures. We've never really accepted boredom as a conscious state. As soon as it comes into the mind we start looking for something interesting, something pleasant. But in meditation we're allowing boredom to be. We're allowing ourselves to be fully consciously bored, fully depressed, fed up, jealous, angry, disgusted. All the nasty unpleasant experiences of life that we have repressed out of consciousness and never really looked at, never really accepted, we begin to accept into consciousness - not as personality problems any more but just out of compassion. Out of kindness and wisdom we allow things to take their natural course to cessation, rather than just keep them going round in the same old cycles of habit. If we have no way of letting things take their natural course then we're always controlling, always caught in some dreary habit of mind. When we're jaded and depressed we're unable to appreciate the beauty of things because we never really see them as they truly are.

I remember one experience I had in my first year of meditation in Thailand. I spent most of that first year by myself in a little hut and the first few months were really terrible - all kinds of things kept coming up in my mind - obsessions and fears and terror and hatred. I'd never felt so much hatred. I'd never thought of myself as one who hated people but during those first few months of meditation it seemed like I hated everybody. I couldn't think of anything nice about anyone, there was so much aversion coming up into consciousness. Then one afternoon I started having this strange vision - I thought I was going crazy actually - I saw people walking off my brain. I saw my mother just walk out of my brain and into emptiness, disappear into space. Then my father and my sister followed. I actually saw these visions walking out of my head. I thought 'I'm crazy! I've gone off!' but it wasn't an unpleasant experience. The next morning when I woke from sleep and looked around, I felt that everything I saw was beautiful. Everything, even the most unbeautiful detail, was beautiful. I was in a state of awe. The hut itself was a crude structure, not beautiful by anyone's standards, but it looked to me like a palace. The scrubby looking trees outside looked like a most beautiful forest. Sunbeams were streaming through the window onto a plastic dish and the plastic dish looked beautiful! That sense of beauty stayed with me for about a week and then reflecting on it I suddenly realized that that's the way things really are when the mind is clear. Up to that time I'd been looking through a dirty window and over the years I'd become so used to the scum and dirt on the window that I didn't realize it was dirty, I'd thought that that's the way it was.

When we get used to looking through a dirty window everything seems grey, grimy and ugly. Meditation is a way of cleaning the window, purifying the mind, allowing things to come up into consciousness and letting them go. Then with the wisdom faculty, the Buddha wisdom, we observe how things really are. It's not just attaching to beauty, to purity of mind, but actually understanding. It is wisely reflecting on the way nature operates so that we are no longer deluded by it into creating habits for our life through ignorance.

Birth means old-age, sickness and death, but that's to do with your body, it's not you. Your human body is not really yours. No matter what your particular appearance might be, whether you are healthy or sickly, whether you are beautiful or not beautiful, whether you are black or white or whatever, it's all non-self. This is what we mean by anattā, that human bodies belong to nature, that they follow the laws of nature, they are born, they grow up, they get old and they die. Now we may understand that rationally but emotionally there is a very strong attachment to the body. In meditation we begin to see this attachment. We don't take the position that we shouldn't be attached, saying 'The problem with me is that I'm attached to my body, I shouldn't be. It's bad isn't it? If I was a wise person I wouldn't be attached to it'. That's starting from an ideal again. It's like trying to start climbing a tree from the top saying, 'I should be at the top of the tree. I shouldn't be down here.' But as much as we'd like to think that we're at the top we have to humbly accept that we aren't. To begin with we have to be at the trunk of the tree, where the roots are, looking at the most coarse and ordinary things before we can start identifying with anything at the top of the tree. This is the way of wise reflection. It's not just purifying the mind and then attaching to purity. It's not just trying to refine consciousness so that we can induce high states of concentration whenever we feel like it, because even the most refined states of sensory consciousness are unsatisfactory, they're dependent on so many other things. *Nibbāna* is not dependent on any other condition. Conditions of any quality, be they ugly, nasty, beautiful, refined or whatever, arise and pass away but they don't interfere with *Nibbāna,* with the peace of the mind.

We are not inclining away from the sensory world through aversion, because if we try to annihilate the senses then that too becomes a habit that we blindly acquire trying to get rid of that which we don't like. That's why we have to be very patient.

This lifetime as a human being is a lifetime of meditation. See the rest of your life as the span of meditation rather than this 10-day retreat. You may think " I meditated for ten days. I thought I was enlightened but

somehow when I got home I didn't feel enlightened any more. I'd like to go back and do a longer retreat where I can feel more enlightened than I did last time. It would be nice to have a higher state of consciousness". In fact the more refined you go the more coarse your daily life must seem. You get high and then when you get back to the mundane daily routines of life in the city, it's even worse than before isn't it? Having gone so high, the ordinariness of life seems much more ordinary, gross and unpleasant. The way to insight wisdom is not making preferences for refinement over coarseness but recognising that both refined and coarse consciousness are impermanent conditions, that they're unsatisfactory, their nature will never satisfy us and they're *anattā* - they're not what we are, they're not ours.

Thus the Buddha's teaching is a very simple one - what could be more simple than 'what is born must die?' It's not some great new philosophical discovery, even illiterate tribal people know that. You don't have to study in university to know it.

When we're young we think "I've got so many years left of youth and happiness". If we're beautiful we think "I'm going to be young and beautiful forever", because it seems that way. If we're twenty years old, having a good time, life is wonderful and somebody says "You are going to die some day", we may think "What a depressing person. Let's not invite him again to our house". We don't want to think about death, we want to think about how wonderful life is, how much pleasure we can get out of it. So as meditators we reflect on getting old and dying. This is not being morbid or sick or depressing but it's considering the whole cycle of existence and when we know that cycle then we are more careful about how we live. People do horrible things because they don't reflect on their deaths. They don't wisely reflect and consider, they just follow their passions and feelings of the moment, trying to get pleasure and then feeling angry and depressed when life doesn't give them what they want.

Reflect on your own life and death and the cycles of nature. Just observe what delights and what depresses. See how we can feel very positive

or very negative. Notice how we want to attach to beauty or to pleasant feelings or to inspiration. It's really nice to feel inspired isn't it? "Buddhism is the greatest religion of them all" or "When I discovered the Buddha I was so happy, it's a wonderful discovery!" When we get a little bit doubtful, a little bit depressed, we go and read an inspiring book and get high. But remember, getting high is an impermanent condition, it's like getting happy, you have to keep doing it, sustaining it and after you keep doing something over and over again you no longer feel happy with it. How many sweets can you eat? At first they make you happy and then they make you sick. So depending on religious inspiration is not enough. If you attach to inspiration then when you get fed up with Buddhism you'll go off and find some new thing to inspire you.

It's like attaching to romance, when it disappears from the relationship you start looking for someone else to feel romantic towards. Years ago in America I met a woman who'd been married six times, she was only about thirty three. I said, "You'd think you would have learned after the third or fourth time. Why do you keep getting married?" She said, "It's the romance, I don't like the other side but I love the romance". At least she was honest, but not terribly wise. Romance is a condition that leads to disillusionment. Romance, inspiration, excitement, adventure - all those things rise to a peak and then condition their opposites, just as an inhalation conditions an exhalation. Just think of inhaling all the time. It's like having one romance after another isn't it? How long can you inhale? The inhalation conditions the exhalation, both are necessary. Birth conditions death, hope conditions despair and inspiration conditions disillusionment. So when we attach to hope we're going to feel despair. When we attach to excitement it's going to take us to boredom. When we attach to romance it will take us to disillusionment and divorce. When we attach to life it takes us to death. So recognize that it's the attachment that causes the suffering, attaching to conditions and expecting them to be more than what they are.

So much of life for so many people seems to be waiting and hoping for something to happen, expecting and anticipating some success

or pleasure or maybe worrying and fearing that some painful, unpleasant thing is just lying in wait. You may hope that you will meet somebody who you'll really love or have some great experience, but attaching to hope takes you to despair.

By wise reflection we begin to understand the things that create misery in our lives. We see that actually *we* are the creators of that misery. Through our ignorance, through our not having wisely understood the sensory world and its limitations we have identified with all that is unsatisfactory and impermanent, the things that can only take us to despair and death. No wonder life is so depressing! It's dreary because of the attachment, because we identify and seek ourselves in all that is by nature *dukkha* - unsatisfactory and imperfect. Now when we stop doing that, when we let go, that is enlightenment. We are enlightened beings no longer attached, no longer identified with anything, no longer deluded by the sensory world. We understand the sensory world, we know how to co-exist with it. We know how to use the sensory world for compassionate action, for joyous giving. We don't demand that it be here to satisfy us any more, to make us feel secure and safe or to give us anything, because as soon as we demand it to satisfy us it takes us to despair.

When we no longer identify with the sensory world as "me" or "mine" and see it as *anattā* (not-self) then we can enjoy the senses without seeking sense-impingement or depending on it. We no longer expect conditions to be anything other than what they are, so that when they change we can patiently and peacefully endure the unpleasant side of existence. We can humbly endure sickness, pain, cold, hunger, failures and criticisms. If we're not attached to the world we can adapt to change, whatever that change may be, whether it's for the better or for the worse. If we're still attached then we can't adapt very well, we're always struggling, resisting, trying to control and manipulate everything and then feeling frustrated, frightened or depressed at what a delusive, frightening place the world is.

If you've never really contemplated the world, never taken the time to understand and know it, then it becomes a frightening place for you. It becomes like a jungle: you don't know what's around the next tree,

bush or cliff - a wild animal, a ferocious man-eating tiger, a terrible dragon or a poisonous snake. *Nibbāna* means getting away from the jungle. When we're inclining towards *Nibbāna* we're moving towards the peace of the mind. Although the conditions of the mind may not be peaceful at all the mind itself is a peaceful place. Here we are making a distinction between the mind and the conditions of mind. The conditions of mind can be happy, miserable, elated, depressed, loving or hating, worrying or fear-ridden, doubting or bored. They come and go in the mind, but the mind itself, like the space in this room, stays just as it is. The space in this room has no quality to elate or depress does it? It is just as it is. To concentrate on the space in the room we have to withdraw our attention from the things in the room. If we concentrate on the things in the room we become happy or unhappy. We say, "look at that beautiful Buddha image" or if we see something we find ugly we say "Oh what a terrible disgusting thing". We can spend our time looking at the people in the room, thinking whether we like this person or dislike that person. We can form opinions about people being this way or that way, remember what they did in the past, speculate about what they will do in the future, seeing others as possible sources of pain or gratification to ourselves.

However if we withdraw our attention it doesn't mean that we have to push everyone else out of the room does it? If we don't concentrate on or absorb into any of the conditions then we have a perspective, because the space in the room has no quality to depress or elate. The space can contain us all, all conditions can come and go within it. Moving inwards, we can apply this to the mind. The mind is like space, there's room in it for everything or nothing. It doesn't really matter whether it is filled or has nothing in it, because we always have a perspective once we know the space of the mind, *its emptiness*. Armies can come into the mind and leave, butterflies, rainclouds or nothing. All things can come and go through without us being caught in blind reaction, struggling resistance, control and manipulation. So when we abide in the emptiness of our minds we're moving away, we're not getting rid of things but no longer absorbing into conditions that exist in the present or creating any new ones. This is our

practice of letting go. We let go of our identification with conditions by seeing that they are all impermanent and not-self. It is what we mean by Vipassanā meditation. It's really looking at, witnessing, listening, observing that whatever comes must go. Whether it's coarse or refined, good or bad, whatever comes and goes is not what we are. We're not good, we're not bad, we're not male or female, beautiful or ugly - these are changing conditions in nature which are not-self. This is the Buddhist way to enlightenment; going towards *Nibbāna,* inclining towards the spaciousness or emptiness of mind rather than being born and caught up in the conditions.

Now you may ask, "Well if I'm not the conditions of mind, if I'm not a man or a woman, this or that, then what am I!?" Do you want me to tell you who you are? Would you believe me if I did? ...What would you think if I ran out and started asking you who I am? It's like trying to see your own eyes, you can't know yourself because you *are* yourself. You can only know what is not yourself and so that solves the problem, doesn't it? If you know what is not yourself then there is no question about what you are. If I said 'Who am I? I'm trying to find myself', and I started looking under the shrine, under the carpet, under the curtain you'd think, "Ven. Sumedho has really flipped out, he's gone crazy, he's looking for himself". "I'm looking for me, where am I?" is the most stupid question in the world. The problem is not who we are but our belief and identity with what we are not. That's where the suffering is, that's where we feel misery and depression and despair. It's our identity with everything that is not ourselves that is *dukkha.* When you identify with that which is unsatisfactory, you're going to feel dissatisfied and discontented, it's obvious, isn't it? So the path of the Buddhist is a letting go rather than trying to find anything. The problem is the blind attachment, the blind identification with the appearance of the sensory world. You needn't get rid of the sensory world but learn from it, watch it, no longer allow yourselves to be deluded by it. Keep penetrating it with Buddha-wisdom, keep using this Buddha-wisdom so that you become more at ease with *being* wise rather than making yourself *become* wise. Just by listening,

observing, being awake, being aware, the wisdom will become clear. You'll be using wisdom in regards to your body, in regards to your thoughts, feelings, memories, emotions - all of these things. You'll see and witness, allowing them to pass by and let them go. So at this time you have nothing else to do except be wise from one moment to the next.

"Wherever the Buddha's teachings have flourished,
either in cities or countrysides,
people would gain inconceivable benefits.
The land and pepole would be enveloped in peace.
The sun and moon will shine clear and bright.
Wind and rain would appear accordingly,
and there will be no disasters.
Nations would be prosperous
and there would be no use for soldiers or weapons.
People would abide by morality and accord with laws.
They would be courteous and humble,
and everyone would be content without injustices.
There would be no thefts or violence.
The strong would not dominate the weak
and everyone would get their fair share."

※ THE BUDDHA SPEAKS OF
THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA OF
ADORNMENT, PURITY, EQUALITY
AND ENLIGHTENMENT OF
THE MAHAYANA SCHOOL ※

Taking Refuge with Bodhichitta

**I go for refuge, until I am enlightened,
to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.
Through the merit I create by practicing giving and the other perfections,
may I quickly attain the state of Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.**

The Prayers of the Bodhisattva

**With the wish to free all beings,
I will always go for refuge
to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha
till I reach full enlightenment.
Enthused by the compassion and wisdom,
Today, in Buddha's presence,
I generate the Mind of Enlightenment,
for the sake of all sentient beings.
For as long as space remains,
and as long as sentient being remain,
until then, may I too remain
to dispel the sufferings of all beings.**

With bad advisors forever left behind,
From paths of evil he departs for eternity,
Soon to see the Buddha of Limitless Light
And perfect Samantabhadra's Supreme Vows.

The supreme and endless blessings
of Samantabhadra's deeds,
I now universally transfer.
May every living being, drowning and adrift,
Soon return to the Pure Land of Limitless Light!

*** The Vows of Samantabhadra ***

I vow that when my life approaches its end,
All obstructions will be swept away;
I will see Amitabha Buddha,
And be born in His Western Pure Land of
Ultimate Bliss and Peace.

When reborn in the Western Pure Land,
I will perfect and completely fulfill
Without exception these Great Vows,
To delight and benefit all beings.

*** The Vows of Samantabhadra Avatamsaka Sutra ***

DEDICATION OF MERIT

May the merit and virtue
accrued from this work
adorn Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land,
repay the four great kindnesses above,
and relieve the suffering of
those on the three paths below.

May those who see or hear of these efforts
generate Bodhi-mind,
spend their lives devoted to the Buddha Dharma,
and finally be reborn together in
the Land of Ultimate Bliss.
Homage to Amita Buddha!

NAMO AMITABHA
南無阿彌陀佛

財團法人佛陀教育基金會 印贈
台北市杭州南路一段五十五號十一樓
Printed and donated for free distribution by
The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation
11F., 55 Hang Chow South Road Sec 1, Taipei, Taiwan, R.O.C.
Tel: 886-2-23951198 , Fax: 886-2-23913415
Email: overseas@budaedu.org
Website:http://www.budaedu.org
This book is strictly for free distribution, it is not for sale.
Printed in Taiwan
10,000 copies; Jul 2008
EN282 - 7301

As this is a Dhamma text,
we request that it be treated with respect.
If you are finished with it,
please pass it on to others or
offer it to a monastery, school or public library.
Thanks for your co-operation.

Namo Amitabha!

財團法人佛陀教育基金會 印贈
台北市杭州南路一段五十五號十一樓
Printed and donated for free distribution by
The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation
11F., 55 Hang Chow South Road Sec 1, Taipei, Taiwan, R.O.C.
Tel:886-2-23951198, Fax:886-2-23913415
Email: overseas@budaedu.org
Website: http://www.budaedu.org
This book is for free distribution, it is not for sale.
Printed in Taiwan
EN282