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Broad View, Boundless Heart

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Ajahn Pasanno

Ajahn Amaro



Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery

Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery
16201 Tomki Road
Redwood Valley, CA 95470
www.abhayagiri.org
707-485-1630

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DEDICATION

We humbly dedicate the merits of this
Dhamma offering to our beloved parents.

May all beings be released from suffering.



*Creatures of a day,
what is anyone?
What are they not?*

We are but a dream of a shadow.

*Yet when there comes
as a gift of heaven
a gleam of sunshine,
there rests upon the heart
a radiant light
and, aye,
a gentle life.*

Pindar
(518-438 BCE)

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

A: *Anguttara Nikaya*

M: *Majjhima Nikaya*

S: *Samyutta Nikaya*

SN: *Sutta Nipata*

Ud: *Udana*

SUBLIME ABIDING PLACES FOR THE HEART

*adapted from a May 1999 workshop at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery
with the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies*

THE BRAHMAVIHARAS ARE THE QUALITIES of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. What is often not sufficiently emphasized is that the brahmaviharas are fundamental to the Buddha's teaching and practice. I shall begin with the chant called *The Suffusion of the Divine Abidings*. I find this chant very beautiful. It is the most frequent form in which the brahmaviharas are mentioned in the discourses of the Buddha. Here is the *Divine Abidings* chant:

I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind
imbued with loving-kindness; likewise the second,
likewise the third, likewise the fourth; so above and
below, around and everywhere; and to all as to
myself. I will abide pervading the all-encompassing
world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness;
abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility,
and without ill will.

The chant continues similarly with the other three qualities:

I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind
imbued with compassion....I will abide pervading
one quarter with a mind imbued with gladness....

I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with equanimity...

Last February I was asked to be the spiritual advisor to a Thai man who was to be executed at San Quentin, and I spent the last few days until his death with him. He touched many people and had many visitors, but in the capacity of spiritual advisor, I was the only person allowed to be with him in the last six hours of his life. So some of his friends asked me what they should be doing in those final hours to help Jay as well as themselves. I asked them to chant this *Divine Abidings* chant. That's what they did during the final hours of Jay's life, sending forth these thoughts of loving-kindness, compassion, gladness, and equanimity. They are powerful emotions to evoke at a time when one could be stuck in anger, regret, and self-pity. It is very empowering to be able to bring forth these qualities of the heart, to turn the mind away from negativity towards that which is wholesome and positive.

The Buddha's Discourses on the Brahmaviharas

The word brahmavihara is translated in many different ways—divine abidings, divine abodes, sublime attitudes. “Brahma” means great, holy, supreme, sublime, exalted, and divine. “Vihara” is a place, an abode, and also an attitude of mind. When put together, “brahmavihara” means the psychological abiding place of the spiritually developed, of those who are exemplary. In the Commentaries, the religious life, the holy life, is called *brahmacariya*. One of the explanations for this term is that the holy life is a life dedicated to developing the brahmaviharas.

These qualities of the mind and heart are qualities that the Buddha himself cultivated and abided in. In a discourse (A 1.182), the Buddha addresses a brahmin thus: “Herein brahmin, I am dependent on a certain village. Setting mindfulness in front of me, I abide suffusing one quarter of the world with a heart possessed of loving-kindness, likewise the second...” He goes through the phrases we just chanted,

...the whole world I suffuse with a heart grown great with loving-kindness, free of enmity, and untroubled. Likewise with a heart possessed with compassion, possessed with sympathy and gladness, possessed with

equanimity. If I walk up and down, my walking is sublime; my standing, my sitting is sublime. This is what I mean when I say it is a sublime abiding place.

So even the Buddha, a completely enlightened being, still directed his attention to these four brahmaviharas.

There is a discourse (M 55) given to Jivaka, the Buddha's physician, where the Buddha addresses the duty of a monk living in dependence on a lay community: “Herein Jivaka, a religious seeker depending on alms lives in a certain village or town. He abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, likewise the second,” and so forth. Namely, it is a duty of such a bhikkhu* to live cultivating the brahmaviharas towards the lay community.

He continues, “That bhikkhu goes into that village for alms, and what do you think? Would such a monk cultivate these for the sake of his own affliction, for the sake of another's affliction, or for both?”

Jivaka answers, “No, venerable sir.”

Someone cultivating these qualities of the brahmaviharas becomes sensitive to the suffering they create for themselves and for others. They are qualities that develop the heart. By cultivating and abiding in them, one leans towards that which would bring happiness to others and to oneself. This is a fundamental truth. As your heart becomes sensitive and open, you realize that suffering is painful and do not want to abide in it.

In another discourse (A 5.294), the Buddha again points to the development of the heart and to the fact that these wholesome qualities create a fullness of the heart. He says, “Monks, those noble disciples, thus freed from covetousness, freed from malevolence, not bewildered, but self-possessed and concentrated, with hearts possessed of amity [also translated as loving-kindness, friendliness, and so on] abide radiating one quarter and then the second, the third and the fourth with loving-kindness, pervading the whole world with a heart immeasurable, grown great, and boundless, free from enmity and untroubled.” After going through the rest of the brahmaviharas, the Buddha says that they come to know that “[f]ormerly this heart of mine was confined, it was not made to grow, but now my heart is boundless, well made to grow.

*A bhikkhu is a Buddhist monk. Literally, it indicates one who lives on alms.

Moreover my heart was limited to a certain range, but now it is not confined, it stays not in that range.” “Well made to grow” is translated from the Pali word with the same root as *bhavana*, meaning meditation or mental development. It means therefore that these qualities enable the development of the mind.

Also as a result of this practice, feelings and thoughts that formerly were limited and constricted become boundless. The results permeate all aspects of one’s life. Similarly, when one does something in a small-minded way, the results are limited. That’s the way it works.

The Buddha ends the discourse thus: “The heart’s release by loving-kindness is conducive to non-returning for the monk with insight but who has not yet penetrated to the truth.” The stages of enlightenment are stream-entry, once-returner, non-returner, and arahant.* Here the Buddha says that even for those who are still practicing and training, the cultivation of the brahmaviharas is conducive to attaining higher levels of the Path.

The Brahmaviharas: Their Nature and Characteristics

As one continues to practice and study Buddhism, it is very useful to familiarize oneself with some of the Pali terms. For example, when working with computers, you have to learn some technical terms to deal with certain concepts or operations, or when studying music, you learn the related technical terms. With Buddhism, there is a range of technical terms in Pali for the qualities of the heart that are helpful to know.

Metta, for instance, is often translated in English as “loving-kindness.” Although two words are used, they still don’t quite get it right, so other words are used, such as amity or friendliness, in an effort to convey its meaning. *Metta* is characterized as being connected to happiness or welfare. Its function is to generate welfare or well being. It is manifested as the removal of annoyance. Its proximate cause is seeing the lovable-ness of beings, or the good qualities and that which is pleasing in others.

* The first stage of enlightenment, “Stream-entry,” results in a return to the human realm no more than seven times, and one is guaranteed not to be born as an animal, as a ghost, or in hell; the second stage, “Once-return,” leads to no more than one more birth as a human; the third stage, “Non-return,” entails rebirth only in the high heavenly realms; and the fourth stage is that of enlightenment, Arahantship, which results in no more birth in any state of being.

Metta succeeds when it causes ill will to subside and fails when it brings about affection. Using the word *metta* is more useful as it does not have the connotations of affection and attachment that the word loving-kindness has. *Metta* is a selfless wishing of happiness and well being for others.

The brahmaviharas have so-called near and far enemies—obstructions to their correct development. The near enemy of *metta* is greed or attachment, since happiness and well being could become coveted. That leads to pain and sorrow and could even turn into a defilement if not correctly understood. When we experience something pleasing, we tend to want it, but to really practice *metta* is to wish for the well being of others and not to try to possess them. The same goes for cultivating *metta* towards oneself, to try not to cling to feelings of joy and well being generated by the practice of meditation. So the near enemy to *metta* is when the heart moves too close to something and then it shifts from being loving-kindness to greed and grasping.

The far enemy of *metta* is anger. Bearing anger, ill will, or aversion is, of course, inimical to loving-kindness, but it is far enough away to recognize such feelings. Being more insidious, the near enemies are more dangerous. When you are angry, you try to deal with it or try to remove it, but when you are delighting in something, your mind tends not to be clear enough to see that you have come too close to the object. In terms of cultivating loving-kindness, you have to know and be aware of these aspects that are related to and define the quality of *metta*, and to use them as boundaries to work within.

Karuna is the quality of compassion. It is characterized by the wish to help alleviate suffering in others. Its function resides in the inability to tolerate suffering, so it motivates the desire to help when others suffer. Compassion does not allow complacency in the face of suffering. One is moved into action. Compassion manifests as non-cruelty, and its proximate cause is seeing the pain and helplessness in those disadvantaged or overtaken by some misfortune. Then the heart responds with the wish to help.

The far enemy is cruelty, and compassion succeeds when it makes such feelings subside. The word cruelty sounds very strong, but the wish to harm, to hurt, to be cruel can come out in many ways. One could be

quite cruel in one's speech without in fact beating up someone. Making a cutting comment or put-down is being cruel. When there is compassion, the tendency to lash out subsides.

Compassion fails when it causes sorrow. When faced with suffering, if one is overwhelmed by grief or heaviness of heart, then that is not being compassionate. The quality of compassion is then tainted and not functioning properly. When the heart is drawn towards boundlessness, it is not dragged down by suffering. Instead, it is uplifted. It is important to recognize that. The heart could be weighed down by sorrow and grief in response to a tragic event or situation, and one could think that that is being compassionate. But that is not compassion, even though the etymology of the word (in English) is "to suffer with." That is not the way the Buddha defined compassion. If one's mind is affected by grief, then one is not able to respond in a clear and open-hearted manner. It is important to recognize that. This is why sorrow and grief are characterized as the near enemy of compassion. Both responses can spring from seeing suffering in others, but grief has a depressive effect, while compassion has a positive and uplifting quality.

Mudita is translated as gladness in the *Divine Abidings* chant, but the term commonly used is sympathetic joy. *Mudita* is characterized as a gladdening at others' success, a delighting in the success, the goodness, and the well being of others. Its function is being unenvious, not being jealous of the good fortune of others. Most of us, I think, find loving-kindness and compassion beneficial and good to practice. When it comes to sympathetic joy, we do not think too much about it and tend to dismiss it as either abstruse or unreal. When you start watching your mind however, you see the pettiness over and over again. The unwillingness to rejoice when someone does something good is seen in the snappy remark or the clever little synopsis of a person or situation, which are a part of daily life in our interrelations with people but which tend to be based in negativity or cynicism. Such responses do not come from a place of gladness but very much from a sense of self. One attempts to lift oneself up by putting down someone else.

By cultivating *mudita*, the sense of self is undermined. There is a letting go of the attachment or fixation to self. This enables us to delight in the well being and good fortune of those around us. A great deal of

joy is generated when one is able to tap into this quality. *Mudita* is manifested as non-aversion, and its proximate cause is seeing the success of others. It succeeds when it causes a sense of coolness of the heart, an acceptance. It fails when it causes merriment, a frivolous delighting in things that agitate the mind, which is not a pure-hearted delight.

Equanimity in Pali is called *upekkha*. It is characterized as that quality which brings about a sense of neutrality or an evenness of heart towards all beings. Its function is in maintaining a steadiness of mind and not allowing differences—whether physical, intellectual, spiritual, or whatever—to detract or influence our perception of those with whom we come in contact. Its proximate cause is understanding the nature of karma—recognition that our actions bear results which affect us and, in effect, that we create our own future world or experiences.

Another factor to recognize regarding karma is that we are not able to take on the results of other's actions and deeds. Equanimity is therefore understanding how the basic laws of nature work, the recognition that our lives are governed by the way we conduct our lives. Where the suffering of others is concerned, we recognize that by making ourselves suffer, we do not decrease or take away the suffering of others. We can work to alleviate another's suffering or delight in another's good fortune, but there is a point where one has to exercise equanimity, being aware of one's own well being. To try to take on someone else's life and carry it around is not equanimity. Equanimity is not taking on more than what is actually necessary or beneficial.

Equanimity succeeds when it is aware of the movement of the mind—the wanting and not wanting, approval and disapproval—and one is able to establish an evenness of mind, a clarity that sees things for what they are. Equanimity fails when it causes indifference, not caring. Indifference could arise due to a lack of attention or clarity, or to being unwilling to deal with a situation because too much effort is required. Indifference is the near enemy of equanimity. True equanimity does not hinder compassion or action, but rather enhances it by developing the discernment that knows how and when to engage. The far enemy is aversion and greed: the liking and disliking, approving and disapproving that occurs within our minds. Equanimity is the quality not shaken by the movement of the worldly dhammas or the ways of the world.

A Foundation for One's Practice

Cultivating the brahmaviharas means bringing these qualities (metta, karuna, mudita, and upekkha) into consciousness. It is like exercising muscles that have not been used. As you develop these qualities, you have to consider whether your mind is getting clearer or more confused. The correct practice of the brahmaviharas always leads to increased clarity and joy. That is the nature of these qualities of mind.

The whole point of the Buddha's teachings is to cultivate mental qualities in order to gain happiness of mind. And the brahmaviharas—a prime source for creating happiness—can thus lay the foundation for the entire practice. Most of the terms the Buddha uses regarding the developing of practice are those that describe states of well being. We see this in a sequence he sets out to illustrate the development of the mind.

Anavajjasukha is the state of mind resulting from abiding by the moral precepts—the happiness of blamelessness or harmlessness, the happiness of non-remorse.

Abhyasekhasukha is the happiness that ensues from training in sense restraint—the composure one finds when one is not bent on gratification or excitement of the senses.

Pamojja means the delight that results from being free of the five hindrances that hinder meditation (sensual desire, ill will, sleepiness or drowsiness, restlessness, and skeptical doubt). Pamojja also refers to the happiness that meditative states of tranquility can bring—an unalloyed kind of happiness. It also includes the delight that arises from skilful reflection on the true nature of things. Pamojja leads to *piti* (joy). Piti leads to *passadhi* (the state of tranquility). When there is tranquility, *sukha* (happiness) arises, and because of *sukha*, *samadhi* arises. Samadhi is the firm meditative state of mind. The Buddha says in many discourses that the happy mind is easily concentrated.

We see that happiness brings about samadhi, whereas usually we approach it the other way round. We often think, “If only I could get my meditation together, then I would be happy,” whereas it should be: “How do I gain true happiness so that my heart could be at ease?” It is a very important truth that the Buddha points to in this sequence of shades of happiness culminating in samadhi.

The result of samadhi is summed up in the recurring phrase “seeing things as they truly are.” This is a description of a mental state where the mind steps back from the sense of self. This state prepares the mind to be truly still and unshakeable. When that happens, the mind moves into *nibbida*. Sometimes this word is translated as boredom or disgust or revulsion, but that does not really get it. It means a cooling of the heart and turning away from things, leading to *vimutti* (freedom). Happiness plays a great role in the development of the whole sequence, and the brahmaviharas, which generate happiness, can serve as a powerful foundation for one's practice.

Similarly, the Four Noble Truths, while often characterized as a means to investigate suffering, also result in the cultivation of happiness. The qualities of happiness and joy are necessary for mental development. This is seen in many aspects of the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha very explicitly uses the Four Noble Truths as a tool. Over and over again he says, “I teach only two things, suffering and the cessation of suffering.” Some could say this is a miserable teaching, dwelling on suffering. But when you investigate the teaching, you see why the Buddha sets it out like that. Suffering is a very tangible quality. We can investigate it. It is something that we know and do not want. The whole range of sentient existence is subject to suffering, and the wish to escape from it is universal.

Many positive qualities are brought into being and are involved when one is engaged in cultivating the boundless qualities of the brahmaviharas. They lead to a sense of ease, security, and fearlessness. The Pali word for fearlessness is *abhaya*. In Thai, it also has the connotation of forgiveness. Developing the brahmaviharas engenders forgiveness, particularly in the practice of loving-kindness and compassion. To open one's heart to these qualities, one needs to be forgiving. The holding of past grievances—the constant refrain of “he did this; she did that; I did this; I can't forgive myself”—is swept away. There is no room in the divine abodes for holding grudges and enmity towards oneself or others.

Generosity, or *dana*, is another natural result of the desire to promote happiness and alleviate suffering. Three kinds of *dana* are mentioned: the giving of material things such as food or money, the giving of Dhamma, and the giving of forgiveness or fearlessness. Often we do not pay much

attention to the little things, such as our perceptions of ourselves and others. We have to learn to really forgive so as to open our hearts to these boundless qualities.

For instance, during that experience I had with Jay Siripongs, I asked him if there was still anybody he had not forgiven. This was during the last six hours leading up to the execution. We had spent the previous four and one-half hours or so talking, chanting, meditating, laughing, and generally having a buoyant time. Jay paused for a while and quietly said, “I don’t think I’ve quite forgiven myself.” That’s not just him. All of us are in that position. So it is very important to bring up into consciousness areas where we have not forgiven ourselves and where we have thus created limitations and constraints for ourselves.

Practicing the Brahmaviharas

As we have seen, the brahmaviharas are a means of uplifting the mind, for brightening and bringing it joy. However, if the practice causes confusion, then something is wrong in the practice. You have to review it and look for the reason. This is where investigation comes in.

The “near enemies” and “far enemies” are terms to aid you when reviewing your practice. They are guidelines to reflect back on the mind. The Buddha instructs us to examine our minds to see the real nature of the qualities and feelings. For instance, is it loving-kindness or affection? This questioning is fundamental in the Buddha’s teaching. It can be so skilful and useful to keep using the reflective capacity of the mind to penetrate and understand how the mind works. He gives us the basis for investigation—the Four Noble Truths are one skilful investigative tool.

Whichever practice one is cultivating (developing mindfulness, the brahmaviharas, or any other meditation), ask, “Is there suffering or freedom from suffering that results from my practice? How does it work for me?” That is always the bottom line in the Buddha’s teaching. “Am I happier, or am I experiencing suffering? Is my mind clearer or more confused? Is it peaceful or agitated?” These are the guidelines.

All of these qualities (the brahmaviharas, dana, and so forth) are thus important tools of investigation in reflecting and understanding what remains to be done in the task of purifying the mind. This teaching of the brahmaviharas was something the Buddha taught everyone, regardless of societal divisions. In the Buddha’s time, caste was an important

factor in Indian society. Pointing out the universality of these qualities to a brahmin who had come to argue with him, the Buddha asks, “What do you think, brahmin? Is only a brahmin capable of developing loving-kindness without hostility and ill will? Can a merchant or worker not be able to do so?”

“No, Master Gotama, a merchant, nobleman, brahmin, or worker is capable of developing loving-kindness, without hostility and without ill will.” (M 93) This practice is accessible to anyone, regardless of gender, age, position in society, or status as ordained or not.

The success of this practice depends on how you direct your mind, how you experience and engage with the world, on your ability to assess the benefit or the lack of benefit of this practice and then make use of it for yourself. Don’t wait for these qualities to develop on their own. You have to investigate your practice, recognize the results that you experience, and then take whatever remedial measures are necessary. This practice empowers us to change and develop ourselves. I would encourage you all to take these brahmaviharas and experiment with, learn from, and delight in them.

ILLUMINATING THE DUST: BRAHMAVIHARAS IN ACTION

*adapted from a May 1999 workshop at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery
with the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies*

I WOULD LIKE TO CONSIDER the application of these brahmaviharas. Buddhist practice is sometimes criticized as being ineffectual and quiescent—that basically the Buddha’s teaching is to sit in a quiet meditation room and placidly think thoughts of loving-kindness.

But that’s not at all the Buddha’s teaching nor indeed his example. The cultivation of the brahmaviharas conditions action, as the intentions and qualities of the heart and mind inevitably color how one engages in the world. So the brahmaviharas advocate action in situations that require such intervention. This is an important aspect of these qualities.

In one of the suttas (A 3.194), Ananda is silent when a dying monk stubbornly and erroneously contradicts the more learned Sariputta on a point of doctrine. Sariputta was called the right-hand disciple of the Buddha and second only to him in wisdom. When the matter is brought to the Buddha’s attention, he corrects and admonishes the dying monk. He also says to Ananda, “Ananda will you look on when an elder monk [Sariputta] is being bothered? Will you not have compassion when an elder monk is being bothered?” The quality of compassion demands us to respond when faced with unskillful deeds. One should not let such acts go by without a response.

Brahmaviharas, Right Speech, and Right Action

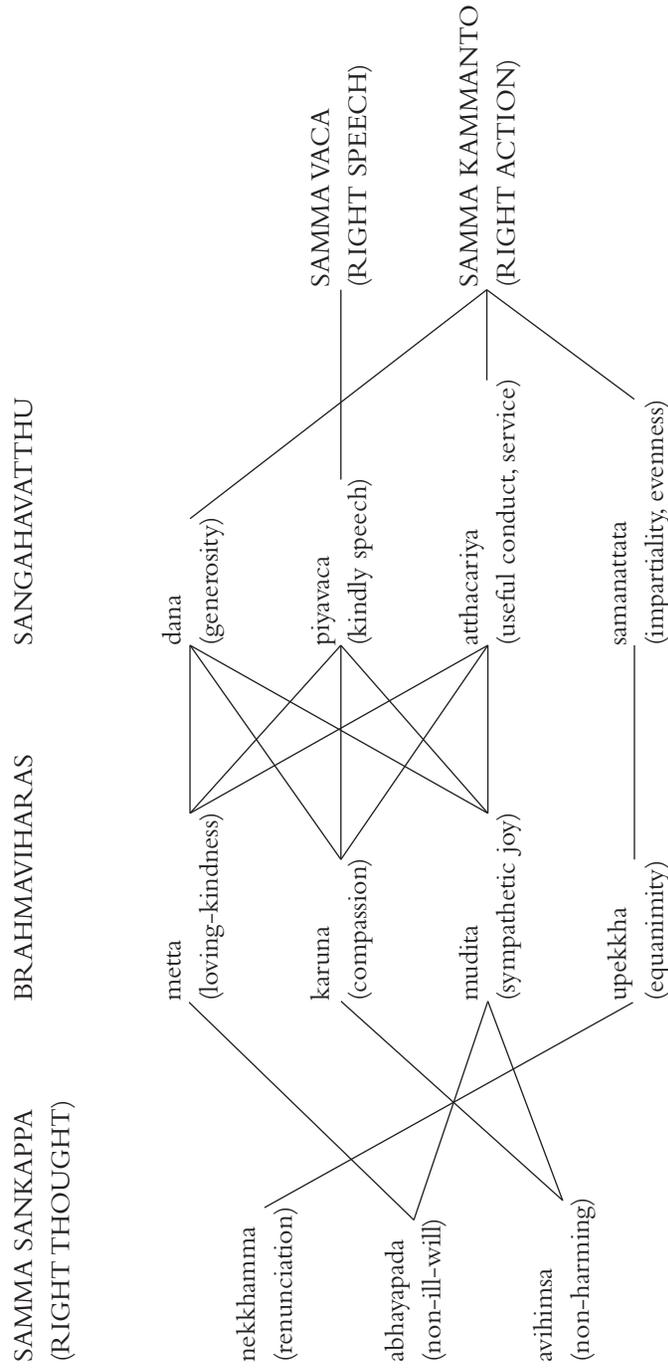
What kind of action do the brahmaviharas engender? In a discourse (A 5.294), the Buddha asks, “Now what do you think, monks? If from his youth up, this young man should make the heart’s release by loving-kindness to grow, would he do any wicked deed?” Having cultivated these abidings, one would refrain from unwholesome action, and the wholesome would be a natural consequence.

In the Eightfold Path*, which frees us from suffering, thought precedes its expression. Right View and Right Thought are the first two aspects of the Path which continues with Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Right Thought is always delineated as including non-ill will (i.e., loving-kindness) and non-harming (i.e., compassion). The intentions that form the brahmaviharas are fundamentally the basis for Right Thought. In turn, Right Thought directly lays the foundation for modes of virtuous conduct.

There is a set of teachings called the *sangahavatthu*. These virtues are described as the basis of sympathy, acts of generosity, principles of service, and that which favors group harmony and integration. The first of these virtues is generosity. The second is kind speech. The third is useful conduct or service, and the last is impartiality or evenness in dealing with others. One can imagine how these qualities, if truly implemented in one’s interactions with others, would generate harmony and well being. In his opus, BUDDHADHAMMA, the eminent Thai monk Phra Payutto illustrates how the brahmaviharas and sangahavatthu are mutually supportive and how their interrelationship is a basis for Right Speech and Right Action. (Chart on next page.)

This is an interesting aspect of the brahmaviharas since the mental qualities of Right View and Right Thought facilitate and foster Right Action. Right Action nurtures the Path, and the Path supports and strengthens the mental qualities. The Path contributes to the growth of the spiritual qualities of these brahmaviharas in body, speech, and mind. It may seem complicated at first glance, but what is striking to me is the interaction and interconnections among these wholesome qualities.

* The Eightfold Path consists of cultivating Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.



Similarly, the brahmaviharas are integrally related to a classification of the Buddha’s teachings called the *saraniya dhammas*, translated as “states of conciliation” or “the virtues necessary for fraternal living.” They are the dhammas or qualities necessary for human beings to get along with one another. The first three are loving-kindness of bodily, verbal, and mental action. These are the actual foundations for these virtues. The fourth is *sadharanaboghi*, the virtue of sharing with one’s friends and associates the results of one’s proper actions. When there is a sharing of the fruits of one’s actions, there would also tend to be a sharing of thoughts and feelings with others.

Silasamanyatta is the next virtue—keeping to standards of conduct with one’s associates. When this virtue is observed, there is a consistency and harmony because of the maintenance of the standards of conduct and virtue with those you associate with. Sometimes, there can be much pain and conflict if one is part of a unit, such as a family or work situation, and there is suspicion or very different standards of moral conduct.

Ditthisamanyatta is the last virtue in this group. It is the possessing of a similarity of views.

One of the reasons life in a monastery or a religious community is conducive to spiritual practice is the degree of trust that is engendered in keeping to the same or similar standards of conduct or virtue. Also, there generally is a similarity of views. In living together, you may not actually like each other but at least you can trust each other. That is a big thing. In monasteries, you get disparate characters thrown together. One of the common personality traits is a certain stubbornness. You would not be in a monastery if you were not able to go against the expectations and wishes of family, society, and even at times your own personal preferences. But the similarity of conduct and purpose is a foundation for conciliation and harmony. There is an evenness and consistency of conduct and commitment within the group, since common goals and a common integrity are present. It is not something forced but is a virtue that is encouraged in order to live together harmoniously. So these *saraniya dhammas* are foundations for harmonious living whatever the size of the unit living together.

Metta

A function of metta, loving-kindness, is to facilitate resolution. Even if there is conflict, if one party is willing to keep the heart directed towards loving-kindness, it tends to lead to an amicable resolution. I have seen it happen over and over again. I remember a conflict with a couple of monks in Thailand. Being the abbot, I was of course right! But that was not getting anywhere. I felt that I should rely on loving-kindness, for I could not see anything else to do and it was definitely suffering for everybody. I took the long alms-round route, a walk of about one and one-half hours, with these two monks and used it as an exercise to generate loving-kindness throughout that whole time. It was interesting that within a few days the situation shifted. They came to me separately. We were able to talk, be open with each other, and so resolve the conflict.

In one of the discourses (M 36.48), a naked ascetic verbally challenges the Buddha. The story goes, “when Saccaka, the Nigantha*, heard this, he said, ‘It is wonderful, Master Gotama, that when Master Gotama is spoken to offensively again and again and assaulted with harsh and discourteous speech, the color of his skin brightens, the color of his face clears, as is to be expected of one who is enlightened.’” Although spoken to discourteously, the Buddha establishes himself in this quality of loving-kindness and brightens. Saccaka was someone who tried to provoke various religious teachers. Therefore he continues, “I recall engaging Purana Kassapa in debate and then he prevaricated and showed anger, hate, and bitterness...and the same with Makkhali Gosala and Ajita Kesakambala.” Of course the Buddha did not buy into the same dynamic. This is an example of the application of loving-kindness when one engages with the world and with others.

Karuna

In all of the ancient commentaries in the Theravada tradition, the perfection achieved by the Buddha and the arahants was expressed as the perfection of wisdom and compassion. These qualities are seen as synonymous. Misapprehension of reality and the creation of suffering occur when the true nature of things is not seen, whereas wisdom is a clear seeing of that true nature of things. Observing misapprehension in

others, one seeks to alleviate the suffering caused by it. When wisdom is present there is compassionate action. The natural response of one who is free from defilement is compassion. As the mind gets clearer, the heart is less burdened with attachments and defilements, and one is able to respond with compassion.

The relinquishment of self is a function of wisdom. As we learn to have a less fixed concept of ourselves (not carrying around the “I” and “I am”), we begin to see more clearly. Then, when we are confronted with situations in which people are acting unskillfully, we can respond with compassion rather than feeling attacked or threatened because of our sense of self. Relinquishing self does not make us dysfunctional or incapable but opens the opportunity to highlight the relationship between wisdom and compassion.

The Buddha is seen as compassionate. Ananda is seen as compassionate. Even Maha Kassapa, who tends to appear as a dour ascetic, a sort of hard-liner, is praised for this quality by the Buddha in one of his discourses (S 16.3). He says of Maha Kassapa, “He teaches the Dhamma to others because of the intrinsic excellence of the Dhamma; he teaches the Dhamma to others from compassion and sympathy, out of tender concern.” From such a person the teaching is very pure. That is, when the Dhamma is taught by someone with compassion, it is very efficacious, very powerful.

There is a lovely example of the Buddha’s compassionate speech in another sutta (M 58). A leader of another religious sect eggs on Prince Abhaya to ask the Buddha a question that could bring the Buddha discredit whichever way he answers.

The question to be asked was, “Would the Buddha utter speech that is unwelcome and disagreeable to others?” If the Buddha answers that he would, the prince could say, “What is the difference between you and an ordinary unenlightened being?” If the Buddha answers that he would not, the prince could reply, “What you are saying is not true, because you have said to Devadatta [the Buddha’s cousin] that he is destined for hell, and that Devadatta is incorrigible, and Devadatta was angry and dissatisfied with what you were saying. So you are not speaking the truth.”

The prince asks the Buddha, “Venerable Sir, would the Tathagata*

* *Nigantha* is another term for a Jain.

* *Tathagata* is the epithet that the Buddha used to refer to himself. It means “One thus come and thus gone.”

utter unwelcome and disagreeable speech to others?”

The Buddha replies, “There is no one-sided answer to that, prince.”

“The Niganthas have lost in this,” the prince says.

“Why do you say this, prince?”

The prince then tells the full story of his being set up by the religious leader. On that occasion, a young, tender infant was lying prone on Prince Abhaya’s lap.

The Buddha asks him, “What do you think, prince? If, while you or your nurse were not attending to him, this infant were to put a stick or stone into his mouth, what would you do?”

“Venerable Sir, I would take it out. If I cannot take it out at once, I would take his head in my left hand, and crooking a finger of my right hand, I will take it out even if I have to draw blood.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I have compassion for the child.”

The Buddha says, “Similarly, prince, such speech as the Tathagata knows to be untrue, unbeneficial, incorrect and which is also unwelcome and disagreeable to others, such speech the Tathagata does not utter. Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be true and correct but is not beneficial and which is unwelcome and disagreeable to others, such speech the Tathagata does not utter. Such speech, which the Tathagata knows to be true, correct, beneficial but which is unwelcome and disagreeable to others, the Tathagata knows the time to use such speech. Such speech which the Tathagata knows to be untrue, incorrect, unbeneficial even if it is welcome and agreeable to others the Tathagata will not utter. Similarly, speech which is true, correct, beneficial and welcome and agreeable, the Tathagata knows the time to use such speech. Why is that? Because the Tathagata has compassion for beings.”

So even if it is true and beneficial, the Buddha would pick the time for such speech. He would speak when it was appropriate to do so even if it was not welcome. Compassion is the conditioning factor.

Mudita

The quality of *mudita*—gladness, sympathetic joy—is not mentioned specifically in the suttas as often as is loving-kindness and compassion. *Mudita* is an antidote for jealousy, for envy, for the tyranny of the self.

The way we relate to others is governed largely by our attempts to prop up a feeling of self-worth. So much of our interaction with others is in terms of comparison, and therefore feelings of intimidation or inadequacy are factors in our relationships. *Mudita* cuts through these feelings and allows us to have a sense of joy with whatever we experience around us. Cutting through self-view is the Buddha’s unique contribution to spiritual practice. *Mudita* is antithetical to the self-view that we carry around with us and leads us to a place of boundless and immeasurable joy. To be able to rejoice in the acquisitions or success of others is the antithesis of what is the norm in a modern, competitive society. We seem to be habituated to finding fault or criticizing as our default option. *Mudita* gives us the opportunity to direct attention to something that makes the heart much more expansive.

Upekkha

Equanimity, or *upekkha*, refers to a psychological virtue and state of mind. Equanimity as the translation for *upekkha* therefore has a different sense from the social ethic of impartiality. The quality of *upekkha* does not preclude relying on the other three brahmaviharas in dealing with the world around us or with our responsibilities. Certainly the Buddha is the exemplar of the brahmaviharas. After his enlightenment he taught for 45 years. That is not indifference to the world but rather an exertion of tremendous effort to help others through his concern for others. But, he was equanimous, or established in *upekkha*.

Upekkha also does not preclude an interest or knowledge in the ordinary affairs of the world. In addition to his teaching and training of monastics, the Buddha himself spoke to and taught people from all levels of society. His injunctions and teachings covered all sorts of activities, such as business and investments, gambling, and conjugal relations.

Before Ajahn Chah* died, Wat Pah Nanachat was given the responsibility of putting together a biography of him. A lot of time and effort went into compiling his teachings and interviewing monks, nuns, and laypeople who had known him in order to get as much information on his life as possible. One of the laypeople’s recurring comments was that they respected and thought of Ajahn Chah as special because he could

* *Ajahn* is the Thai form for addressing a teacher.

relate to their experiences in dealing with the world at their level. He had a talent to tune in to the villagers and teach them at their level. It was the same when he taught military personnel, merchants from the city, and others, including foreigners from other cultural backgrounds.

On a certain level, one needs to set aside all of one's preferences and one's own perspectives to be open to others. That is equanimity and compassion working together. The cultivation of equanimity does not make one dull, stupid, or indifferent to others. Rather it enhances one's perspective on things so that one can get involved where appropriate.

For instance, some years ago, the Thai economy went into a disastrous downward spin. The people lost all faith in the government and themselves. Ajahn Maha Boowa, now considered in Thailand to be the most respected monk living, actively involved himself in the affairs of the day. He is a very uncompromising forest monk and was about 85 years old at the time. His response was to set up a program to collect money to help the government rather than let the people get sucked into worry, fear, and self-considerations. He set the target of a billion baht, a considerable sum of money, especially in a country undergoing total economic collapse. On the king's birthday, he offered a billion baht to the Central Bank of Thailand. It was collected by him from people around the country and was meant to show them that generosity and goodness were the way to get through difficulties.

There is a lovely story in the Jatakas of the power of equanimity. In a previous life, the Buddha dedicated his whole life from the time he was quite young to extreme asceticism. In India this practice was considered very worthy and efficacious, and so he threw himself into all the most extreme ascetic practices of the time. It was believed that such extreme asceticism enabled the expiation of any bad karma and that heaven would be the reward at the end of practitioners' harsh lives. From the Buddhist perspective, it does not work like that, of course, but that was the belief at that time. When one is dying, a sign of one's future birth (*gati nimitta*) can come up. After a long life, when this ascetic was on his deathbed, a clear recognition that he was going to hell arose. He then recognized within himself that he had spent his whole life on a worthless undertaking and immediately established himself in equanimity. With the power of that equanimity, his mind stabilized, and he was reborn in a heavenly world.

An incident recounted in the suttas illustrates the way the divine abidings translate into practice. There was an occasion when the Sangha was not in concord, and in the words of the sutta, they were "wounding each other with verbal arrows." The Buddha came to know of it and tried to mediate. The monks said something like, "It would be good if the Lord were to abide in a pleasant place, and we will look after ourselves." Basically, "Buzz off, and we'll get on with this business on our own." After a few attempts to mediate, the Buddha, seeing that the monks were not willing to resolve their quarrelling, went away to spend some time in retreat in a forest. (M 31)

This is an interesting perspective: even the Buddha could not fix some things. The Buddha saw that there was no purpose in trying to force anything and went away to a park where three monks were living together. One of them was his cousin Anuruddha, who was well known for his meditative abilities and peaceful nature. When the Buddha asked them how they were faring, they replied that they were living in concord, "like a mixture of milk and water"—in other words, getting along together very well. They said that since they considered it a great gain to live together with other religious practitioners, they "maintain acts and words and thoughts of loving-kindness towards these venerable ones both in public and in private." Namely, having loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity towards each other. Anuruddha describes and epitomizes this quality of mind when he says, "Why don't I set aside what I wish to do and do what these venerable ones wish to do. We are different in body but one in mind." That is loving-kindness and compassion in action—setting aside one's own wishes through caring, kindness, and solicitude towards each other.

So these have been some reflections on the brahmaviharas.
*Evam.**

* *Evam* is a common ending to Dhamma talks. Literally, it means "thus" or "so."

Guided Meditation

Loving-kindness is usually the entry point to the brahmaviharas. Take time to establish yourself in loving-kindness. Pay attention to the feeling of kindness, softness, warmth, and gentleness in the heart rather than the words or concepts we use to describe loving-kindness. Cultivate and bring this quality into consciousness as if loving-kindness were a muscle that has not been used.

Be aware of the posture, making sure the body is not tense. Soften, relax the body. Pay attention to the posture so that one isn't too strained. If there's a feeling of tightness, draw this feeling of loving-kindness around that tension. Allow tenseness to disappear by drawing loving-kindness around you. Surround yourself with loving-kindness and allow the tension to disappear into the feeling of loving-kindness.

Breathing in, think, "May I be happy." Allow it to settle and permeate the whole body, the whole heart. "May I be secure." When breathing out, sustain that attention within the heart. "I wish for well being. I wish for security." Establish this intention of loving-kindness. Keep returning the focus to the heart base, taking the intention of loving-kindness, the wish for happiness within.

The mind wanders or gets distracted, but its duty right now, its sphere of work, is to bring the quality of loving-kindness into the heart. Pay attention to that intention, and direct the heart towards happiness, well being, safety, and security. These are the qualities of metta. Pay attention to the feeling in the heart, formulating in the mind, "May I be happy. May I be secure," but pay attention to the feelings within the heart. Let the feeling resonate. "May I be happy." Let the thought resonate within the heart, within the body.

Be aware, mindful of this moment, mindful of the breath. The sensation of the breath is apparent. The sensation of the body sitting here is apparent. But the central focus is the feeling within the heart. "May I be happy. May I abide in well being. May I be secure. May I dwell in safety." Allow the mind to experience the quality in the heart as in the *Divine Abidings* chant, making it abundant, exalted, and immeasurable.

"May I be happy." Allow the mind to soften, soften the heart. The intention of loving-kindness is an intention of gentleness. But it is also very strong, very powerful. Draw it into the heart and let it permeate one's being. Brighten the mind, brighten the heart with loving-kindness. Allow the heart and mind to expand, to be spacious. The quality of loving-kindness is spacious and bright.

THE THERAVADA BUDDHISM IN A NUTSHELL

*adapted from a talk given during a November 1997 retreat
at the Angela Center, Santa Rosa, California*

A COUPLE OF DAYS AGO, a few people asked: “What is Theravada Buddhism?” It’s a good question. Oftentimes people have come across *vipassana*, insight meditation and its related teachings, disconnected from their origins. Sometimes they are not even aware that *vipassana* has anything to do with Buddhism or who the Buddha was.

How It Began

The Buddha started his life as the crown prince of a small kingdom in what is now Nepal. He was born around 563 BCE, although, of course, scholars and different Buddhist lineages disagree on the exact date. After being cosseted within the confines of the palace for his first 29 years, the spiritual impulse led him to take up the life of a wandering ascetic. After a few years of intense meditation practice, accompanied by many pointless austerities, he found the Middle Way and realized the true nature of things. He was enlightened.

Called upon to teach, he spent the next 45 years wandering the Ganges valley of northeast India, sharing his understanding with those who requested teachings. He established a well-formed monastic order and a large lay community. His final passing away (the *Parinibbana*) occurred in Kusinara, in the Himalayan foothills, around 483 BCE.

As far as the histories go, it seems that, in its initial form, the

Theravada school began about 100 years after the Buddha’s time. A few months after the *Parinibbana*, a great council of elders was held to formalize and establish the Teachings. A hundred years later they had a second council, again to go over all the Teachings (the discourses and the monastic rules), in the attempt to keep everyone on the same page. However, as it transpired, it was at this time that the first major split in the Sangha occurred. As I understand it—and there are different versions of this—the larger portion of the Community wanted to change some of the rules, including allowing the monastics to use money.

The majority of the Sangha wanted to bring in these reforms, but there was a small group that said, “Well, whether it makes sense or not, we want to do things the way the Buddha and his original disciples did.” Those of the small group were known as the *Sthaviras* (in Sanskrit) or *Theras* (in Pali), meaning “Elders.” After about another 130 years, they gave rise to the Theravada school. “Theravada” literally means “The Way of the Elders,” and that has been their abiding theme ever since. The ethos of the tradition can be characterized as something like: “Right or wrong, that’s the way the Buddha established it, so that is the way we’ll do it.” It has thus always had a particularly conservative quality to it. This is a very abbreviated version of the story, but it essentially describes the pattern of our origins.

As with all religious traditions and human institutions, over time a number of branches grew up. It is said that by about 250 years after the Buddha’s time, during the reign of the Emperor Asoka, there were 18 different major schools of the *Buddha-sasana*, the Buddha’s dispensation. It is important to note, however, that these were not completely separate sects. Regularly there were monasteries where people of many different schools lived with each other—apparently this was more common than not. It was normal to have schools and teachers from different strands working together and living side by side. There were different emphases, but also considerable harmony within the Sangha. The Theravada branch (*Sthaviravada* in Sanskrit) was just one of those schools.

The Patronage of Emperor Asoka

One of the reasons why the Theravada tradition has been sustained pretty much in its original form ever since then is because of the Emperor Asoka. He was a warrior-noble king about whom it was said, in typical

mythical fashion, that he killed 99 of his brothers in order to take over the throne. He then proceeded to work on the rest of India, conquering the vast majority of the Indian subcontinent. After a particularly gruesome battle with the Kalingans, where there were about 60,000 dead, he looked out over the sea of groaning, weeping, bleeding, and dismembered bodies and was suddenly struck by the folly of his ways. He realized, “This really is a terrible track that I’ve got myself onto.” But of course by then he’d conquered the whole of India, so he could afford to give himself some breathing space. He also realized, “I’ve got to do something about my spiritual life, because if I don’t do something quickly, I’m in bad, bad trouble.”

He invited different teachers from different sects—not just Buddhist—to come and explain their teachings to him. One after another, different people came, but nobody was very convincing to him. Then one day, from the window of his palace, he saw a young Buddhist novice walking down the street. He was so struck by the demeanor of this child (only seven years old) that he thought, “How could such a young child have such a noble bearing and look so serene?” So he told his people to bring the child into the palace.

The king invited him in and said, “Please take a seat.” The novice, knowing the protocol that a member of the Sangha should never sit lower than a lay person, and seeing that the only high chair in the place was the throne, climbed up onto the king’s throne. Even if Asoka hadn’t killed 99 of his brothers and conquered all India, this would have raised a few hairs on the back of his neck. So he said to the novice, “What do you think you’re doing climbing on the throne?” The novice said something like, “The Dhamma is that which is supreme in the world. Having given my life to the realization of that Truth, it is my obligation to put myself in a seat which represents that.”

The Emperor then started asking him questions. He was so impressed with the answers the novice gave, he thought, “I’ve got to find out who this child’s teachers are.” It turned out that the boy was from the Theravada school of the Buddha’s disciples. Eventually that was the school that Asoka espoused, and since he was by then in charge of India, he decided India would become a Buddhist nation. Primarily he patronized the Theravada tradition, although he also gave support to other

Buddhist lineages as well as to various non-Buddhist sects. Later his son and daughter, Mahinda and Sanghamitta, went to Sri Lanka; Sanghamitta was a *bhikkhuni*, a Buddhist nun, and Mahinda was a monk. They established the Theravada tradition in Sri Lanka around 240 BCE.

Through this circumstance, Sri Lanka later became a stronghold of Theravada Buddhism. It has sustained itself there for many centuries, particularly because Sri Lanka is an island and therefore protected by its isolation. In India empires came and went, civilizations arose and departed, and many different Buddhist schools came into being and dissolved or fragmented. They eventually spread through the north into Afghanistan, Tibet, and China, later on to Korea and Japan. Theravada largely disappeared on the mainland of India in later times and completely so, along with all other Buddhist schools, with the advent of the Muslim invasions. Despite this, there on Sri Lanka (called Tambapanni in those days) the little cluster of Theravadans were hanging on, pretty much unbothered by anybody else. There were, of course, wars and famines over time, as well as other Buddhist schools operating there. However, Theravada Buddhism was continually restored and maintained as the main religion.

Theravada Buddhism eventually spread throughout Southeast Asia (there was a lot of traffic between India and that region) as at different times missionaries were invited from Sri Lanka and went out to Burma and later on to Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Because, particularly in those countries, they had no strong, uniting cultural forms, Theravada Buddhism and the Indian culture that backed it up became the defining influence. When it arrived in Thailand, Laos, and Burma, their societies shaped themselves around it. In most Buddhist countries, the features of the Buddha images resemble the features of the people of that country. However, in Southeast Asia, the Buddhas often have Indian features. The Thai Buddha images usually don’t look like Thais at all; they have Indian features, large noses, and an Indian cast to their forms.

The Language of the Theravada Teachings

Pali is the language of the Theravada scriptures. It seems to have been something of a lingua franca in the region of the Ganges valley around the time of the Buddha, closely related therefore to the language that the

Buddha actually spoke. The Buddha was adamant that the Teachings should be learned in this common speech and passed on by rote learning, rather than being cast into the “religious language” of Sanskrit, let alone written down, thereby becoming the sole property of the brahmins, who were the only ones who could speak it.

Pali is something of a poor cousin to Sanskrit, having a much simpler grammar, and does not have its own alphabet. It was not written down at all until 73 BCE, in Sri Lanka, when there was a famine and concern that, if the monks and nuns who had memorized the Teachings died off, the words of the Buddha would be lost forever. From that time on it has been written down, using the alphabet of each country it has come to or, in some cases, necessitating an alphabet to be created for it.

Even though the Pali scriptures have long been committed to writing, they still keep much of their repetitive form—a form useful for rote learning and recital but sometimes wearying for the silent reader. The Canon itself is divided into three major sections: the discourses of the Buddha (*Sutta*), the monastic discipline (*Vinaya*), and the philosophical/psychological compendium of the *Abhidhamma*.

The scriptures of the Northern School (usually known as the *Mahayana* tradition) were largely written down in Sanskrit. Although they contain a portion of the Buddha’s Teachings as they are found in the Pali texts (these are known as the *Agamas*), the majority of their discourses have no exact counterparts in the Pali. Having said this, however, even features that at first glance might seem unique to the Northern lineages, such as the Pure Lands, clearly have their roots in the texts and myths of the Southern. Whether these discourses were actually spoken by the Buddha and not included in the Pali collection for some reason or whether they were composed at a later date has been hotly debated by scholars and the faithful of both schools over many centuries. The majority of scholars agree, however, that the Pali is the most ancient and trustworthy redaction of the Buddha’s Teaching.

Degeneration and Renewal

Throughout the time of the geographical dispersion of the Theravada tradition the theme of a continual looking back to the original standards, the original Teachings, has been sustained. When being established in new countries, there has always been a strong sense of respectfulness and

reverence for the original Teachings, and also a respect for the style of life as embodied by the Buddha and the original Sangha, the forest-dwelling monastics of the earliest times. This is the model that was employed then and was thus carried on.

Obviously in these many centuries, there have been lots of ups and downs, but this pattern is what has been carried on. Sometimes the religion would die down in Sri Lanka, and then some monks would come from Burma to crank it up again. Then it would fade out in Thailand, and some Sri Lankans would boost them up—propping each other up over the centuries. Thus it has managed to keep itself afloat and still largely in the original form.

When it would be well developed, it would get rich, and then it would get overweight and corrupt, collapsing under its own weight. Then a splinter group would go off into the forest and say, “Let’s get back to basics!” and would again return to those original standards of keeping the monastic rules, practicing meditation, and studying the original Teachings.

The Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths

Although there are numerous volumes of the Buddha’s discourses in many traditions, it is also said that the entirety of his Teaching was contained in his very first exposition—called *The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Truth*—which he gave to five monastic companions in the deer park near Benares, shortly after his enlightenment. In this brief discourse (it takes only 20 minutes to recite), he expounded the nature of what he named the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths.

This teaching, the Four Noble Truths, is common to all Buddhist traditions. Just as an acorn contains within it the template for what eventually takes shape as a vast and ancient oak, so too all the myriad Buddhist Teachings can be said to derive from this essential matrix of insight. What is more, enlightened Elders of both Southern and Northern traditions have agreed that this is the case.

The Four Noble Truths are formulated like a medical diagnosis in the ayurvedic tradition: 1) the symptoms of the disease, 2) the cause, 3) the prognosis, and 4) the cure. This, I’m told, is the standard format. The Buddha always drew on structures and forms that were familiar to people in his time, and this is how he laid out the Four Noble Truths.

The First Truth (the “symptom”) is that there is *dukkha*—the experience of incompleteness, dissatisfaction, or frustration—that we are less than blissfully happy all the time. Does anybody argue with that? [*Laughs.*] Occasionally we are blissfully happy, and everything is fine, but there are moments when we wobble, right? Why this is significant is that, if we have an intuition of an Ultimate Reality, an ultimate perfection, then how come there is this *dukkha*? But there is.

Sometimes people read this First Truth and misinterpret it as an absolute statement: “Reality in every dimension *is* *dukkha*”—that the universe and life and everything are unsatisfactory. The statement gets taken as an absolute value judgment of all and everything, but that’s not what is meant here. These are *noble* truths, not *absolute* truths. They are “noble” in the sense that they are relative truths that when understood lead us to a realization of the Absolute or the Ultimate. It’s just saying, “There is the experience of *dukkha*, of dissatisfaction.”

The Second Noble Truth is that the cause of this *dukkha* is self-centered craving, *tanha* in Pali (*trshna* in Sanskrit), which literally means “thirst.” This craving, this grasping is the cause of *dukkha*. This can be craving for sense-pleasure, craving to become something, craving to be, to be identified as some thing. Or it can be craving to not be, the desire to disappear, to be annihilated, to get rid of. There are many, many subtle dimensions of this.

The Third Truth is that of *dukkha-nirodha*. *Nirodha* means “cessation.” This means that this experience of *dukkha*, of incompleteness, can fade away, can be transcended. It can end. In other words, *dukkha* is not an absolute reality. It’s just a temporary experience that the heart can be liberated from.

The Fourth Noble Truth is that of the Path, how we get from the Second Truth to the Third, from the experience of *dukkha* to ending it. The cure is the Eightfold Path, which is, in essence, virtue, concentration, and wisdom.

Dependent Origination, the Source Code

What brings us to this retreat, what gets us to use all our holiday time and pay good money to come here and suffer for ten days is the “Big

D,” *dukkha*. With meditation, what we are looking at very closely is the bridge between the Second and Third Noble Truths: how suffering arises, what is the cause of suffering, and how we can bring about its cessation. The Buddha focused a huge amount of attention on explaining this point. He talked about the Four Noble Truths in many discourses and also went into a lot of fine analysis about the relationship between the Second and Third Truths.

He used the term *idappaccayata* for “causality.” It literally means something like, “the conditionality of the relationship between this and that.” This is talking about how things are brought into being—how a chain of causation brings *dukkha* into existence and the chain of causation that brings it to cessation. There is a little passage that is repeated over and over in the suttas that I find very helpful to recollect:

*When there is this, that comes to be.
With the arising of this, that arises.
When there is not this, that does not come to be.
With the cessation of this, that ceases.*

(A 10.92)

This fundamental pattern underlies all the teachings on causality. In analyzing the arising of *dukkha*—where *does* it come from?—the Buddha points to ignorance.

The Buddha, particularly in the Theravada Teachings, avoided any kind of metaphysical speculation. It’s not as if: “Well, there was this event at the beginning of the universe, and God blinked. Therefore we suffer.” Or that this was just a trial run. There’s a Kurt Vonnegut novel in which the whole of human evolution, the course of human history, and all the wars and empires and crises and glories, were brought into being because an alien, one of the Tralfamadorians, crashed their spaceship onto earth and was trying to send a message back to their home planet: “Could you send me a new distributor, mine’s gone out?” The whole current of human history had been brought about just as a way of sending this message through space.

We might get the feeling that there is just such a perverse logic behind what we experience in life, but the Buddha didn’t go into any

of that. He consciously avoided trying to describe any ultimate beginning of things; not because he didn't know how it all worked or because it was inherently wasteful to contemplate the nature of life, but largely because metaphysical speculation alone is pointless and unliberating. He used the telling simile of the poisoned arrow to illustrate this principle: a soldier has been wounded in battle. A field-surgeon comes along to help him, but he says, "I'll not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble, a brahmin, a merchant or a worker...the man's name and clan...was he tall or short, fair or dark...where he lived, what kind of bow he used, what wood the arrow was made from...the bird the feathers came from," etc., etc.

"All this would still remain unknown to that man and meanwhile he would die," said the Buddha. (M 63.5) The point of the tale being that the only wise and significant thing to do is to pull out the arrow and treat the wound. In this light he simply said that the cause of the core wound is ignorance, not seeing clearly. Through not seeing clearly, the whole cycle begins: because there is less than total mindfulness, total awareness, total attunement to reality, we lose our balance.

This principle is known as Dependent Origination. In a way it is the nucleus of the entire Teaching, the source code for *Samsara* and *Nibbana* (*Nirvana* in Sanskrit). It is how the Buddha analyzed the nature of experience in the most radical manner. Furthermore, the realization of Dependent Origination is what he pointed to as having been the way to his own enlightenment, and he prescribed its realization for others who were keen to cure their own disease of dukkha.

When there is ignorance, then the whole sense of "subject" and "object" crystallizes; the sense of this and that solidifies. There is an identification with the body and the senses as being "self" and the external sense-objects as being "the world outside." Because there is a body and senses, we hear, think, smell, and so forth. Because of that sense contact, feeling arises. There is pleasure, pain, or neutral feeling, feelings of interest, aversion, excitement, whatever it might be. Initially it is just a feeling, then from feeling there arises desire. Pleasant feeling will give rise to the desire to get a hold of, to get closer to: "Whoa, what's that? Smells good!" This is feeling turning into craving. There is sense contact, feeling, then craving arises from that. If it's painful or unpleasant, then we

withdraw from it; we desire to get away from it. Craving leads to clinging, *upadana*, attachment.

Upadana leads to what is called "becoming" (*bhava* in Pali). I like to picture this as a rising wave. The mind grabs hold of an experience: "I wonder if they need any help down in the kitchen? Yes, I'm sure they do. I could peel a chestnut or two. I could really be useful down there." This is upadana. Then *bhava* is actually getting up off our cushion and heading down the stairs. Becoming is aiming toward the object of desire and acting on that. *Bhava* is what the consumer society runs on. This is what the entire advertising industry and the consumer culture are aimed at fostering: the thrill of me just about to get what I want.

Then *jati* ("birth") comes after that. Birth is the moment we get what we want. It's the moment of no turning back. At *bhava* we can still withdraw. We can be all the way down the stairs and then think, "Get back in there. *Come on*, he's halfway through a Dhamma talk. This is really too much!" There is still time to get out of it. But *jati* is where there's no turning back. The die is cast, and we're in there spinning our story to the cook and getting what we want.

"Oh yes, I could use some help. Could you stir this for me and then taste it?"

We think, "Ahhh, I've got it!" That's the moment of getting what we want. Then, following upon the moment of getting what we want, there is the rest of it. After we're born, as we all know, there is a lot of life that happens. After the moment of birth comes the entire life span. After the moment of thrill has passed and we've managed to do as much tasting as we can deal with, the excitement of it starts to fade away. The feelings of embarrassment arise: "Good grief where am I at? Dragged around by my nose, when am I going to get *over* this?!" Feelings of self-criticism, self-disparagement, and disappointment assail us: "It didn't taste that good after all. After all of that...I sat there for 20 minutes cranking myself up for it, and then they put too much salt in it."

This is what is called *soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupayasa*: "sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair." (As our beloved retreat manager says, "These are a few of my favorite things.") So then what happens? There we are, we feel kind of mucky, disappointed, down. This is dukkha. Essentially that long word just means dukkha; it feels bad.

So what do we do when we feel bad? This is interesting—the Buddha said, “Dukkha ripens in two ways: either as continuing the round of rebirth or in search.” The first of these means we feel mopey and wretched, and then think, “Maybe they need help with the *cake!*”

What happens if we don’t awaken is that we go back to the time when we last felt really good, which was at the bhava-jati junction when the thrill hit. That was the last time we felt good. So we just go back to where we last felt good and try it again. And again and again....

“Dukkha ripening as search” means we realize, “I’ve been through this 153,485 times, *enough*; this is *enough*. How can I get out of this? What can I do? What’s going on here? What is this pattern?” We’re pretty thick creatures—and I speak from personal experience. We take a lot of pounding before we learn some of these lessons.

We can be very convincing. We really build ourselves up and excuse ourselves. But what brings us here to a retreat is recognizing that trying to find happiness through that kind of gratification does not work. Even though we get fooled and lose it, something in our hearts knows: this does not work. This is what we mean by “search,” looking for the roots of how the whole thing operates.

A Lesson from a Chocolate Éclair

Sometimes the lessons come not because we’ve chosen them. A story springs to mind about an incident which occurred many years ago at Chithurst Monastery. A friend of ours, a very sweet old faith healer in his nineties named Albert Knockles, wanted to sponsor a meal for the whole community. Normally we never cook in the afternoon or evening in the monastery, but it had been decided: “We’ve got to do this big meal for Albert.” The nuns were asked to cook it (this was before the Ten Precept,* brown-robed nuns existed, so all the nuns were in white and on the Eight Precepts** in those days). Some of them were happy to do the cooking in the afternoon, but others felt railroaded into it.

* *The Ten Precepts are to refrain from: killing living beings, taking what is not given, engaging in any kind of sexual activity, speaking falsely or harmfully, consuming intoxicants which cause carelessness, eating at inappropriate times, seeking entertainment, beautifying or adorning oneself, lying on a high or luxurious sleeping place, and accepting money.*

** *The Eight Precepts follow the Ten Precepts (see above), with the exception of accepting*

There was also an issue about whether or not it was all a big waste of time, people expending this huge effort cooking—“We’re supposed to be reflecting on alms food being medicine for the body...” Meanwhile others thought, “Yeah, great, big feast tomorrow!” I was in the former camp, a sourpuss thinking, “This is all a *total* waste of time.”

As the day wore on and the evening came, some of the venerables were getting more than slightly excited by all this, and one of these was the second monk, the vice-abbot. I spent most of the evening in contemptuous thoughts, and he spent most of the evening salivating. The next morning, after the morning chanting, meditation, and the work meeting, he confessed that he hadn’t been able to sleep all night since he’d been anticipating the meal so much. When he said that, my level of contempt went off the scale, “He’s supposed to be this great monk, an inspiring example, and he’s just...arrrrrgghhh...” But he was on a roll and was not going to be dissuaded from the belief that this was a really good thing.

Come the mealtime, amongst the other things that the nuns had prepared, there were chocolate éclairs, *big* chocolate éclairs, stuffed with whipped cream; the rest of the meal was also fabulous. I was full of aversion for the whole thing.

I noticed that, when the meal had all been offered, the second monk took his éclair out of his bowl and had it in his lid, and then we started to eat. After a few mouthfuls I was forced to come to the conclusion that this really was delicious food and that maybe it hadn’t been such a bad idea after all. Meanwhile I noticed the second monk *started* with his chocolate éclair. He picked it up with incredible concentration, took two bites out of it, and put it down. Then he closed his eyes and just sat there, not eating anything else.

I thought: “Well done—he’s really seen the foolishness of his greed, his obsession, and he’s decided to forgo the whole meal—good man, well done, impressive.”

When we got to the end of the meal and were cleaning our bowls, I made some sort of comment to him like, “It was interesting that, after all the build up, you refrained from eating the meal.”

money. Also, two of the Ten Precepts (on entertainment and beautification/adornment) are consolidated into one precept.

He said, “I was about to be sick.”

“Why was that?”

“What was your éclair like?”

“It was fine.”

“I took one mouthful, and it tasted like it was full of salt,” he said. “I thought I must be dreaming so I took another bite, and it was exactly the same. I sat there on the edge of nausea through the whole meal.”

The nuns had ended up working so late the previous night and had got so tired in the process, that they had accidentally put salt instead of sugar into one last batch of the whipped cream. Also, because they were on the Eight Precepts, they were not allowed to eat in the evening, thus they were forbidden by their Rule to consume or even taste the food they were preparing, so they hadn’t noticed the difference.

He was the one who got the salty éclair: soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupayasa, the unsatisfactory result of desire. It was a great lesson.

Escape from the Cycle of Birth and Death

In meditation, as you’ve probably noticed, we begin with that kind of lesson. Life smacks us in the face and says, “Wake up.” Or we begin to notice a pattern. We see ourselves following this through and think, “What an idiot. Why do I keep doing this?!” Slowly, the more that we practice with it, we can catch the process earlier and earlier on, so that as we see ourselves getting entangled, grasping, clinging, feeling the discomfort of that, then we know to let go. The more that our awareness gets refined and we bring clearer and clearer attention to the flow of experience, the more we find we can begin to catch the process where craving turns into clinging or where feeling turns into craving. We can experience a pleasant feeling but not let it turn into craving, or a painful feeling and not let it turn into hatred.

By meditating on physical discomfort, we can see that there is a way that there can be pain in the body but we are not suffering because of it. The pain is one thing, and the suffering we create around it is another. We can be quite at peace with it. There’s the feeling, but it’s not giving rise to desire, craving. Just as, if we’re experimenting with eating one mouthful at a time, food can be delicious but we’re not adding anything to it, we’re not getting crazy for the next mouthful. It’s simply, “This tastes good.” End of story. We’re more able to be with that experience

because we’re not racing onto the next thing, or not opinionating about it. We loosen the process in this way.

The more full the awareness is, the more we sustain mindfulness—a whole-hearted awareness—then the process of craving and dukkha does not kick into action. When there is no loss of mindfulness, then that polarity, the sense of self and other, is not so strong. The sense of “me” in here and “the world” out there, even that is loosened; it’s not solidified. Then when there is a sound or a feeling, a sensation or memory, an emotion, any kind of sensory or mental impression, it is seen for what it is. It is not given a life of its own. It ceases.

By breaking the chain of causation at clinging or craving, or where feeling turns into craving, or even at the very beginning—by not allowing ignorance to arise but sustaining awareness—then the causes of dukkha are removed. If there are no causes, then suffering will not arise. “When there is not this, then that does not come to be. When this ceases, that also ceases.” This is what we mean by the ending of birth and death, the ending of rebirth.

The process of Dependent Origination as a whole is also known as the *bhavacakka*, the cycle or wheel of rebirth. The terminology “getting off the wheel” or “ending birth and death” describes the very process that I’ve just outlined. Principally this is what Theravada Buddhist practice is all about: the ending of rebirth, not being born again.

This cycle of rebirth is what was illustrated in that last story: my being born into my negativity and then being shown that there really wasn’t anything to be negative about. The other monk was born into his chocolate éclair. We get born into all kinds of things. It’s not just what happens in the maternity ward. Birth is happening many, many times a day. We can look at it on an external, physical level, but more directly we can see over and over the whole process on a psychological level.

Ofentimes when we chant *The Buddha’s Teaching on Loving-Kindness*, people find that it sounds wonderful, and then come the last four lines:

*By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense-desires,
Is not born again into this world.*

(SN 152)

It's easy to trip up on that last line. I don't know if any of you have had that experience. Certainly those conditioned to the Northern school of Buddhism and the Bodhisattva ideals might think, "Well, wait a minute. What's this about not being born again?" Also, just from the general life-affirming philosophy that we have in the West, particularly in America, *particularly* in California. "Hey! I don't mind being reborn. This world is all right. I like this place. What's so wrong with the world anyway?!" The idea of not being reborn is looked upon as a kind of death wish. "If only I could stop being. If I could be annihilated and not exist." But that is not the right understanding.

Every one of us, I'm sure, has had at least a moment or two in the last few days when the mind was at its clearest—those "best moments" are when we're not being born into anything. Rebirth has ended. The mind is awake, and there is peacefulness, clarity. There's no sense of self. There's no time or place—just "Is-ness," Suchness. Everything is fine. We're actually at our most alive, and life is at its most perfect. Just on the tangible, experiential level "not being born" is far from being a wipeout experience of nothingness or not feeling anything, a total anesthesia. It has more to do with both being completely alive and also completely undefined. It is a sense of awareness that has no form or place, and has nothing to do with time or individuality.

This can be hard to conceptualize, but when we talk about "not being born again," we are talking about the personal, the individual, the idea of a separate self that is not being crystallized. When we try to create an idea of what we are, we wonder, "Well, what *is* a person anyway? Surely if I'm not reborn, I've got to go somewhere, or something has got to happen. What happens?"

The Goal

There was an occasion when a wanderer, named Vacchagotta, came to ask the Buddha, "Where do enlightened beings go when they die?"

The Buddha said, "If we had a little fire burning in front of us and let it go out, then I asked you, 'Where did the fire go, north, south, east, or west? What would you say?'"

Vacchagotta furrowed his brow and said, "It didn't go anywhere. It just went out. The question doesn't apply."

The Buddha said, "Exactly so, Vacchagotta. The way you phrased the question presumes a reality that does not exist." We cannot say an enlightened being *goes any-where*. The state of an enlightened one at the breaking up of the body is indescribable. (M 72.16-20)

There is another exchange that the Buddha had, with a wanderer called Upasiva, that is recounted in the Sutta Nipata, in *The Way to the Beyond*. Upasiva has asked the Buddha a similar question, to which he replies:

*"Like a flame struck by a sudden gust of wind,
in a flash it has gone out,
and nothing more can be known about it.
It is the same with a wise person
freed from mind and body—
in a flash they have gone,
and nothing more can be known about them;
designation applies to them no more."*

*"Please explain this clearly to me, Sir," said Upasiva,
"for it's a state that you have understood:
one who has reached the end—
do they not exist,
or are they made immortal, perfectly free?"*

*"One who has reached the end
has no criterion
by which they can be measured.
That by which they could be talked of
is no more.
You cannot say, 'They do not exist.'
When all modes of being,
all phenomena are removed,
then all means of description
have gone too."*

(SN 1074-6)

So this points to the Goal. In the Theravada world, we talk about the goal of the spiritual life as the realization of Nibbana. It has an inscrutable quality to it. It frustrates the thinking mind, but I feel it is very

important to have at least a sense for what this is referring to—awakening our intuitive sense of the Ultimate. It's also important to know that the Buddha didn't speak of this Goal as something that can only be realized after the death of the body.

There is a principle that the Buddha talked about which is known as "the unapprehendability of the enlightened." Anuradha, a young monk, has been challenged by some brahmins, who ask him, "What happens to enlightened beings when they die?"

He replies, "The Buddha does not answer that question."

"You must be either someone who is really stupid, or else newly gone forth into your tradition, otherwise you'd give us a straight answer."

Anuradha later repeats this discussion to the Buddha and asks, "Did I answer well, or did I answer badly?"

The Buddha says, "You answered well, Anuradha." He went on to instruct him further, "Anuradha, do you see the Tathagata as *being* the five *khandhas* [body, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, and discriminative consciousness]?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Do you see the Tathagata as *having* the five *khandhas*?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Do you see the Tathagata as *not having* the five *khandhas*?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Do you see the Tathagata as *being in* the five *khandhas*?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Do you see the Tathagata as *being apart from* the five *khandhas*?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Exactly so, Anuradha. Therefore, if the Tathagata is unapprehendable here and now, while the body is still alive, how much more so after the breaking up of the body after death? What I teach, Anuradha, now as formerly, is dukkha and the ending of dukkha." (S 44.2)

The Buddha, in the Theravada tradition, is always pulling away from creating a metaphysical description of Nibbana, the Beyond, Ultimate Reality. Instead he always comes right back to the focus of: "If there is suffering, it's because there is clinging to something. An identity is being created." That's all we need to know. The rest is whipped cream. Over and over again such abstruse philosophical questions were put to the

Buddha, and over and over again he would bring it back to: "I teach only dukkha and the ending of dukkha."

It's not a matter of creating the perfect philosophical model (and then getting lost in it) but looking at how we feel now, what's happening within our hearts right now. As we recognize that, as we see dukkha being created, we trace it back. We realize there's been some clinging; the clinging came from craving; the craving came from feeling; and the feeling came from that contact. We realize, "Aha! It was that thought that triggered this." We see that and let it go. This is dukkha-nirodha, the ending of suffering.

The ending of suffering is not some kind of Armageddon, a cosmic healing at the ending of time. The ending of suffering occurs at exactly the place where the suffering is generated. When we trace back some particular event of dukkha, when we see where it has arisen from and let go of it right there, then there is no suffering.

So I offer this for your reflection, a Dhamma feast for the evening.

AJAHN CHAH'S VIEW OF "THE VIEW"

adapted from SMALL BOAT, GREAT MOUNTAIN, a forthcoming collection of teachings given by Ajahn Amaro on retreats he participated in or co-led with Ven. Tsoknyi Rinpoche. This talk was given during a September 1997 retreat at Wisdom House, Litchfield, Connecticut.

A FEW DAYS AGO I WAS HAVING A CHAT with Rinpoche and was expressing to him how profound the similarities are between what I have been hearing him say here and my own training in the Thai forest tradition. In fact I have to admit that the other day I suddenly realized that I've been practicing in a fashion somewhat akin to *dzogchen** for about the last ten years. So, apart from sitting with my eyes closed, the practice I have been doing for at least the latter half of my monastic life, since about 1987, has been close to the practice that Rinpoche has been guiding here. If I had eyebrows, I would raise them a little bit.

Fundamentally we all have the same teacher: the Dharma comes from the Buddha and is rooted in our own nature. So this convergence shouldn't be that surprising. In fact, I was telling Rinpoche that, particularly during the first few days here, listening to him was like listening to my own teacher, Ajahn Sumedho, with a weird robe on. Even down to the same phrases, let alone the same principles. Also, I must admit that the Tibetan teachings are much better on the fine anatomy of the details

* *Dzogchen* is Tibetan for "great perfection." Its equivalent in Sanskrit is *maha-ati*, which can also be translated as "great peak" or "summit."

and particularities of View. Within the tradition that I come from, it is much more down to the eloquence and inspiration in the moment of that particular teacher. In other words, there is a lot of inconsistency in the ways that things are expressed. So I have learned a great deal from the very structured and well-patterned nature of the teachings that Rinpoche has been putting forth.

Rinpoche asked that I talk this evening about Ajahn Chah's view of the View. There are many similarities so I'll try to cover these as fully as possible, and also try to provide other angles or reflections from the Theravada tradition that have some bearing upon the same issues that we have been exploring.

"The Faster You Hurry, the Slower You Go"

One very striking thing from the start of this retreat is how Rinpoche has been telling us (mostly the vipassana people*), to stop meditating. He has been saying, "Stop, stop it! I can see you're meditating, aren't you? Stop it. Put it down." This is very similar in spirit to my experience with Ajahn Sumedho's teachings.

When Ajahn Sumedho first started to offer this kind of teaching, to talk in this way, it would mostly be during the monastic retreat. Every winter we have a two- or three-month long retreat. For the first number of years, when the community was being established, he encouraged everyone to commit themselves to practice, to put forth a lot of energy. This spirit culminated in the winter retreat of 1986, when we were all getting up at three in the morning, staying up until the last sitting at eleven at night, while engaging in a full schedule all day, every day. It was a real "crack the whip, meditate or die" type of retreat—"knock 'em down, drag 'em out" Dharma. Some of the community were actually breaking the ice and diving at three in the morning into the swimming pool (now a fishpond) to freshen up for the first sitting of the morning. There was that kind of a mood. I thought we were having a great time.

The next year Ajahn Sumedho was making noises before the winter retreat that he hadn't really liked the results of this approach. He thought that people were fixated on the meditation practice as an end in itself and that more was being seen as intrinsically better. I was listening to this

* Nearly two-thirds of the retreatants were long-term practitioners of vipassana meditation.

and thinking, “Interesting, interesting, though of course he’s not talking about me. Perish the thought.”

By this time I had begun to realize that I had become something of a fanatical monk. You might think this is an oxymoron, but it is by no means impossible. I mean fanatical in the sense that I was trying to do everything 120%. I would get up super-early in the morning and do all sorts of ascetic practices, all kinds of special pujas and suchlike things. I wasn’t even lying down. I didn’t lie down to sleep for about three years at this time. Finally I realized I had far too many things going.

I was chuckling to myself when Rinpoche was talking about being busy with the meditation. During that time, I realized my life was jammed full. I was so busy and fussy. I couldn’t even eat; I couldn’t even walk across the courtyard without it being a THING. Finally I realized, “Why am I doing this? This life is supposed to be lived for peace, for realization, for freedom, and my day is all clogged up.”

I should have got the clue during the previous winter retreat. I used to sit flat on the floor, the use of a zafu being a sign of weakness in my eyes. Well, one of the nuns was getting so fed up watching me fall asleep during every sitting that she came up to me and asked, “Could I offer you a cushion, Ajahn?”

“Thank you very much, I don’t need it.”

She replied, “I think you do...”

Eventually, I went to Ajahn Sumedho and said, “I’ve decided to give up all my ascetic practices. I’m just going to follow the ordinary routine and do everything absolutely normally.” It was the first time I ever saw him get excited. “At last!” was his response. I thought he was going to say, “Oh well, if you must.” But he was waiting for me to get the point that it was not the amount of stuff that you do, the hours on the cushion, or how strictly you keep all the rules. It was then that I began to realize that there were a lot of things in his teaching about non-striving that he had been saying for many years.

It was about that time during the winter retreat that Ajahn Sumedho began to stress the awareness of what we call “the becoming tendency.” In Pali the word for this is *bhava*, and in the Tibetan tradition they seem to use the word in the same way. This word describes the desire to become something. You do *this* to get *that*. It’s that kind of busy-ness

and doing-ness—taking hold of the method, the practices, the rules, and the mechanics of it. As Rinpoche was saying, “You need the manure and the water and the sunlight.” It is as though the soil is full of manure and water but the seed is still in the bag in the potting shed. We’ve forgotten the seed. But if we are lugging the manure, we really feel like we are doing something. “I’m really working hard at my practice here.” Meanwhile there’s the teacher standing by the seed bag saying...[*gestures as if pointing at a sack in the corner*].

From that time on, Ajahn Sumedho began to emphasize the same principle: “Stop meditating.” Particularly at the beginning of the retreat, he would talk repeatedly about *being* enlightened, rather than *becoming* enlightened. “It is not about doing something *now* to become enlightened in the *future*. This is totally wrong. This kind of thinking is bound up with self and time. Be awake now; be enlightened to the present moment.” As Rinpoche has been imparting to us, it’s not a matter of finding *Rigpa** as an object, or doing something now to get *Rigpa* in the future, but actually being *Rigpa*. As soon as we start to say, “Hey, look, I got it” or “How can I extend this,” or as soon as we start to do something with it, at that moment the mind has taken hold of that thought and has left *Rigpa*—unless that thought is witnessed as just another transparent formation within the space of *Rigpa*. So this teaching has had very strong echoes within me as well.

Ajahn Sumedho himself was not always so clear on this kind of point. He would often tell the story about his own obsessions with being a meditator. Ajahn Chah’s method was to emphasize formal meditation practice to quite a great extent. But also he was extremely keen on not making the formal meditation distinct from the rest of life. He would talk about the maintenance of a continuity of practice whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down and whether one was doing formal practice, eating, using the restroom, or working. The point was always to sustain a continuity of Awareness. If our peace lies on the meditation mat, then when we leave the mat, we leave our peace behind.

Ajahn Chah was once given a piece of forested land on a hilltop in his home province. The very generous supporter who had donated it

* *Rigpa* is Tibetan for “non-dual awareness,” also known as “the View.” Its equivalent in Sanskrit is *jñāna*, and in Pali, *ñāna* (“transcendent knowing” or “knowledge”).

said to him, "If you can find a way to make a road up to the top of the mountain, then I will build the monastery up there for you." Always up for a challenge of this nature, Ajahn Chah spent a week or two on the mountain and found a pathway up. He then moved the entire monastic community out there to make the road.

Ajahn Sumedho was a newly arrived monk. He had been there a year or two by this time and was a *very* serious meditator. He spent two or three days breaking rocks in the sun, shifting barrows of rubble around, and working with the rest of the community. He was getting hot, sweaty, and cranky. Everyone would sit down to meditate at the end of the day after a 12-hour shift and be reeling. He thought, "This is useless. My meditation has fallen apart completely. This is not helping the holy life at all."

He said to Ajahn Chah with great seriousness, "I'm finding that all the work we are doing is harmful to my meditation. I really think it would be much better for me if I didn't take part in it. I need just to sit in one of the huts and get on with my practice. That would be very helpful for me, and it's what I think would be for the best."

Ajahn Chah said, "Okay, Sumedho. Yes, you can do that. But I'd better inform the Sangha so that everyone knows what's happening." He was really wicked in this way.

They had a Sangha meeting, and he said, "I want to make an announcement to everybody. Now, I know that we have all come up here to make this road. And I know that we are all breaking rocks and carrying gravel. I know this is important work for us to do, but the work of meditation is also *very* important. Tan Sumedho has asked me if he can practice meditation while we build the road, and I have told him that this is absolutely all right. I do not want any of you to think any critical thoughts. It is absolutely all right. He can stay in his hut and meditate, and we'll all build the road."

Ajahn Chah himself was out there from dawn until dusk. When he wasn't working, he was receiving guests and teaching as well. So he was really cranking it out. Ajahn Sumedho then stayed in his hut for about two days. He felt pretty bad on the first day and even worse on the second day. By the third day, he couldn't stand it any longer. His feelings were so tortured. So he joined the rock-breakers, pitched himself into it, and really gave himself to the work.

Ajahn Chah, of course, looked on with a foot-wide grin, "You enjoying the work, Sumedho?"

"Yes, Luang Por."*

"Isn't it strange that your mind is happier now in the heat and the dust than it was in the hut when you were meditating?"

"Yes, Luang Por."

Ajahn Sumedho was creating a false division of what meditation is and isn't. But actually, if we give our hearts to whatever we are doing, without our personal agendas or our preferences taking over, then whether it's pain, heat, dust, hard work, or being alone on your mountain top, the space of Rigpa is the same.

The Buddha Is Awareness

Ajahn Chah's teachings also parallel the dzogchen teachings regarding the nature of the Buddha. When you come right down to it, Awareness is not a *thing*. Nevertheless, it can be said to be an attribute of the fundamental nature of mind. Ajahn Chah would refer to that Awareness, that knowing nature of mind, as Buddha. "This is the true Buddha, The One Who Knows [*Poo Roo* in Thai]." The customary way of talking about Awareness for both Ajahn Chah and other masters of the forest tradition would be to use the term Buddha in this way—the aware, awake quality of our own mind. This is the Buddha. He would say things like, "The Buddha who passed into Parinibbana 2,500 years ago is not the Buddha who is a refuge." (He also liked to shock people; they would think they had a heretic in front of them.) "How can that Buddha be a refuge? He is gone. Gone...really gone. That's no refuge. A refuge is a safe place. So how can this great being who lived 2,500 years ago provide safety? When you think about him, it makes you feel good? But this feeling on its own is not so secure..." A pleasant sentiment, an inspiring feeling is easily disturbed. When there is a resting in that Knowing, then nothing can touch the heart—this makes that Buddha, that Buddha Nature a refuge. It is invulnerable. What happens to the body, emotions, and perceptions is secondary because there is that Knowing. That Knowing is beyond the reach of the phenomenal world, so *that* is the true refuge. Whether we experience pleasure or pain, success or failure, praise

* *Luang Por* means "Venerable Father" in Thai.

or criticism, that Knowing, the awakened nature, the Knowing nature of the mind is utterly undisturbed, undisturbable, incorruptible. Like a mirror unembellished or untainted by the images it reflects, it cannot be touched by any sense perception, any thought, any emotion, any mood, any feeling. It's of a transcendent order. Exactly as Rinpoche has been saying, "There is not one hair tip of involvement of the mind objects in Awareness, in the Nature of Mind itself." That is why Awareness is a refuge; Awareness is the very heart of our nature.

"Has Anybody Seen My Eyes?"

Another familiar theme of Ajahn Chah's teaching is very similar to what Rinpoche has been talking about as the experience of looking for Rigpa with the conditioned mind—as it is also phrased in the verses of the Third Zen Patriarch: "To seek Mind with the discriminating mind is the greatest of all mistakes." Ajahn Chah would use the expression: "You are riding your horse to go and look for your horse." We are riding along saying, "Has anyone seen my horse? Anyone see my horse?" Everyone is looking at us strangely, so we ride over to the next village, "Anyone seen my horse? Anyone seen my horse?"

Rinpoche gave another example concerning the elephant—following the elephant's footprints when the elephant is actually back at home in the stable. Ajahn Sumedho uses the image of the act of looking for our eyes: the very organ with which we see is doing the seeing, yet we go out searching, "Has anyone seen my eyes? I can't see my eyes anywhere. They must be around here somewhere, but I can't find them."

We can't see our eyes, but we can see. This means that Awareness cannot be an object. But there can be Awareness. Within the tradition of the forest masters, and Ajahn Chah in particular, they would use this expression very often: being the Knowing. It is rather like being Rigpa. In that state, there is the mind knowing its own nature—Dharma knowing its own nature. That's all. As soon as we try to make an object of that, then a dualistic structure has been created, a subject here looking at an object there. There is resolution only when that duality is completely let go of, when we relinquish that "looking for" and the heart just abides in Knowing. But our habit is to think, "I'm just not looking hard enough. I haven't found it yet. My eyes must be here somewhere. After all, I can

see. I need to try harder, then I would find them."

Have you ever been in one of those interviews where you go in to describe your meditation, what your practice has been like, and the teacher looks at you and says, "More effort is necessary." You think, "But I'm dancing as fast as I can!" It's true that we need to put effort in, but we can do it in the wrong way. The type of effort we are exploring in this retreat refers explicitly to being clearer and *doing* less. This quality of relaxing is really crucial not only with the dzogchen teaching but also within my own experience of Theravadan monastic practice.

It's an interesting and ironic point that this relaxation is necessarily built on top of a vast array of preparatory practices. Within the Tibetan *ngondro* training, one performs 100,000 prostrations, 100,000 visualizations, 100,000 mantras, and then years of study, keeping all the *sila* and so on. Similarly, within the Theravadan tradition, we have the *sila*: the practices of virtue for lay people, and for the monastic community there is the training in Vinaya discipline. We also do a lot of chanting and devotional practice, plus a huge amount of training in meditation practices such as mindfulness of breathing, vipassana, and so forth. Then there's the practice of living in community. One of the elder monks once referred to communal monastic training as being the practice of 100,000 *frustrations*—we don't qualify until we've had our hundred thousandth. So there is an enormous amount of preparatory work that is required to make the relaxation effective.

In this way, that relaxation is a type of overdrive. We use the fifth gear—the same speed but less revs. Until I had given up my ascetic practices, I was in fourth gear and racing. There was always a pushing, a "take it to the limit" attitude. What was really revealing, particularly on that retreat in 1987, was that when I dropped back one notch and was not quite *so* fanatical about the rules and doing everything perfectly the *whole* time (the irony being that I was still fulfilling 99.9% of my spiritual duties and practices and all the things that I was used to doing)—that one little element of relaxation actually allowed the whole thing to be consummated. Simply because I stopped pushing it. We can relax without switching off and consequently we can enjoy the fruits of the work that has been done. In many respects that is what we mean by letting go of becoming and learning just to *be*.

Realizing Cessation

Another very important aspect of the View is its correspondence with the experience of cessation, *nirodha*. I would say the experience of *Rigpa* is synonymous with the experience of *dukkha-nirodha*, where suffering has ceased, where there is no experience of *dukkha*.

What happens, however, is that we are so used to letting go of things, we are so used to working with things, that when the mind becomes spacious and empty, we're quite lost: "Oh! What do I do now?" We are so used to *doing* something with the mind, that when it is suddenly—*whoom*—open, clear, spacious, we don't know how to leave that alone. Because our conditioning tells us, "I am supposed to be doing something. I am meditating. I am progressing on the Path." When that space appears, we don't know what to do with it or we just overlook it. It is as if each of us were a thief who thinks, "Well, there is not much to take here so I should just keep going."

This is a very common experience: when we let go of something, *dukkha* ceases, but we ignore that fact and go looking for the next thing instead. We don't, as the expression goes, "taste the nectar," the juice of *Rigpa*. We just zoom through the juice bar. We keep going because it looks like there is nothing here. It looks kind of boring: no lust or fear or other issues to deal with. We think, "I'll be being irresponsible if I'm not dealing with my issues. Quick, let's go and find something to deal with." Out of the best of intentions, we fail to taste the juice that's right there. We just keep going to find some other work to do.

However, when grasping ceases, that is the experience of Ultimate Truth. When Ananda and another monk had been debating about the nature of the Deathless state, they decided to consult the Buddha. They prepared themselves for one of those long, expansive explanations to the question "What is the nature of Deathlessness?" However, the Buddha simply said, "The cessation of grasping is Deathlessness." That's it. When the grasping stops, there is *Rigpa*, there is Deathlessness—the ending of suffering—*dukkha-nirodha*.

Ironically, right in the Four Noble Truths themselves, the Buddha's very first teaching, he spoke directly to this problem. For each of the Four Truths, there is a way in which they are to be handled. The First Noble Truth, that of *dukkha*, dissatisfaction, "is to be apprehended." We

need to recognize, "This is *dukkha*. This is not *Rigpa*. This is *ma-rigpa* (un-awareness), and therefore unsatisfactory."

The Second Noble Truth, the cause of *dukkha*, is self-centered desire, craving. It "is to be let go of, relinquished, abandoned."

The Fourth Noble Truth, the Eightfold Path, "is to be cultivated and developed."

But what is interesting, especially in this context, is that the Third Noble Truth, *dukkha-nirodha*, the ending of *dukkha*, "is to be *realized*." So, when the *dukkha* stops, *notice* it. Notice: "Oh! Everything is suddenly okay." That is when we go into overdrive.

"Ah hah"—tasting the nectar of *Rigpa*—"aaaah, this is all right."

In a way we were correct with our first impression, because it is nothing. It is not a *thing*. But that doesn't mean to say that there is nothing or no quality there. It is actually the experience of Ultimate Truth, if we allow the heart to fully taste it.

So this is also an element of Dharma that is greatly stressed within the tradition I am familiar with—that conscious realization of the ending of *dukkha*, the conscious realizing of emptiness, the space of the mind.

Non-abiding

Maybe the most significant of things that has come up during this week, and one of the points that Ajahn Chah liked to stress most strongly, is the question of "non-abiding." Even during the brief time (two years) that I was in Thailand, Ajahn Chah spoke on this over and over again—and on the relationship between conventional and Ultimate Reality, and the establishment of Right View around that. The issue of non-abiding was something that he tried to convey as the essence of the Path, but it is a very subtle point.

Ajahn Chah gave a very significant teaching to Ajahn Sumedho on this point. During the summer of 1981, after Ajahn Sumedho had been in England for a couple of years, a letter arrived from Thailand. Ajahn Chah could write, but he hardly ever wrote anything, and he *never* wrote letters. It began, "Well, Ajahn Sumedho, you are not going to believe this, but Luang Por wanted to write you a letter and asked me to take his dictation, so here we are."

Ajahn Chah said, “Whenever you have feelings of love or hate for anything whatsoever, these will be your aides and partners in building *parami* [the spiritual virtues]. The Buddha-dharma is not to be found in moving forwards or backwards, nor in standing still. This, Sumedho, is your place of non-abiding.”

(It still gives me goose bumps.)

His health collapsed a few weeks after he sent this, in September of 1981. He had a stroke and became unable to speak, walk, or move—it was his “final instructions” to his disciple.

Ajahn Chah would use this kind of statement in exactly the same fashion that Rinpoche has been questioning people. It is a very good method: pressing people to see how they respond. Even when someone gets the “right” answer, that isn’t necessarily enough: “But that’s what you said five minutes ago, Rinpoche.”

“So what? I want to know what you know, not hear you repeat me.”

Ajahn Chah would often press people with this question: “If you can’t go forwards, and you can’t go backwards, and you can’t stand still, where do you go?” He’d have this look like a cobra. Occasionally you’d get past that one: “Go to the side?”

“Nope, can’t go to the side either.”

He would push you, and you would try to come up with different answers. The cleverer you got, the more he would make you squirm: “No, no, no, no, no!”

He would press it because as long as we are conceiving reality in terms of self and time, as a “me” who is some place and can go some other place, then we are not realizing that going forwards, going backwards, and standing still are all entirely dependent upon the relative truths of self and time. The only way out of the conundrum is to let go of self and to let go of time and, furthermore, to let go of place. In that abandonment of self, time, and space, all questions are resolved.

This principle is also contained within the ancient Theravada teachings. It isn’t just Ajahn Chah’s own insight or the legacy of some stray Nyingmapa lama who wandered over the mountains and fetched up in northeast Thailand 100 years ago. Right in the Pali Canon the Buddha points directly to this.

In the Udana (the collection of “Inspired Utterances” of the Buddha), he says:

There is that sphere of being where there is no earth, no water, no fire, nor wind; no experience of infinity of space, of infinity of consciousness, of no-thingness, or even of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; there is neither this world nor another world, neither moon nor sun; this sphere of being I call neither a coming nor a going nor a staying still, neither a dying nor a reappearance; it has no basis, no evolution, and no support: it is the end of suffering.

(Ud 8.1)

Rigpa is the direct Knowing of this.

Similarly, when a wanderer named Bahiya stopped the Buddha on the street in Rajagaha, he said, “Venerable Sir, you are the Samana Gotama. Your Dharma is famous throughout the land. Please teach me that I may understand the Truth.”

The Buddha replied, “We’re on our alms round, Bahiya. This is not the right time.”

“Life is uncertain, Venerable Sir. We never know when we are going to die, please teach me the Dharma.”

This dialogue repeats itself three times. Three times over the Buddha says the same thing, and Bahiya responds in the same way. Finally the Buddha says, “When a Tathagata is pressed three times, then he has to answer. Listen carefully, Bahiya, and attend to what I say:

*In the seen, there is only the seen,
in the heard, there is only the heard,
in the sensed, there is only the sensed,
in the cognized, there is only the cognized.
Thus you should see that
indeed there is no thing here;
this, Bahiya, is how you should train yourself.*

*Since, Bahiya, there is for you
in the seen, only the seen,
in the heard, only the heard,*

*in the sensed, only the sensed,
in the cognized, only the cognized,
and you see that there is no thing here,
you will therefore see that
indeed there is no thing there.*

*As you see that there is no thing there,
You will see that
you are therefore located neither in the world of this,
nor in the world of that,
nor in any place
betwixt the two.*

This alone is the end of suffering.”

(Ud 1.10)

Upon hearing these words, Bahiya was immediately enlightened. Moments later, he was killed by a runaway cow. So he was right: life is uncertain. Later Bahiya was awarded the title of “The disciple who understood the teaching most quickly.”

This principle of non-abiding is incredibly frustrating to the conceptual/thinking mind because the conceptual mind has built such an edifice of “me” around *here*, around *there*, around the past, around present, around future, around *you*, and around *this* and *that*. It is tied up with the phenomenal, dualistic world.

In order to discover the place of non-abiding, we have to see that identification. We have to see what’s happening. Then we need to find the way to let go. The first part—seeing the identification—is mainly what we need to do. We don’t realize that we are identified. It seems the most normal thing. “I am Joe Shmoe—I was born in this place; this is my age; and this is who I am.” It seems so reasonable. But when we identify with that, there is no freedom. When we believe these attributes to be an absolute truth, then there is no freedom. It is a matter of recognizing how absolutely we take this identity to be true and real. It’s like tasting the sense of self and feeling how gritty that is and how real it seems to be. In recognizing the feeling, we are able to know, “This is just a feeling.” The feelings of “I-ness” and “my-ness” (*ahamkara* and *mamam-kara*) are as transparent as any other feelings.

Not Made of That

In the Theravada tradition, we’re familiar with the three characteristics of existence—*anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta* (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, selflessness). These are “chapter-one, page-one” Buddhism. But the Theravadans also talk about three other characteristics of existence, at a more refined level: *suññata*, *tathata*, and *atammayata*. *Suññata* is emptiness, which is talked about a lot. That expression, *suññata*, derives from saying “NO” to the phenomenal world. It’s like saying, “I’m not going to believe in this. This is not entirely real.”

Tathata means suchness. It has a very similar quality to *suññata* but derives from a “YES.” There is nothing, yet there is *something*. The quality of suchness is like the texture of Ultimate Reality. *Suññata* and *tathata*—emptiness and suchness—the Teachings talk in those ways. But this other quality, *atammayata*, is little known.

In Theravada, *atammayata* has been referred to as the ultimate concept. It literally means “not made of that” but it can be rendered in many different ways, giving it a variety of subtle shades of meaning. Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Ñanamoli (in their translation of the MAJJHIMA NIKAYA) render it as “non-identification”—picking up on the “subject” side of the equation. Others have translated it as “non-fashioning” or “unconcoctability”—thus pointing more to the “object” element of it. Either way, it refers primarily to the quality of Awareness prior to, or without, a subject/object duality.

The origins of this term seem to lie in a theory of sense perception of ancient India, in which the grasping hand supplies the dominant analogy. The hand takes the shape of what it apprehends. The process of vision is explained as the eye sending out some kind of ray which then takes the shape of what we see and comes back with it. Similarly with thought: mental energy conforms to its object (e.g. a thought) and then returns to the subject. This idea is encapsulated in the term *tan-mayata*, “consisting of that:” the mental energy of the experiencer becoming consubstantial with the thing being realized.

The opposite quality, *atammayata*, refers to a state where the mind’s energy does not “go out” to the object and occupy it. It neither makes an objective “thing” nor a subjective “observer” knowing it. Hence

“non-identification” refers to the subjective aspect, and “non-fabrication” to the objective.

The way emptiness has been talked about during this retreat has made it very clear that this is a characteristic of Ultimate Reality. But also, when we talk about emptiness or about suchness, in that usage of those words there can still be a sense of an agent (a subject) which is a *this* looking at a *that* and the *that* is empty. Or the *that* is such, thus. What the word *atammayata* is attempting to convey is an ending of “that-ness”—a complete abandonment of the idea that there can be anything other than Mind Essence. *Atammayata* is the realization that, in truth, there cannot be anything other than Ultimate Reality. There is no *that*. In letting go of *that*, then the whole relative subject/object world, even at its subtlest level, is dissolved. It is broken apart.

I particularly like this word because of the message it conveys. It may seem very obscure, but sometimes the most abstruse and subtle tools can bring about the most radical changes of heart. Among its other qualities, this concept deeply addresses that sense of always wondering: “What is that over there?” That hint that something over there might be a little more interesting, a little bit more real than what is here. Even the subtlest sense of overlooking *this* to get to *that*, not being content with *this* and wanting to become *that*, is an error. *Atammayata* is that quality in us which knows, “There is no that. There is only this.” Thereby even “this-ness” becomes meaningless. *Atammayata* helps us to break the subtlest habits of restlessness as well as stilling the reverberations of the root duality of subject and object. That abandonment brings the heart to a realization of a complete spaciousness and fulfillment, a wholeness. The apparent dualities of this and that, subject and object, are known as essentially meaningless.

One way that we can use this on a practical level is a technique that Ajahn Sumedho has often suggested. Thinking the mind is in the body, we say, “my mind” [*points to head*] or “my mind” [*points to chest*], right? “It’s all in my mind.” Actually we’ve got it the wrong way round, because our body is in our mind, right? What do we know about our body? We can see it. We can hear it. We can smell it. We can touch it.

Where does sight happen? Where does seeing happen? In the mind. Where does touch happen? Where do we experience touch? In our

mind. Where do we experience smelling? Where does that happen? In the mind.

Everything that we know about our body, now and at any time in our life, has all been known through the agency of our mind. We have never known anything about our body except through our mind. So our entire life, ever since we were an infant or before, everything we have ever known about our body and the world has happened in our mind. So, where is our body?

It doesn’t mean to say there isn’t a world, but what we can say is that the experience of the body, the experience of the world, happens within our mind. It doesn’t happen anywhere else. It’s all happening here. In that here-ness, the world’s externality, its separateness has ceased.

We may also use the word cessation, *nirodha*, here. Along with its more familiar rendition, the word also means “to hold in check,” so it can mean that the separateness has ceased. When we realize that we hold the whole world within us, its otherness has been checked, has ended. We are thus better able to recognize its true nature.

This is an interesting little meditation tool that we can use anytime. It is a very useful device because it is true. Whenever we apply it, it flips the world inside out because we are able to see that this body is a set of perceptions. The world is a set of perceptions. It doesn’t negate our functioning freely within it, but it puts it all into context: “It’s all happening within the space of *Rigpa*. It’s all happening within the space of the Knowing mind.” In holding it in this way, we suddenly find our body, the mind, and the world all arrive at a resolution—a strange realization of perfection. It all happens here.

Reflective Inquiry

One of the other methods that Ajahn Chah would use for himself in sustaining the View, Right View, would be reflective inquiry. He would depict it almost as if he were having a dialogue with himself. Reflective inquiry is the deliberate use of verbal thought to investigate the Teachings, as well as particular attachments, fears, hopes, and especially the feeling of identification itself.

We should not overlook the use of conceptual thought. Oftentimes thinking gets painted as the big villain in meditation circles: “Yeah, my

mind...If only I could stop thinking, I'd be happy." But actually, the thinking mind can be the most wonderful of helpers when it is used in the right way, particularly when investigating the feeling of selfhood. We can use reflective inquiry. When we are experiencing, seeing, or doing something, ask a question like: "What is it that's aware of this feeling?" "Who owns this moment?" "What is it that knows Rigpa?" However we want to phrase it.

The deliberate use of reflective thought or inquiry in this way, when picked up and then focused, can reveal a set of assumptions, habits, and compulsions that we have set in motion but have remained unconscious of. This can be very helpful and can yield great insight. So, some of you might find this kind of inquiry a useful method.

What we find is that, regardless of whether it is a pleasant or a painful experience, whether profane or sublime, when we ask, "What is it that knows this? What is aware of this moment? Who is it that feels pain? Who is it that is having this fantasy? Who is it that is wondering about supper?"—then, at that moment, a gap opens up. Rinpoche quoted Milarepa as saying (roughly), "When the flow of discursive thinking is broken, the doorway to liberation opens up." In exactly the same way, when we pose that kind of question, it is like an awl being worked into a knotted tangle of identification and prying open a gap. It breaks the habit, the pattern of discursive thinking. When we ask "who?" or "what?" then for a moment the thinking mind trips over its own feet. It fumbles. In that space, before it can piece together an identity or an answer, there is timeless peace and freedom. Through that peaceful space, the innate quality of mind, Mind Essence, can appear.

Fear of Freedom

The last thing that I thought I might bring up concerns the realization of emptiness, selflessness, and the blissful quality that can happen when the heart lets go of the sense of "I." It is true that the Buddha said that the letting go of the sense of "I" is the supreme happiness (for example, at Ud 2.1 and 4.1). But over the years we have become very fond of this character, haven't we? It is like an old friend. It can be a pain in the neck, like most old friends, but it is so familiar to us. As Ajahn Chah once said, "It is like having a dear friend whom you've known your whole life,

who you've done everything together with all these years, then the Buddha comes along and says that you and your friend have got to break up." There's some heartbreak there.

So sometimes what happens when we let go of that sense of self, is that we experience freedom—there is freedom and peace or bliss—and to the heart itself there is delight, but the ego is suffering bereavement. To the sense of self, there is loss. There is a feeling of diminution, lack.

What can easily happen then is that we experience space and openness and deeply enjoy that for a moment, then comes the desperation. The ego habits kick in and want to engage with something because, to the ego, undefined being is death. To the sense of self, "being," is always defined in terms of *being* some thing. But the practice and teachings point out very clearly that what we're talking about here is undefined being. An Awareness: edgeless, colorless, infinite, omnipresent—you name it. It is Knowing, period. To the ego, when being is undefined in this way, it seems like death. And death is the worst thing. The egoic habits will kick in and search for something to fill up that space. Anything will do: "Quick, give me a problem, a meditation practice—that's legal!—or some kind of memory, a hope, a responsibility I haven't fulfilled yet....Something to feel guilty about. *Anything.*"

Certainly for myself, I have experienced this many times. In that spaciousness, it is like having a hungry dog at the door, trying this door, that door, the window: "C'mon, lemme in, lemme in." The hungry dog wants to know, "When is that guy gonna pay attention to me? He's been sitting there for hours like some goddamn Buddha. Doesn't he know I'm hungry out here? Doesn't he know it's cold and wet? Doesn't he care about me!?"

"All sankharas are impermanent. All dharmas are such and empty. There is no other..." [*makes forlorn, hungry dog noises*].

These experiences have been some of the most telling points of my own spiritual practice, and explorations—where there is such a rabid, hungering to *be*. I am sure you have experienced this. *Anything* will do—anything in order just to be *something*: a failure, a success, a messiah, a blight upon the world, a mass murderer. "Just let me be something, please, God, Buddha, anybody."

To which Buddha wisdom just responds, "No."

It takes incredible resources and strength to be able to say “No,” because the pleading of the egoic habits becomes phenomenally intense, visceral. We can find the body actually shaking and our legs twitching to run: “Get me out of this place.” Our feet start moving to get to the door because that urge is so strong.

What we are doing at this point is getting right at the root of being. We are pointing the light of wisdom right at the very root of separate existence. That root is a tough one. It takes a lot of work to get to that and to cut through it. So we should expect a great deal of friction and difficulty in engaging in this kind of work. That kind of hankering does arise. Don’t be intimidated by it.

In leaving that urge alone, there is a kind of grief, a feeling of bereavement. There’s a little being that just died there. The heart feels a wave of loss. Stay with that and let it pass through. The feeling that “Something is going to be lost if I don’t follow this urge” is the message of desire. Whether it’s a subtle little flicker of restlessness or a grand declaration—“I am going to be deeply diminished if I don’t follow this!”—that’s the message.

There is a wonderful line in a poem by Rumi where he says, “When were you ever made less by dying?”* Let that surge of the ego be born, and let it die. Lo and behold, not only is the heart not diminished, if we rouse the strength to let go of that, the heart is actually more radiant and alive than ever before. There’s a spaciousness, a contentment, an ease that is not attainable through grasping or identifying with any attribute of life whatsoever.

No matter how realistic, no matter how genuine the problems, the responsibilities, the passions, the experiences seem to be, we don’t have to be that. There is no identity that we have to be. Nothing whatsoever should be grasped at.

Evam.

* Translated by Jonathan Star.

An Afterthought

The words of a Vajra Song of the First Tsoknyi Rinpoche:

*Don’t wander, don’t wander, place mindfulness on guard;
Along the road of distraction, Mara lies in ambush.
Mara is the mind, clinging to like and dislike,
So look into the essence of this magic, free from
dualistic fixation.
Realize that your mind is unfabricated primordial purity;
There is no buddha elsewhere, look at your own face;
There is nothing else to search for, rest in your own place;
Non-meditation is spontaneous perfection so capture the
royal seat.**

These lines remind me of one last story about Ajahn Chah. Through the early years of his life as a monk with Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho was full of inspiration and could find no flaw in his teacher. As time went by and the glamour wore off somewhat, more and more cracks started to be seen in Ajahn Chah’s perfection. After some time Ajahn Sumedho could not hold back any longer and decided to broach these criticisms with the Master. Even though such face-to-face criticism is much avoided in Thai society, Ajahn Sumedho was an all-American boy and decided to talk straight.

He went to Ajahn Chah and asked permission to recount his grievances, to which Ajahn Chah listened carefully and receptively. When Ajahn Sumedho reached the end of his litany of complaints, Ajahn Chah paused for a few moments and then said:

Perhaps it’s a good thing that I’m not perfect,
Sumedho, otherwise you might be looking for the
Buddha somewhere outside your own mind.

* Translated by Erik Pema Kunsang and Tony Duff, reproduced with the permission of Ven. Tsoknyi Rinpoche.

ABHAYAGIRI BUDDHIST MONASTERY AND THE AUTHORS

ABHAYAGIRI IS THE FIRST MONASTERY in the United States to be established by followers of Ajahn Chah, a respected Buddhist Master of the ancient Thai forest tradition of Theravada Buddhism.

In 1995, as Ven. Master Hsüan Hua, abbot of the City of 10,000 Buddhas, located in Ukiah, California, approached his death, he instructed his disciples to offer to Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Chah's senior Western disciple, 120 acres of forest 15 miles north of the City of 10,000 Buddhas, in Redwood Valley. Subsequently, an adjacent parcel of land with some buildings was purchased to make up the 250 acres of land that now comprise Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery.

Abhayagiri is a center of teaching and practice for people in monastic or lay life. Its heart is a community of monks (*bhikkhus*), nuns (*siladhara*), novices (*samaneras*), and postulants (*anagarikas*) pursuing a life of meditative reflection. Frequently monastics from the other branches of this global community visit for shorter or longer periods of time.

The Sangha lives according to the Vinaya, a code of discipline set by the Buddha. In accordance with this discipline, the monastics are alms mendicants, living lives of celibacy and frugality. Above all, this training is a means of living reflectively and a guide to keeping one's needs to a minimum: a set of robes, an alms bowl, one meal a day, medicine when ill, and a sheltered place for meditation and rest.

Ajahn Amaro began his training in the forest monasteries of north-east Thailand with Ajahn Chah in 1978. He continued his training under Ajahn Sumedho, first at Chithurst Monastery in West Sussex, England, and later at Amaravati Buddhist Centre outside of London, where he lived for 10 years. In June of 1996, Ajahn Amaro moved to California to establish Abhayagiri. Ajahn Pasanno is a highly respected and well-known Dhamma teacher. Ordained in 1973, he spent 23 years as a monk in Thailand, with the latter 15 years as abbot of the International Forest Monastery (Wat Pah Nanachat). He joined Ajahn Amaro at Abhayagiri Monastery at New Year of 1997. Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno guide the Monastery as co-abbots.