



**SMALL BOAT,  
GREAT MOUNTAIN**

AMARO BHIKKHU

*Theravādan an Reflections on  
The Natural Great Perfection*

*May whatever goodness that arises from reading these pages be dedicated to the welfare of Patricia Horner, my greatly beloved mother.*

*In kindness and unselfishness unsurpassed, she showed me the beauty of the world in her endlessly caring and generous heart.*

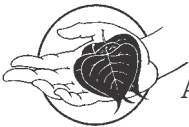
Small Boat,  
Great Mountain



# SMALL BOAT, GREAT MOUNTAIN

Theravādan Reflections on  
the Natural Great Perfection

AMARO BHIKKHU



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*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*

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## Foreword

**A**JAHN AMARO IS A TRUE FOLLOWER of the Buddha and holder of the teaching lineage of the Theravāda tradition. Though his early life was as an ordinary person, from an early age he was curious about spiritual matters and so journeyed to Thailand. There, through his karmic good fortune, he readily connected with a Buddhist teacher. He received full instructions and meditated there for many years. He has mainly followed Buddhist teachers of the Forest monk tradition; his emphasis has been the “renunciation wheel of meditation practice.”

Amaro’s main practice has been the direct application of the Four Noble Truths: acknowledging suffering, eliminating the origin, realizing the cessation, and following the path. These four truths encapsulate the main teaching of the Buddha, and among them—suffering, origin, cessation, and path—in the contemplation of the twelve links of dependent origination the focus is mainly on eliminating the origins of suffering.

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I have had a karmic bond with Ajahn Amaro over the course of my visits to the U.S., where we met on several occasions and taught together at Spirit Rock Center in California. I feel confident that he is someone who has thoroughly both studied and practiced the Theravāda path. In addition he has also met several Vajrayāna masters, including Dudjom Rinpoche, and I therefore feel he has an open-minded appreciation of the Vajrayāna teachings.

Seen from my point of view, the Buddha taught what we call Three Vehicles. Each of them contains a complete path for sentient beings to eliminate their negative emotions—desire, hatred, ignorance, pride, and envy—with all their 84,000 proliferations and variations. It is therefore entirely possible when someone practices free of laziness and procrastination any of these three paths to attain the same level as Buddha Shakyamuni.

Moreover, it is possible for any person to practice all three vehicles in combination without any conflict whatsoever. This is often the case in the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism, where many practitioners have practiced the three vehicles either separately or unified into a single system.

In the present time, when we see a growing interest in Buddhist practice all over the world, I find it important that people come to understand the primary emphasis and special qualities of each of these three vehicles. Free of bias, and with clarity, each person is then free to adopt what is closest to their inclinations—whether one of the vehicles alone or the three in combination. I therefore encourage everyone to understand the vital points in Buddha's three vehicles.

I have found, and deeply appreciate, that among the many current Dharma teachers, Ajahn Amaro is one who respects this non-sectarian principle—and embodies an understanding of it as well.

—Drubwang Tsoknyi Rinpoche

PUTUO SHAN ISLAND

October 2002

## Preface

**A**S A BUDDHIST MONK in the early 1980s, I was living and practicing at Wat Suan Mokkh, a forest monastery in the south of Thailand established by Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of the greatest Thai meditation masters and scholars of the last 50 years. I had a deep appreciation for the Theravādan lineage of Buddhism expressed in that country and for its profound allegiance to the original teachings of the Buddha as recorded in the Pali Canon.

At one of my first morning meals in the open-air dining hall at Suan Mokkh, I was quite surprised to see nearby, atop a five-foot-high pedestal, a bust of Avalokitesvāra, the Mahāyāna deity of compassion. What on earth, I wondered, was a Mahāyāna deity doing in a Theravādan monastery? The two schools had split apart in northern India some 2,000 years ago. At that time I assumed, quite mistakenly, that they had never spoken again, like a childless couple after an acrimonious divorce.

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Looking around the Buddhist world circa 1980, there was little evidence to the contrary. Zen masters rarely spoke to Tibetan lamas; the Theravādan monks of Thailand and Burma had little contact outside their own countries. The image of Avalokitesvāra at Wat Suan Mokkh was mysterious because it flew in the face of centuries of separation. Even more striking was my discovery of an entire building within the monastery, then called the Spiritual Theatre (shades of *Steppenwolf*, I thought to myself), dedicated to original paintings and facsimiles of spiritual art from Theravādan, Zen, Tibetan, and even Western sources. This variety very much reflected the open-mindedness of Ajahn Buddhādāsa, whose appreciation for truth ran far deeper than his loyalty to any historical lineage.

But the Avalokitesvāra bust was another question. I was told that it had been unearthed in the last century near the town of Chaiya, a few miles from Suan Mokkh. Its origin, however, was traced to the ninth century C.E. It thus became clear that over 1,000 years ago, Mahāyāna Buddhism had flourished in this region. In fact, historians tell us that Theravāda and Mahāyāna coexisted in Thailand, along with Vajrayāna and Hinduism, until the fourteenth century. After a change in the political sphere, Theravāda began to dominate, as it has ever since.

So perhaps it should not be too surprising that in the modern Thai forest tradition we find an understanding of Dharma with strong parallels to the central tenets of Mahāyāna and Tibetan Buddhism. The Mahāyāna doctrine of Buddha-nature, for instance, tells us that our very essence is an unborn and undying awareness. In a later expression of the teachings through the Dzogchen school, specific meditation techniques have been developed to allow practitioners to recognize and abide in this nature. Ajahn Amaro (whose name means “deathless”) once

commented that this specific teaching is the national anthem of the Thai forest tradition.

Ajahn Chah, a Thai master who is considered the head of Ajahn Amaro's lineage (and the teacher of Ajahn Sumedho and Jack Kornfield), referred often to the "One Who Knows" as a pointer to the inherent wisdom within awareness itself. Ajahn Buddhadasa says that "emptiness and mindfulness are one." Ajahn Mahā Boowa, a contemporary of Ajahn Chah's who learned from the same master, Ajahn Mun, says of impermanence: "This vanishes, that vanishes, but that which knows their vanishing doesn't vanish. . . . All that remains is simple awareness, utterly pure."

This notion of an intrinsic awareness as an aspect of the deathless nature is generally considered a Mahāyāna innovation. Yet it is found often in the Thai forest tradition as well. Tracing its genesis, one can find hints of this idea in the Pali Canon, the traditional sourcebook for Theravāda, but the references are infrequent and somewhat ambiguous. One of the delights of *Small Boat, Great Mountain* is that Ajahn Amaro has enumerated many of these references and provided clear and compelling explanations of them. In orthodox circles in Burma and Sri Lanka, however, this notion is frankly heretical, since awareness (or consciousness, *viññāṇa*) is considered impermanent.

The issue is of particular interest at the current time. Over the last 10 years, many Western vipassanā teachers and students have sought teachings from Dzogchen masters. Among the Tibetan teachers who have been especially helpful to vipassanā seekers have been the late Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche, his son Tsoknyi Rinpoche, and the late Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. Having been inspired by the profound view and techniques of this lineage, many vipassanā practitioners are grappling to reconcile

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Dzogchen understandings with their Theravādan backgrounds. Ajahn Amaro's talks as recorded in this book are a very important contribution to this dialogue. As such, a few words about the occasion on which they were given may be of interest.

In the fall of 1997 the Dharma teachers of Spirit Rock Meditation Center (among whom we are delighted to count Ajahn Amaro) were meeting to talk about inviting Tsoknyi Rinpoche to lead a retreat at Spirit Rock. When we invite teachers outside our tradition, we like to pair them with a Spirit Rock teacher in order to minimize the potential for confusion among students who, like us, may be grappling with differences in vocabulary and understanding. We were discussing who might teach the retreat with Tsoknyi Rinpoche when Ajahn Amaro's name came up. One teacher enthusiastically supported the nomination with the endorsement, "Yes! The tulku and the bhikkhu!" And so it came to be.

Dialogue across different spiritual traditions is fraught with obstacles, even within a shared Buddhist heritage. Over the thousands of years since the death of the Buddha, different schools have evolved in their own unique ways. Typical of the pitfalls was a meeting in the late 1970s between a Korean Zen master and a respected Tibetan rinpoche. The meeting had, of course, been set up by their Western students in hopes of fostering an exchange between two lineages long estranged. The Zen master began with a Dharma challenge. Holding out an orange, he asked forcefully, "What is this!" The Tibetan master sat in silence and continued to thumb through the beads of his mala. The Zen master asked again: "What is this!" The rinpoche turned to his translator and inquired softly, "Don't they have oranges in his country?"

Even today the divisions among different Buddhist schools have hardly mended at all. I listened recently to a recorded con-



versation between a Western Theravādan teacher and a Tibetan Dzogchen master, through an excellent translator, about some important Dharma insights. The teachers may as well have been from different planets. I found myself first puzzled, then frustrated, and finally amused by their inability to find common ground despite the obvious goodwill of all three parties. They kept just missing one another because of the difficulties of translation in the spheres of language, culture, and Dharma philosophy.

So it was by no means assured that the retreat with Ajahn Amaro and Tsoknyi Rinpoche would be a success. Both are charismatic and assured teachers used to leading retreats on their own. Such a pairing had never been tried before. I wondered if this was the first time a Theravādan and a Vajrayāna teacher had shared the same platform since Nālandā University in northern India, which was destroyed by Muslim invaders in the twelfth century.

There were delicate issues of status to address. Rinpoche generally teaches from a throne, a high and ornate chair meant to convey the high respect that the listener should accord the teachings, somewhat independent of the teacher. Would Ajahn Amaro feel comfortable in a high stand decorated with colorful Tibetan silk tapestries? Or would the Theravādan monk be relegated to the ordinary wooden platform? But this could be problematic because the *Vinaya*, the monk's code of discipline, prohibits a monk from teaching if any layman is seated higher than he. The organizers were all relieved when Ajahn Amaro explained that the throne was a common teaching device in his forest tradition and he would very happily speak from it.

Quite contrary to our concerns, the retreat was an unqualified success. As a student at that retreat, I was very appreciative of both teachers. Rinpoche's daily exposition of the Dzogchen teachings was very skillfully formatted for Westerners, as one

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can see from his book *Carefree Dignity*. Ajahn Amaro's evening talks, as represented here, were a beautiful complement and helped to make Rinpoche's teachings more accessible to vipassanā practitioners. I sat in awe each night as Ajahn Amaro delivered talks which covered technical aspects of meditation and philosophy, with long quotations from the Buddha's discourses, without notes. Delivered in a fresh and almost extemporaneous style, it was a virtuoso display. Equally impressive was his overall demeanor. Many of us remarked on his unfailing cheerfulness. Tsoknyi Rinpoche summed it up at the end when he expressed his appreciation for Ajahn Amaro's part in the retreat: "I've never met anyone like him before. His Vinaya is very strict. Usually when the Vinaya is strict, inside, the monk is very tight. But he is very loose inside and always happy."

In the lineage of Ajahn Chah, a teacher is not supposed to prepare much for a Dharma talk. Rather the teacher is encouraged to trust in his or her sense of the moment and to intuit from the setting and the audience what words are most appropriate. I believe that Ajahn Amaro followed this guideline during the retreat with Tsoknyi Rinpoche, and that we are most fortunate to have this record of the extraordinary talks that the situation evoked. In their erudition, humor, and profundity, they are a unique and accurate transmission of the atmosphere of that special retreat. May their message lead all those who read them directly to their own Buddha-nature and to the vast freedom of the Natural Great Perfection.

—Guy Armstrong

SPIRIT ROCK MEDITATION CENTER

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Lastly, I would like to make a nod of appreciation, for post facto inspiration, to René Daumal and his unfinished spiritual masterpiece *Mount Analogue*. The story describes the journey of a group of spiritual adventurers, sailing in a small boat named “The Impossible,” to a hidden island whereon is found the vast and soaring Mount Analogue, which they aspire to scale. It was not until the talks had been transcribed for *Small Boat, Great Mountain*, and the title decided upon, that I read Daumal’s excellent little tale.

# Abbreviations

- D *Dīgha Nikāya*, The Long Discourses of the Buddha.  
M *Majjhima Nikāya*, The Middle Length Discourses.  
A *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, The Discourses Related by Numbers.  
S *Samyutta Nikāya*, The Discourses Related by Subject.  
SN *Sutta Nipāta*, A collection of the Buddha's teachings in verse form.  
UD *Udāna*, The Inspired Utterances.  
MV *Mahāvagga*, The Great Chapter, from the books of monastic discipline.



ESSENCE OF MIND







## Ultimate and Conventional Reality

**T**HE MEETING OF SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS, including that of Theravāda wisdom teachings and Dzogchen, two great expressions of the Buddha-Dharma, is one of the major beneficial aspects of life in these times. The technological revolution makes the ability to travel, to communicate, and to study across traditions very simple. Most of the world's great spiritual texts are online, and a steady stream of conferences and retreats brings meditators, scholars, and spiritual masters together to practice and to openly discuss their lineages, insights, and knowledge. The breakdown of separate spiritual encampments that is occurring nowadays is both remarkable and unprecedented. For the first time, we can enjoy a broad view of all traditions and see where they merge as well as where they collide.

I was reminded of this marvelous confluence of traditions the other evening, just as this retreat began. Shortly before 7:00 P.M., I was sitting in my room. In the midst of the quiet and calm, I

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heard a loud thumping noise coming from outside. We were doing a lot of earth moving at the monastery at the time, so the noise made me think that maybe some heavy equipment was being brought in to help us along. I imagined large yellow mechanical devices rolling up the road to the retreat center. But then I heard what I thought was a huge engine making bang! bang! bang! noises. Eventually that stopped and was replaced by a loud trumpeting sound. I thought, “Maybe it’s one of those Dzogchen parties, and the powers that be think the bhikkhus shouldn’t be invited.” But then I realized that that kind of party, the Dharma feast, is at the end rather than the beginning of the retreats. So I continued to wonder, “What could this mean? What is this loud ruckus?” I figured I’d find out at some point.

It slowly dawned on me that it was the beginning of the Jewish New Year, and I recollected that one Jewish tradition had something to do with blowing horns and banging drums. Then I remembered that in the Tibetan tradition it is said that when the Buddha was invited to teach by the brahma gods, the gods came along with a conch horn and a Dharma wheel to make their request. I thought, “Maybe this isn’t a Jewish tradition after all. Perhaps it’s the brahma gods coming down with their conch horns and Dharma wheels to invite the teachings.”

In fact, the sounds I heard were part of the Jewish New Year’s ritual, and it was Wes Nisker who was blowing the shofar, the ram’s horn trumpet. I later learned that the harsh blast of the shofar symbolizes the call to awaken out of unconsciousness. Hearing the shofar serves as a reminder of our higher calling, of our true purpose—to awaken and be free.

This is a wonderful time to be alive and to be present for such camaraderie as this between different spiritual traditions, both within the Buddhist world and between religions. These inter-

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connections encourage us to see beyond the externals of a spiritual tradition, yet they also illuminate the conundrum that we live with. On the one hand, we have the verbal teachings, traditions, and structures that enable the insights and values to be carried through time and space across the planet. On the other hand, those same structures can become the things that inhibit and obstruct the very truths they are trying to convey.

We are extremely lucky that Buddhism is so new in the West. Many people have reflected on the notion that “these are the good ol’ days.” In 100 years, we will have a Buddhist president, there will be big grants from philanthropists, and Buddhism will have become institutionalized. People will become Buddhist to climb the social ladder, and the glory days will all be over. So we are lucky to be practicing before Buddhism becomes part of the social norm. To be a Buddhist at this point in time is to be out on the fringes. After all, in conventional terms, there is very little social value in being a Buddhist. One of the biggest drawbacks I find to being a monk in Asia is the automatic value that people give us because we have shaved heads and robes. People in Asia think we are something special, while in the West they think we are just kooks. We get shouted at in the street with all kind of remarks. In England, it’s usually something like, “Skinhead!” “Hari Krishna!” or “‘Allo ‘Ari!”

This coming together of different spiritual expressions, in which there’s both an understanding of religious forms and a commitment to them, is indeed precious. But there’s always the challenge within this supportive context to see beyond that—to use the form and, at the same time, to see through it. We need to be able to pick up the convention and use it merely as that. On the inside, we need to be completely free, without boundaries; we need to let go of everything. On the outside, we need

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to be really strict and proper, to follow the routine and do everything according to the rules. My own experience is that it takes a while to appreciate the true meaning of this.

### **The Search for Freedom**

Probably like many people, I wrestled at length with the question of freedom in my teens and early twenties. I was a late flower child, having been born in 1956. I just caught the tail end of the good stuff. Through much of my early years, I worshipped the ideal of freedom and longed for the true experience of it. Rather than becoming a bomb-throwing anarchist, though, I became more of a flower-waving, philosophical anarchist. Nevertheless, I took this aspiration to freedom very seriously. And I had a profound intuition that freedom is possible—that there is this potential we have as human beings to be totally free, and that there is something utterly pure, uninhibited, and uninhibitable within us. My experience, however, was one of colliding with endless restrictions and frustrations. First it was getting away from my parents; then it was the law; and then it was not having enough money. I thought that this or that was standing in my way, and if only it wasn't there, I would be free.

I was completely bewildered. No matter how much I tried to be free and unhindered by conventions, forms, and structures (mostly by defying these things), there always seemed to be another layer and another layer and another layer. I kept meeting up with limitations, and as a result I was constantly feeling frustrated. I was suffering, and I had no idea why.

I left England and began my travels in hopes of finding freedom somewhere, anywhere. I went to Southeast Asia and pursued a Dionysian lifestyle of eat, drink, be merry; sex, drugs, rock and roll; dancing in the moonlight on the beaches, with one hand

## Ultimate and Conventional Reality

waving free. But inside me was a feeling that I was coming to a desperate crunch; I knew intuitively that this decadent path really was not leading to freedom. So I searched some more.

I took off to the northeast of Thailand, where hardly any Western tourists ever went, and found myself wandering into a forest monastery. It was the branch of Ajahn Chah's monastery where his Western monks lived. It's important to know that the Thai forest tradition is the stiff end of an already narrow orthodoxy; it's the strict observance of an already conservative tradition. What was immediately apparent to me, however, was that these people were living the most bizarrely austere life, yet they were also the most cheerful characters I'd ever met. They were getting up at three o'clock in the morning, eating one meal a day, drinking a cup of tea twice a week, sleeping on thin grass mats, having no sex—definitely no sex—no drugs, alcohol, or rock and roll. Yet they were fully at ease, very friendly, and uncomplicated people. I asked myself, "What have they got to laugh about? How come they are so happy when their lifestyle is so restricted?" Then I met Ajahn Chah, the teacher. If I'd thought the monks seemed pretty content with their lot, meeting him was even more striking. Ajahn Chah appeared to be the happiest man in the world. He had been living as a monk in the forest without any sex, music, or drink for 40 years. You would imagine someone would be pretty dried up by then. But here was a man who was totally at ease with life. In fact, he was thoroughly enjoying it, totally content.

The monastery routine was extremely restrained. It was aimed at simplifying all the externals so that one could put one's attention directly, very pointedly at the one place where one can find freedom—in the inner world. So rather than monastery life being a negation of the sense world or a criticism, hatred, or fear of it,

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the whole style of life was built around simplicity of living. It was the monks' job to place attention on the inner dimension, where one could truly be free. I was so taken by this way of being that, to my amazement, I found myself staying. When I'd showed up, I hadn't thought I would stay for more than three days.

I quickly realized that I had been looking for freedom in the wrong place. I remember opening up to myself and chuckling, "How could I have been so stupid?" It never crossed my mind that freedom could come only from within. Until then, I had been looking for freedom in that which was inherently bounded. My misguided way of finding freedom was by defying conventions, by trying not to be inhibited by the rules of society or the dictates of my personality or the conditioning of my body. I appeared free on the outside, but on the inside I was a prisoner of my beliefs and behaviors. It was only by turning my attention inward that I could discover the freedom that was already there. I realized that the external forms and structures that we pick up and use (for example, the retreat routines and schedules, the language and jargon of Buddhism, the different meditation techniques) are designed to help us direct our attention to where we are already totally free. It is not like we need to *become* free. It is a matter of discovering that quality of being that is inherently unhindered and unbounded.

## Conventional Truth and Ultimate Truth

The longer I stayed, the more I began to pay attention to Ajahn Chah's repeated emphasis on the relationship between convention and liberation, conventional reality and ultimate reality. The things of this world are merely conventions of our own creation. Once we establish them, we proceed to get lost in or blinded by them. This gives rise to confusion, difficulty, and struggle. One of

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the great challenges of spiritual practice is to create the conventions, pick them up, and use them without confusion. We can recite the Buddha's name, bow, chant, follow techniques and routines, pick up all these attributes of being a Buddhist, and then, without any hypocrisy, also recognize that everything is totally empty. There is no Buddhist! This is something Ajahn Chah focused on a great deal over the years: if you think you really are a Buddhist, you are totally lost. He would sometimes be sitting up on the Dharma seat, giving a talk to the whole assembly of monastics and laypeople, and say, "There are no monks or nuns here, there are no lay people, no women or men—these are all merely empty conventions that we create."

The capacity we have to commit ourselves sincerely to something and simultaneously to see through it is something we find difficult to exercise in the West. We tend to be extremists. Either we grab onto something and identify with it or we think it is meaningless and reject it, since it's not real anyway. So the Middle Way is not necessarily a comfortable one for us. The Middle Way is the simultaneous holding of the conventional truth and the ultimate truth, and seeing that the one does not contradict or belie the other.

There is a story I am reminded of that happened at a Buddhist conference in Europe. A Tibetan lama was there, and a member of the audience was an extremely serious German student. The rinpoche had been teaching visualizations of Tāra and the *pūjā* to the 21 Tārās. During the course of this teaching, this student, with great sincerity, put his hands together and asked the question: "Rinpoche, Rinpoche, I have zis big doubt. You see, all day we do the pūjā to the 21 Tāra and, you know, I am very committed to zis practice. I want to do everything right. But I have zis doubt: Tārā, does she exist or does she not? Really Rinpoche, is

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she zhere or not? If she is zhere, I can have a full heart. But if she's not zhere, zen I don't want to do zhe pūjā. So please, Rinpoche, once and for all, tell us, does she exist or does she not?" The lama closed his eyes for a while, then smiled and replied, "She knows she is not real." It is not recorded how the student responded.

### What Is a Living Being?

A certain amount of spiritual maturity hinges on understanding the nature of conventional reality. So much of our conditioning is predicated on the assumption that there is such a thing as a "real" living being. We see ourselves in terms of the limitations of the body and the personality, and we define what we are within those bounds. We assume then that other beings are also limited little pockets of beingness that float around in the cosmos. But a lot of what the practice is doing is deconstructing that model. Rather than taking the body and personality as the defining features of what we are, we take the Dharma as the basic reference point of what we are. (Or, if you like using the Vajrayāna language, you take the *Dharmakāya* as the basic reference point.) Then we see the body and personality as being merely minuscule subsets of that, and as a result, we relate to our own nature in a very different way. The body and personality are recognized as little windows that the Dharma-nature is filtered through.

Through the matrix of the body, personality, and our mental faculties, that nature of reality can be realized; it is not some little thing that is tacked on at the edge. Within all Buddhist traditions, understanding what a living being is means revisioning that whole structure, the habitual image of what we are.

It's quite a common expression in the Mahāyāna Buddhist world (for instance in the *Vajra Sutra*) for the teachings to say



such things as, “‘Living beings are numberless, I vow to save them all.’ And how do you save all living beings? You realize that there are no living beings. That is how you save living beings.” But does saying that there aren’t any beings mean that they don’t exist? We can’t quite say that either. A true understanding of this expression means we are seeing beyond the normal limitations of the senses.

### Where Are We?

You can practice understanding the experience of limitation. Try taking out the physical element of what you are and just look at yourself in terms of mind. You will find that the whole quality of boundary breaks up, as does the idea of “where I am” and “where other people are.” You will see that the body, its location, and three-dimensional space only apply to *rūpa-khandha*—only to the world of material form. In fact, “inside” and “outside,” “here” and “there,” “space” and “spatial relations” only apply to form; they do not apply to mind. Mind does not exist in space. Three-dimensional space exists only in relationship to the world of physical form.

That’s why meditating with our eyes open is a good test. It seems that there are separate bodies out there. There’s one here, there’s one there. With our eyes closed, it’s easier to get a feeling of unity. The material form is giving us the clue of separateness, but that separateness is entirely dependent on the material world. In terms of mind, place does not apply. The mind is not *anywhere*. We are here, but we are not here. Those limitations of separate individuality are conventions that have a relative but not an absolute value.

We create the illusion of separateness and individuality through our belief in the sense world. When we start to let go of

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the sense world, particularly the way we relate to physical form, then we start being able to expand the vision of what we are as beings. It's not even a matter of seeing how we overlap with other beings; it's a matter of realizing that we are of a piece with other beings.

## The Middle Way

Meditation is a special kind of dance in which we commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the practice of deconstructing the materialistic view of reality. The challenge is simultaneously to hold on and to let go; it is to see clearly what we are doing and at the same time see through it. To do this, it's important to cultivate a *feeling* for the Middle Way. This is the balance point. The Middle Way is not just halfway between two extremes—it's not a 50-50 kind of thing. It's more like saying [*holds the bell striker vertically and moves the lower end to the left*] existence is over here and nonexistence is over here [*moves the lower end to the right*]. The Middle Way is the hinge-point at the top where the two pivot, rather than the lower end of the striker just being halfway along its arc. It's actually the source from which the two emanate. This is just one way of describing it.

Some people may be familiar with Tibetan practice, others more familiar with Therāvada and vipassanā practice. The questions often arise: "How do we mesh the two? Can we? Should we?" If we are looking to align the different methodologies, we can get really tangled up and confused, because this one says do this and the other one says do that. I therefore encourage everyone to recognize that every technique, every form of expression is just a convention that we're picking up and using for a single goal: to transcend suffering and to be liberated. That's what *any* technique points us toward.

## Ultimate and Conventional Reality

The way to know if what we are doing is worthwhile is to ask, "Does this lead to the end of suffering or does it not?" If it does, continue. If it does not, we need to switch our attention to what will. We can simply ask ourselves, "Am I experiencing *dukkha*? Is there a feeling of alienation or difficulty?" If there is, it means that we are clinging or hanging on to something. We need to see that the heart is attached somewhere and then make the gesture to loosen up, to let go. Sometimes we don't notice where the suffering gets generated. We get so used to doing things in a particular way that we take it as a standard. But in meditation, we challenge the status quo. We investigate where there is a feeling of "dis-ease" and look to see what's causing it. By stepping back and scanning the inner domain, it's possible to find out where the attachment is and what's causing it. Ajahn Chah would say, "If you have an itch on your leg, you don't scratch your ear." In other words, go to where the *dukkha* is, no matter how subtle it may be; notice it and let go. That's how we allow the *dukkha* to disperse. This is how we will know whether the practices we are doing are effective or not.

My suggestions and recommendations on how to understand ultimate and conventional reality are not anything you need to believe in. Buddhist teachings are always put out as themes for us to contemplate. You need to find out for yourself if what I'm saying makes sense or rings true. Don't worry if you're getting contradicting instructions. Do your best not to spend too much energy or attention getting everything to match. Otherwise you'll just stay confused. The fact is, things in life don't match. You can't align all the loose ends. But you can go to the place where they come from.



## The Place of Nonabiding



ONE OF THE TOPICS that Ajahn Chah most liked to emphasize was the principle of nonabiding. During the brief two years that I was with him in Thailand, he spoke about it many times. In various ways he tried to convey that nonabiding was the essence of the path, a basis of peace, and a doorway into the world of freedom.

### **The Limitations of the Conditioned Mind**

During the summer of 1981, Ajahn Chah gave a very significant teaching to Ajahn Sumedho on the liberating quality of nonabiding. Ajahn Sumedho had been in England for a few years when a letter arrived from Thailand. Even though Ajahn Chah could read and write, he rarely did. In fact, he hardly wrote anything, and he *never* wrote letters. The message began with a note from a fellow Western monk. It said: “Well, Ajahn Sumedho, you are not going to believe this, but Luang Por decided he wanted

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to write you a letter, so he asked me to take his dictation." The message from Ajahn Chah was very brief, and this is what it said: "Whenever you have feelings of love or hate for anything whatsoever, these will be your aides and partners in building *pārami*. The Buddha-Dharma is not to be found in moving forwards, nor in moving backwards, nor in standing still. This, Sumedho, is your place of nonabiding."

It still gives me goose bumps.

A few weeks later, Ajahn Chah had a stroke and became unable to speak, walk, or move. His verbal teaching career was over. This letter contained his final instructions. Ajahn Chah was well aware of all the tasks and difficulties involved in establishing a monastery, having done this many times himself. One would think that when he offered advice, it would be along the lines of "Do this, don't do that, and always remember to . . ." But no, none of that; this was not Ajahn Chah's way. He simply said, "The Buddha-Dharma is not to be found in moving forwards, nor in moving backwards, nor in standing still."

At his monastery in Thailand, Ajahn Chah would sit on a wicker bench in the open area underneath his hut and receive visitors from ten o'clock in the morning until late at night. Every day. Sometimes until two or three in the morning.

Amongst the many ways in which he would convey the teachings, Ajahn Chah sometimes liked to test, to tease his visitors. He would put various conundrums out to them, queries or puzzles designed to frustrate and then break through the limitations of the conditioned mind. He would ask such questions as: "Is this stick long or short?" "Where did you come from and where are you going?" Or, as here, "If you can't go forwards and

you can't go back and you can't stand still, where do you go?" And when he'd put forth these questions, he'd have a look on his face like a cobra.

Some of the more courageous responders would try a reasonable answer: "Go to the side?"

"Nope, can't go to the side either."

"Up or down?"

He would keep pushing people as they struggled to come up with a "right" answer. The more creative or clever they got, the more he would make them squirm: "No, no! That's not it."

Ajahn Chah was trying to push his inquirers up against the limitations of the conditioned mind, in hopes of opening up a space for the unconditioned to shine through. The principle of nonabiding is exceedingly frustrating to the conceptual/thinking mind, because that mind has built up such an edifice out of "me" and "you," out of "here" and "there," out of "past" and "future," and out of "this" and "that."

As long as we conceive reality in terms of self and time, as a "me" who is someplace 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, locality, and time. In terms of physical reality, there is a coming and going. But there's also that place of transcendence where there is no coming or going. Think about it. Where can we truly go? Do we ever really go anywhere? Wherever we go we are always "here," right? To resolve the question, "Where can you go?" we have to let go—let go of self, let go of time, let go of place. In that abandonment of self, time, and place, all questions are resolved.

## Ancient Teachings on Nonabiding

This principle of nonabiding is also contained within the ancient Theravāda teachings. It wasn't just Ajahn Chah's personal 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 *Udāna* (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; here 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 dukkha. (UD. 8.1)*

*Rigpa*, nondual awareness, is the direct knowing of this. It's the quality of mind that knows, while abiding nowhere.

Another teaching from the same collection recounts the story of a wanderer named Bāhiya. He stopped the Buddha on the street in Sāvattthī and said, "Venerable Sir, you are the Samaṇa Gotama. Your Dharma is famous throughout the land. Please teach me that I may understand the truth."

The Buddha replied, "We're on our almsround, Bāhiya. 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 Bāhiya responds in the same



way. Finally, the Buddha says, “When a *Tathāgata* is pressed three times, he has to answer. Listen carefully, Bāhiya, 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, Bāhiya, is how you should train yourself.*

*Since, Bāhiya, 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. I.10)*

Upon hearing these words, Bāhiya was immediately enlightened. Moments later he was killed by a runaway cow. So he was right: life is uncertain. Later Bāhiya was awarded the title of “The Disciple Who Understood the Teaching Most Quickly.”

### **“Where” Does Not Apply**

What does it mean to say, “There is no thing *there*”? It is talking about the realm of the object; it implies that we recognize that “the seen is merely the seen.” That’s it. There are forms, shapes, colors, and so forth, but there is no *thing* there. There is no real substance, no solidity, and no self-existent reality. All there is, is the quality of experience itself. No more, no less. There is just seeing, hearing, feeling, sensing, cognizing. And the mind naming it all is also just another experience: “the space of the Dharma hall,” “Ajahn Amaro’s voice,” “here is the thought, ‘Am I understanding this?’ Now another thought, ‘Am I not understanding this?’”

There is what is seen, heard, tasted, and so on, but there is no thing-ness, no solid, independent entity that this experience refers to.

As this insight matures, not only do we realize that there is no thing “out there,” but we also realize there is no solid thing “in here,” no independent and fixed entity that is the experienter. This is talking about the realm of the subject.

The practice of nonabiding is a process of emptying out the objective and subjective domains, truly seeing that both the object and subject are intrinsically empty. If we can see that both the subjective and objective are empty, if there’s no real “in here” or “out there,” where could the feeling of I-ness and me-ness and my-ness locate itself? As the Buddha said to Bāhiya, “You will not be able to find your self either in the world of this [subject] or in the world of that [object] or anywhere between the two.”

There is a similar and much lengthier exchange between the Buddha and Ānanda in the *Shurangama Sutra*, which is a text much referred to in the Ch’an school of the Chinese tradition.

## The Place of Nonabiding

For pages and pages the Buddha asks Ānanda, in multifarious ways, if he can define exactly where his mind is. No matter how hard he tries, Ānanda cannot establish it precisely. Eventually he is forced to the conclusion that “I cannot find my mind anywhere.” But the Buddha says, “Your mind does exist, though, doesn’t it?”

Ānanda is finally drawn to the conclusion that “where” does not apply.

Aha!

This is the point that these teachings on nonabiding are trying to draw us to. The whole concept and construct of where-ness, the act of conceiving ourselves as this individual entity living at this spot in space and time, is a presumption. And it’s only by frustrating our habitual judgments in this way that we’re forced into loosening our grip.

This view of things pulls the plug, takes the props away, and, above all, shakes up our standard frames of reference. This is exactly what Ajahn Chah did with people when he asked, “If you can’t go forward and you can’t go back and you can’t stand still, where can you go?” He was pointing to the place of nonabiding: the timeless, selfless quality that is independent of location.

Interestingly enough, some current scientific research has also reached a comparable conclusion about the fundamental nature of matter. In the world of quantum physics, scientists now use such terms as “the well of being” or “the sea of potential” to refer to the primordial level of physical reality from which all particles and energies crystallize and into which they subsequently dissolve. The principle of non-locality in this realm means that the “place where something happens” cannot truly be defined, and that a single event can have exactly simultaneous effects in (apparently) widely separated places. Particles can

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accurately be described as being smeared out over the entirety of time and space.

Terms like “single place” and “separate places” are seen to apply only as convenient fictions at certain levels of scale; at the level of the ultimate field, the sea of quantum foam, “place” has no real meaning. When you get down into the fine, subatomic realm, where-ness simply does not apply. There is no there there. Whether this principle is called nonabiding or non-locality, it’s both interesting and noteworthy that the same principle applies in both the physical and mental realms. For the intellectuals and rationalists among us, this parallel is probably very comforting.

I first started to investigate this type of contemplation when I was on a long retreat in our monastery and doing a lot of solitary practice. It suddenly occurred to me that even though I might have let go of the feeling of self—the feeling of this and that and so on—whatever the experience of reality was, it was still “here.” There was still here-ness. For several weeks I contemplated the question, “Where is here?” Not using the question to get a verbal answer, more just to illuminate and aid the abandonment of the clinging that was present.

Recognizing this kind of conditioning is half the job—recognizing that, as soon as there is a here-ness, there is a subtle presence of a there-ness. Similarly, establishing a “this,” brings up a “that.” As soon as we define “inside,” up pops “outside.” It’s crucial to acknowledge such subtle feelings of grasping; it happens so fast and at so many different layers and levels.

This simple act of apprehending the experience is shining the light of wisdom onto what the heart is grasping. Once the defilements are in the spotlight, they get a little nervous and uncomfortable. Clinging operates best when we are not looking. When

clinging is the focus of our awareness, it can't function properly. In short, clinging can't cling if there is too much wisdom around.

### Still Flowing Water

Ajahn Chah would put the same "Where do you go?" question to people for a few months. As they got used to it, he would switch questions. Throughout his teaching career, he posed a number of different ones. The very last questions he came up with before his health deteriorated were in the form of a little series: "Have you ever seen still water?"

They would nod, "Yes, of course, we've seen still water before." At the same time, they were probably saying inwardly, "Now that's a pretty strange question." But outwardly everyone was very respectful to Ajahn Chah, as he was one of Thailand's great meditation masters.

Then he would ask, "Well then, have you ever seen flowing water?" And that also seemed a strange thing to ask. They'd respond, "Yes, we've seen flowing water."

"So, did you ever see still, flowing water?" In Thai you would phrase that as *nahm lai ning*. "Have you ever seen *nahm lai ning*?"

"No. That we have never seen."

He loved to get that bewilderment effect.

Ajahn Chah would then explain that the mind's nature is still, yet it's flowing. It's flowing, yet it is still. He would use the word "*citta*" for the knowing mind, the mind of awareness. The *citta* itself is totally still. It has no movement; it is not related to all that arises and ceases. It is silent and spacious. Mind objects—sights, sounds, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and emotions—flow through it. Problems arise because the clarity of the mind gets entangled with sense impressions. The untrained heart chases

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the delightful, runs away from the painful, and as a result, finds itself struggling, alienated, and miserable. By contemplating our own experience, we can make a clear distinction between the mind that knows (*citta*) and the sense impressions that flow through it. By refusing to get entangled with any sense impressions, we find refuge in that quality of stillness, silence, and spaciousness, which is the mind's own nature. This policy of noninterference allows everything and is disturbed by nothing.

The natural ability to separate mind (or mind-essence, to use Dzogchen terminology) and mind objects is clearly reflected in the Pali language. There are actually two different verbs meaning "to be," and they correspond to the conventional or conditioned, and to the unconditioned. The verb "*hoti*" refers to that which is conditioned and passes through time. These are the common activities and the labels of various sense impressions that we use regularly, and, for the most part, unconsciously. Everyone agrees, for example, that water is wet, the body is heavy, there are seven days in the week, and I am a man.

The second verb, "*atthi*," refers to the transcendental qualities of being-ness. Being-ness, in this case, does not imply a becoming, the world of time or identity. It reflects the unconditioned, the unmanifest nature of mind. So, for example, in the passages from the *Udāna* about the unborn and "that sphere of being where . . . there is neither a coming nor a going nor a staying still," the verb "*atthi*" is always used. It indicates a supramundane, timeless is-ness. The fact that the distinctions between the mind (*citta*) and mind objects are embedded in the language itself offers both a reflection on and a reminder of this basic truth.

## “Who” and “What” Do Not Apply

In order to discover the place of nonabiding, we have to find a way of letting go of the conditioned, the world of becoming. We need to recognize the strong identification we have with our bodies and personalities, with all of our credentials, and with how we take it all as inarguable truth: “I am Joe Schmo; I was born in this place; this is my age; this is what I do for a living; this is who I am.”

It seems so reasonable to think like this, and on one level, it makes total sense. But when we identify with those concepts, there is no freedom. There’s no space for awareness. But then, when we recognize how seriously and absolutely we take this identity, we open ourselves to the possibility of freedom. We taste the sense of self and feel how gritty that is and how real it seems to be. In recognizing the feeling of it, we are able to know, “This is just a feeling.” The feelings of I-ness and my-ness (*ahaṃkāra* and *mamaṃkāra* in Pali) are as transparent as any other feelings.

When the mind is calm and steady, I like to ask myself, “Who is watching?” or “Who is aware?” or “Who is knowing this?” I also like asking, “What is knowing?” “What is aware?” “What is practicing non-meditation?” The whole point of posing questions like these is not to find answers. In fact, if you get a verbal answer, it is the wrong one. The point of asking “who” or “what” questions is to puncture our standard presumptions. In the spaciousness of the mind, the words “who” and “what” start sounding ridiculous. There is no real “who” or “what.” There is only the quality of knowing. And, as we work with this in a more and more refined way, we see that feeling of personhood become more and more transparent; its solidity falls away, and the heart is able to open and settle back further and further.

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Vipassanā and Dzogchen practices are trying to outline very clearly for us how we are constantly making solid that which is inherently not solid. These methods are trying to illuminate the subtler and subtler kinds of clinging that we create around the feelings of self, time, identity, and location.

By framing our world in these ways, we are unconsciously concretizing it. Questions like “Who are you?” automatically imply the reality of personhood. Answering with one’s name is a reasonable answer on the relative level. But the trouble comes in when we blindly allow the relative to slide into the absolute. We believe this name is a real thing. “I am a real person; I *am* Amaro.” Similarly, when we ask, “What day is it?” that question automatically implies the reality of time. If we’re not mindful, we go from acknowledging a human convention—brought about by the passage of our planet around the sun, somewhere in the middle of this particular galaxy—to creating an absolute, universal truth.

The corollary to this noncreation of solidity in the realm of perceptions and conventions—just in case we’re afraid of losing all forms of reality—is that we don’t have to create or somehow obtain the Dharma to replace the familiar basis we are losing. When we stop creating the obscurations, the Dharma is always here.

As soon as we see where the subtle and coarse forms of clinging are happening, and that stranglehold loosens—when we remind ourselves, “There it is; there’s that grip, the contraction of identity”—there’s an openness and spaciousness. That freedom of heart comes from recognizing how we habitually create things and then accept them as real. When that is truly seen and known, the clenching contractedness can’t sustain itself and the Dharma manifests instead.



## “When” Does Not Apply

Time is another area in which we should notice subtle clinging. We may experience resting in awareness and have an attendant sense of clarity and spaciousness, but we may also have a firm sensation that this is happening *now*. When we do, without noticing it, we have turned that now-ness into a solid quality.

The process of letting go happens layer by layer. As one layer falls away, we can get all excited and think, “Oh, great. I’m free now. This open space is wonderful.” But then we start to realize, “Something isn’t quite right here. There is still some stickiness in the system.” We notice the solidification of time and the limitation we have created of the present.

There’s a verse about time by the Sixth Zen Patriarch that I love to quote. It says:

*In this moment there is nothing which comes to be.*

*In this moment there is nothing which ceases to be.*

*Thus, in this moment, there is no birth and death to be brought to an end.*

*Thus, the absolute peace is this present moment.*

*Although it is just this moment, there is no limit to this moment,*

*And herein is eternal delight.*

Birth and death depend on time. Something apparently born in the past, living now, will die in the future. Once we let go of time, and if we also let go of thing-ness, we see there can be no real “thing” coming into being or dying; there is just the suchness of the present. In this way, there is no birth or death to be brought to an end.

That’s how this moment is absolutely peaceful; it is outside of time, *akālika*.

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We use such phrases as “this moment,” but they are not quite accurate because they still can give us an impression of the present as a small fragment of time. For even though it is just a moment, the present is limitless. In letting go of the structures of the past and future, we realize that this present is an infinite ocean, and the result of this realization is living in the eternal, the timeless. We needn’t solidify and conceive the present in contradistinction to a past or future—it is its own self-sustaining vastness.

We’re talking here about the abandonment of clinging at a very subtle level, a practice that takes a lot of quick and careful spiritual footwork. When we see our mind getting caught up with something, we can apply the classic vipassanā technique—just hit it with impermanence, not-self, and suffering, the old one, two, three. If we have a good sense of *anattā*, we chop it with a “not me, not mine” and down it goes. But it is important to remember that clinging is extraordinarily wiley. There we are gloating over our success, but we don’t realize that this is a tag match that’s going on. Another character is bearing down on us from behind while we look at our knockout on the floor. The partner is about to clobber us. We just barely let go of the attachment to time when attachment to opinions starts moving full-speed ahead. We drop that, then here-ness takes over. Then it’s the body. . . . Clinging takes shape in many, many different ways and we need to notice them all.

## Oil and Water

Up until the point when Ajahn Chah met his teacher Ajahn Mun, he said he never really understood that mind and its objects existed as separate qualities, and that, because of getting the two confused and tangled up, he could never find peace. But

what he had got from Ajahn Mun—in the three short days he spent with him—was the clear sense that there is the knowing mind, the *poo roo*, the one who knows, and then there are the objects of knowing. These are like a mirror and the images that are reflected in it. The mirror is utterly unembellished and uncorrupted by either the beauty or the ugliness of the objects appearing in it. The mirror doesn't even get bored. Even when there is nothing reflected in it, it is utterly equanimous, serene. This was a key insight for Ajahn Chah, and it became a major theme for his practice and teaching from that time onward.

He would compare the mind and its objects to oil and water contained in the same bottle. The knowing mind is like the oil, and the sense impressions are like the water. Primarily because our minds and lives are very busy and turbulent, the oil and water get shaken up together. It thus appears that the knowing mind and its objects are all one substance. But if we let the system calm down, then the oil and the water separate out; they are essentially immiscible.

There's the awareness, the Buddha-mind, and the impressions of thought, the sensory world, and all other patterns of consciousness. The two naturally separate out from each other; we don't have to do a thing to make it happen. Intrinsically, they are not mixed. They will separate themselves out if we let them.

At this point, we can truly see that the mind is one thing and the mind-objects are another. We can see the true nature of mind, mind-essence, which knows experience and in which all of life happens; and we can see that that transcendent quality is devoid of relationship to individuality, space, time, and movement. All of the objects of the world—its people, our routines and mind states—appear and disappear within that space.

## Breathing and Walking

The effort to make a clear distinction between the mind that knows and mind-objects is thus very important to our practice. Mindfulness of breathing is a good way to work with this insight. Just notice the feeling of the breath as you follow the sensation of it. The breath is moving, but that which knows the breath is not moving.

Perhaps we first pick this up by catching the space at the end of the out-breath and then at the end of the in-breath. We notice there is a pause, a space there. But, if we extend our vision, we begin to notice that that spaciousness and stillness are actually always there. As the breath flows in and out, there is an eternal spaciousness of the mind that remains unobstructed by the movement of the breath.

We can also extend this practice to walking meditation. If we stand still, with our eyes open or closed, we can notice that all of the sensations of the body are known within our mind. The feeling of the feet on the ground, the body standing, the feeling of the air, and so on are all held and known within the mind. It can take a few minutes to really get to that point, but if we make the effort, soon we will have that sense of mind established.

Then we simply let the body start walking.

Usually when we walk, we're going *someplace*; this can complicate the picture. Actually there's no essential difference in walking somewhere and going nowhere. Walking meditation is very helpful in this way; it simplifies things a lot. We know we're going absolutely nowhere. It's deliberately a completely pointless exercise on the level of trying to get someplace.

By working with the moving body in meditation, we can use it as an opportunity to witness the body walking without going anywhere. As the body walks along at a gentle pace, we begin to

see that even though the body is moving, the mind that knows the body is not moving. Movement does not apply to awareness. There are movements of the body, but the mind that knows the movements aren't moving. There's stillness, but there's flow. The body flows, perceptions flow, but there is stillness. As soon as the mind grabs it and we think we are going somewhere, then the oil and water are mixed up. There's a "me" going some "place." But in that moment of recognizing—"Oh, look, the stillness of the mind is utterly unaffected by the movement in the body"—we know that quality of still, flowing water.

There's an appreciation of freedom. That which is moving is not-self. That which is moving is the aspect of flow and change. And the heart naturally takes refuge in that quality of spaciousness, stillness, and openness that knows but is unentangled.

I find meditation with the eyes open is also very helpful in this respect. With the eyes open, there's more of a challenge to exercise the same quality that is normally established only in walking meditation. If we keep our eyes open and hold the space of the room, we see the coming and going of people, the gentle swaying of the bodies in the breeze, the changing light, the waxing and waning of the afternoon sun.

We can let all of this just come and go and be held in that space of knowing, where there is a conscious experience of both the conventional and ultimate truths. There's the ultimate view of no person, no time, and no space, of timeless knowing and radiance. Then there are the conventions: you and me, here and there, sitting and walking, coming and going. The two truths are totally interfused; one is not obstructing the other. This is a way of directly appreciating that nonabiding is not just some kind of abstruse philosophy but is something we can taste and value.

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In the moment we really understand the principle, the heart realizes, "The body is moving, the world is coming and going, but it's absolutely going nowhere." Birth and death have ended right there.

And we don't have to be sitting still or walking in slow motion to awaken to this insight. We can be running, even playing tennis, and still find the same quality. It pertains equally when we are physically motionless and when we are moving at a high speed, even racing along the freeway.

BEING BUDDHA







## The View from the Forest

*Adapted from a talk given during a retreat led by Ven. Tsoknyi Rinpoche, held at Wisdom House in Litchfield, Connecticut, in September of 1997. A longer version of this talk was published in Broad View, Boundless Heart under the title “Ajahn Chah’s View of the View.”*



FTEN WHEN I AM IN THE PRESENCE of Dzogchen teachings, I have a strange sense of hearing the echoes and seeing the images of my own teachers, Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho—not just in the way those teachings describe principles I am familiar with, but even down to the use of the same analogies and phrases. When this concordance first sank in, it made me realize that I’ve been practicing in a way somewhat akin to Dzogchen for at least the latter half of my monastic life, since about 1987. If I had eyebrows, I would raise them a little bit.

But perhaps the convergence shouldn’t be that surprising. After all, we all have the same teacher: the Dharma comes from the Buddha and is rooted in our own nature. There may be 84,000 different Dharma doors, but fundamentally there is one Dharma.

There are several Tibetan teachings I have come to appreciate over time, but especially those that describe the fine anatomy and nuances of rigpa, otherwise known as the view. The Thai

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forest tradition, the lineage I have mostly trained in, is much more dependent on the eloquence and inspiration of particular teachers extemporizing on themes of Dharma that occur to them in the moment. This keeps the teachings alive and fresh, but it also means that there can be 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 Dzogchen teachings.

Ajahn Chah's teachings covered a very broad range, but he was particularly notable for the open, skilled, and free way in which he spoke of the realm of ultimate truth. And this was to anyone he felt was able to understand, whether layperson or monastic. His ways of speaking of this domain, and about the awareness that knows it—his view of the view—reflect many similarities with Dzogchen, so I thought it might be helpful to describe some of these, as well as some of the methods taught by Ajahn Sumedho, his senior Western student. I will also try to provide other angles or points of view from the Theravāda tradition that have some bearing on our understanding and practice in this area.

### **The Faster You Hurry, the Slower You Go**

It's easy to get very busy with spiritual life, even driven and obsessive. During the first 10 years of my monastic life, I became a somewhat fanatical monk. This might sound like an oxymoron, but it is by no means impossible. I was trying to do everything 120 percent. I would get up super early in the morning and do all sorts of ascetic practices, all kinds of special pūjās and suchlike. I wasn't even lying down; I didn't lie down to sleep for about three years. Finally I realized I had far too many things

going; there was no sense of any internal spaciousness throughout the day.

I was desperately busy with the meditation. During that time, my life was jammed full. I was always half fretful and fussy. I couldn't even eat or walk across the courtyard without it being a *thing*. Finally I had to ask myself: "Why am I doing this? This life is supposed to be lived for peace, for realization, for freedom, and my days are all clogged up."

I should have gotten the message long before. 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." He was waiting for me to realize that it wasn't the amount of stuff that I did, the hours that I put in on the cushion, the number of mantras that I recited, or how strictly I kept all the rules. It was more about embodying the spirit of nonbecoming, nonstriving in everything I did. It then dawned on me that the importance of nonstriving was something Ajahn Sumedho had been teaching for many years; I just hadn't been hearing it.

Ajahn Sumedho would encourage an awareness of what we call "the becoming tendency." In Pali the word for this is "*bhava*," and in the Tibetan tradition the word is used in the same way. It

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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 in order to get somewhere. This habit is the cause of many of our troubles.

For seeds to grow we need soil, manure, water, and sunlight. But if the bag of seed remains in the potting shed, we are missing the essential piece. When we lug the manure and the water around, we 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 reminding us [*gestures as if pointing at a sack in the corner*].

Ajahn Sumedho talked repeatedly about *being* enlightened rather than *becoming* enlightened. Be awake now; be enlightened to the present moment. It is not about doing something now to become enlightened in the future. That kind of thinking is bound up with self and time and bears no fruit. Dzogchen teachings are the same. It's not a matter of finding rigpa as an object or doing something now to get rigpa in the future; it's about actually being rigpa now. As soon as we start to do something with it or say, "Hey, look, I got it" or "How can I keep this?" the mind takes hold of that thought and leaves rigpa—unless the thought is witnessed as just another transparent formation within the space of rigpa.

Ajahn Sumedho himself was not always so clear on this point. He would often tell the story about his own obsessions with being "a meditator." Ajahn Chah's method of teaching emphasized formal meditation practice to quite a great extent. But he was also extremely keen on not making the formal meditation distinct from the rest of life. He spoke about maintaining a continuity of practice whether one was walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. The same was true for eating, using the bathroom,

and working. The point was always to sustain a continuity of awareness. He used to say, "If your peace rests on the meditation mat, when you leave the mat you leave your peace behind."

Ajahn Chah was once given a piece of forested land on a hill-top in his home province. The very generous supporter who had donated it said to him, "If you can find a way to make a road up to the top of the mountain, I will build a monastery 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 recently arrived monk. He had been there a year or two by this time and was a very serious meditator. He hadn't been keen to leave the settled life at the main monastery, Wat Nong Pah Pong, but he joined in and there he was—breaking rocks in the sun, pushing barrows of rubble around, and working hard with the rest of the community. After two or three days, he was getting hot, sweaty, and cranky. At the end of the day, after a 12-hour shift, everyone would sit down to meditate and would be reeling. Ajahn Sumedho thought, "This is useless. I'm wasting my time. My meditation has fallen apart completely. This is not helping the holy life at all."

He carefully explained his concerns to Ajahn Chah: "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 to do more sitting and walking meditation, more formal 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 could be really wicked in this way.

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At the Sangha meeting 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 working hard at 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 of him. It is absolutely all right with me. He can stay alone and meditate, and we will continue building the road."

Ajahn Chah was out there from dawn until dusk. When he wasn't working on the road, he was receiving guests and teaching Dharma. So he was really cranking it out. In the meantime, Ajahn Sumedho stayed alone and meditated. He felt pretty bad on the first day and even worse on the second. By the third day, he couldn't stand it any longer. He felt tortured and finally left his solitude. He rejoined the monks, broke rocks, carried gravel, and really gave himself to the work.

Ajahn Chah looked at the enthusiastic young monk with a foot-wide grin and asked, "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 when you were meditating alone?"

"Yes, Luang Por."

The lesson? Ajahn Sumedho had created a false division about what meditation is and isn't, when in fact, there is no division at all. When we give our hearts to whatever we do, to whatever we experience, or to what is happening around us, without personal agendas or preferences taking over, the space of rigpa, the space of awareness, is exactly the same.

## The Buddha Is Awareness

Ajahn Chah's teachings also parallel Dzogchen in regard to the nature of the Buddha. When you come right down to it, awareness is not a *thing*. Nevertheless, it is 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)." The customary way of talking about awareness for both Ajahn Chah and other masters of the forest tradition was to use the term "Buddha" in this way—the fully aware, awake quality of our own mind. This is the Buddha.

He would say things like, "The Buddha who passed into *parinibbāna* 2,500 years ago is not the Buddha who is a refuge." He liked to shock people sometimes, when he felt he needed to bring their attention to the teachings. When he said something like this, 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? Thinking about him can make us feel good, but that feeling is also unstable. It's an inspiring feeling, but it is easily disturbed."

When there is resting in the knowing, then nothing can touch the heart. It's this resting in the knowing that makes that Buddha a refuge. That knowing nature is invulnerable, inviolable. What happens to the body, emotions, and perceptions is secondary, because that knowing is beyond the phenomenal world. So that is the true refuge. Whether we experience pleasure or pain, success or failure, praise or criticism, that knowing nature of the mind is utterly serene. It is undisturbed and incorruptible. Just as a mirror is unembellished and untainted by the images it

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reflects, the knowing cannot be touched by any sense perception, any thought, any emotion, any mood, any feeling. It's of a transcendent order. The Dzogchen teachings say this too: "There is not one hair's 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 parallel between Dzogchen and Ajahn Chah's teachings comes in the form of a warning: do not look for the unconditioned, or rigpa, with the conditioned mind. In the verses of the Third Zen Patriarch it says, "To seek Mind with the discriminating mind is the greatest of all mistakes." Ajahn Chah expressed the futility and absurdity of this tendency by giving the example of riding a horse and looking for it at the same time. We are riding along, asking, "Has anyone seen my horse? Anyone see my horse?" Everyone looks at us like we are crazy. So we ride over to the next village and ask the same thing: "Anyone seen my horse?"

Ajahn Sumedho offers a similar example. Instead of looking for a horse, he uses the image 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. Ajahn Chah and other forest masters would use the expression "being the knowing." It is 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 we let go of that dual-



ity and relinquish that “looking for.” Then the heart just abides in the knowing. But the habit is to think, “I’m not looking hard enough. I haven’t found them yet. My eyes must be here somewhere. After all, I can see. I need to try harder to find them.”

Have you ever been in a retreat interview where you describe your meditation practice and the teacher looks at you and says, “More effort is necessary”? You think, “But I’m dancing as fast as I can!” We need to put effort in, but we need to do it in a skillful way. The type of effort we need to develop is that which involves being clearer but doing less. This quality of relaxation is seen as crucial, not only within the Dzogchen teachings but also in Theravādan monastic practice.

It’s an 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 *sīla*, and so on. Similarly, within the Theravāda tradition, we have *sīla*: the practices of virtue for the lay and the monastic communities, as well as the refinements of the training in Vinaya discipline. We do a lot of chanting and devotional practice, plus a huge amount of training in meditation techniques, such as mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of the body, and so forth. Then there’s the practice of living in community. (One of the elder monks of my Sangha 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 that relaxation effective.

I like to think of this relaxation as a type of overdrive. We use the fifth gear, the same speed but less revs. Until I told Ajahn Sumedho that I had given up my ascetic practices, I was in fourth

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gear and racing. There was always a pushing, a take-it-to-the-limit attitude. When I dropped back one notch and was not quite *so* fanatical about the rules and doing everything perfectly the *whole* time, that one little element of relaxation allowed the whole thing to be consummated; simply because there was a letting go of the stress, I stopped pushing. The irony was that I was still fulfilling 99.9 percent of my spiritual duties and practices. But I did them without being driven. We can relax without switching off, and consequently we can enjoy the fruits of our work. This is what we mean by letting go of becoming and learning to *be*. If we're too tense and eager to get to the other end, we're bound to fall off the tightrope.

## Realizing Cessation

Another very important aspect of the view is its resonance with the experience of cessation, *nirodha*. The experience of rigpa is synonymous with the experience of *dukkha-nirodha*, the cessation of suffering.

Sounds good, doesn't it? We practice to end suffering, yet we get so attached to working with things in the mind that when the dukkha stops and the heart becomes spacious and empty, we can find ourselves feeling lost. We don't know how to leave that experience alone: "Oh!—*whoom*—everything is open, clear, spacious . . . so now what do I do?" Our conditioning says, "I am supposed to be *doing* something. This isn't what it means to be progressing on the path." We don't know how to be awake and yet to leave that spaciousness alone.

When that space in the mind appears, it can bewilder us or we can easily overlook it. It is as if each of us were a thief who breaks into a house, looks around, and decides, "Well, there is not much to take here so I'll just keep going, find some other

place." We miss the realization that when we let go, dukkha ceases. Instead, we ignore that still, open, clear quality and go looking for the next thing, and then the next and the next. We don't, as the expression goes, "taste the nectar," the juice of rigpa. We just zoom straight through the juice bar. It looks like there is nothing here. Everything looks kind of boring: no lust or fear or other issues to deal with. So we busy ourselves with attitudes like: "I am being irresponsible; I should have an object to concentrate on; or I should at least be contemplating impermanence; I'm not dealing with my issues. Quick, let me go and find something challenging to work with." Out of the best of intentions, we fail to taste the juice that's right here.

When grasping ceases, the ultimate truth appears. It's that simple.

Ānanda and another monk had been debating about the nature of the deathless state and they decided to consult the Buddha. They wanted to know: "What is the nature of deathlessness?" They prepared themselves for a long, expansive explanation. But the Buddha's response was brief and succinct. He replied, "The cessation of grasping is deathlessness." That's it. On this point, the Dzogchen and Theravādan teachings are identical. When grasping stops, there is rigpa, there is deathlessness, the ending of suffering, dukkha-nirodha.

The Buddha's very first teaching on the Four Noble Truths spoke directly about this. For each of the four truths, there is a way in which it is to be handled. The First Noble Truth—of dukkha, dissatisfaction—is "to be apprehended." We need to recognize: "This is dukkha. This is not rigpa. This is *marigpa* (unawareness, ignorance) and is therefore unsatisfactory."

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

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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.” That means when the *dukkha* stops, *notice it*. Notice: “Oh! Everything is okay.” That’s when we go into overdrive—we can just be, without becoming.

“Aha”—taste the nectar of *rigpa*—“aaah, this is all right.”

The conscious realization of the ending of *dukkha*, of emptiness, and of the space of the mind are considered crucial elements of right practice within the Theravāda tradition. Realizing *nirodha* is in some ways the most important of all the aspects of working with the Four Noble Truths. It seems inconsequential, it’s the least tangible of them all, but it’s the one that contains the jewel, the seed of enlightenment.

Although the experience of *dukkha-nirodha* is not a *thing*, this doesn’t mean that there is nothing or no quality there. It is actually the experience of ultimate truth. If we don’t rush through looking for the next hit and we pay attention to the ending of *dukkha*, we open ourselves to purity, radiance, and peacefulness. By allowing our heart to fully taste what’s here, all so-called ordinary experience blossoms and opens, beautifully adorned like a golden orchid; it keeps getting brighter and clearer.

## Not Made of That

All Buddhist practitioners, regardless of tradition, are familiar with the three characteristics of existence—*anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, selflessness). These are “chapter one, page one” Buddhism. But the Theravādins also talk about another three characteristics of existence, at a more refined level: *suññatā*, *tathatā*, and *atammayatā*. *Suññatā* is

emptiness. The term derives from saying “no” to the phenomenal world: “I’m not going to believe in this. This is not entirely real.” Tathatā means suchness. It is a quality very similar to suññatā but derives from saying “yes” to the universe. There is nothing, yet there is *something*. The quality of suchness is like the texture of ultimate reality. Suññatā and tathatā—emptiness and suchness—the teachings talk in these ways.

This third quality, atammayatā, is not well known. In Theravāda, atammayatā has been referred to as the ultimate concept. It literally means “not made of that.” But atammayatā 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 Nikāya*) render it as “non-identification”—picking up on the “subject” side of the equation. Other translators call it “nonfashioning” 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 ancient Indian origins of this term seem to lie in a theory of sense perception in which the grasping hand supplies the dominant analogy: the hand takes the shape of what it apprehends. The process of vision, for example, 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-mayatā*,” “consisting of that.” The mental energy of the experiencer (subject) becomes consubstantial with the thing (object) being realized.

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

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knowing it. Hence, nonidentification refers to the subjective aspect and nonfabrication to the objective.

The way emptiness is usually discussed in Dzogchen circles makes it very clear that it is a characteristic of ultimate reality. But in other usages of emptiness or suchness, there still can 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. Atammayatā is the realization that, in truth, there cannot be anything other than ultimate reality. There is no *that*. In letting go, in the complete abandonment of *that*, the whole relative subject-object world, even at its subtlest level, is broken apart and dissolved.

I particularly like the word “atammayatā” because of the message it conveys. Among its other qualities, this concept deeply addresses that persistent sense of always wondering, “What is that over there?” There’s that hint that something over there might be a little more interesting 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. Atammayatā is that quality in us that knows, “There is no that. There is only this.” Then even this-ness becomes meaningless. Atammayatā helps the heart break the subtlest habits of restlessness as well as still the reverberations of the root duality of subject and object. That abandonment brings the heart to a realization: there is only the wholeness of the Dharma, complete spaciousness, and fulfillment. The apparent dualities of this and that, subject and object are seen to be essentially meaningless.

One way that we can use this on a practical level is with a technique Ajahn Sumedho has often suggested. Thinking the mind is in the body, we say, “my mind” [*points at head*] or “my mind” [*points at chest*]. Right? “It’s all in my mind.” Actually

we've got it wrong. The body is in our mind rather than the mind in the body, 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 seeing happen? In the mind. Where do we experience touch? In the mind. Where do we experience smelling? Where does that happen? In the mind.

Everything that we know about the body, now and at any previous time, has 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 infancy, 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 physical world, but what we can say is that the experience of the body, and the experience of the world, happens within our mind. It doesn't happen anywhere else. It's all happening here. And in that here-ness, the world's externality, its separateness has ceased. The word "cessation," (nirodha), may also be used 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 thing-ness, its other-ness has been checked. We are better able to recognize its true nature.

This shift of vision is an interesting little meditation tool that we can use anytime, as was described before with reference to walking meditation. It is a very useful device because it leads us to the truth of the matter. Whenever we apply it, it flips the world inside out, because we are then able to see that this body is indeed just a set of perceptions. It doesn't negate our functioning freely, but it puts everything into context. "It's all happening within the space of rigpa, within the space of the knowing

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mind." In holding things in this way, we suddenly find our body, the mind, and the world arriving at a resolution, a strange realization of perfection. It all happens here. This method may seem a little obscure, but sometimes the most abstruse and subtle tools can bring about the most radical changes of heart.

### Reflective Inquiry

Reflective inquiry was another of the methods that Ajahn Chah would use in sustaining the view, or we may say, in sustaining right view. It involves the deliberate use of verbal thought to investigate the teachings as well as particular attachments, fears, and hopes, and especially the feeling of identification itself. He would talk about it almost in terms of having a dialogue with himself.

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. There's a missed opportunity when we overlook the use of conceptual thought in this way. When you 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?"

The deliberate use of reflective thought or inquiry can reveal a set of unconscious assumptions, habits, and compulsions that we have set in motion. This can be very helpful and can yield great insight. We establish a steady, open mindfulness and then 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?" At that moment a gap opens up. Milarepa once said something along the lines of, "When the flow of discursive thinking is broken, the doorway to



liberation opens." 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 loosening its strands. It breaks the habit, the pattern of discursive thinking. When we ask "who" or "what," for a moment the thinking mind trips over its own feet. It fumbles. In that space, before it can piece together an answer or an identity, there is timeless peace and freedom. Through that peaceful space the innate quality of mind, mind-essence, appears. It's only by frustrating our habitual judgments, the partial realities that we have unconsciously determined into existence, that we are forced to loosen our grip and to let go of our misguided way of thinking.

### **Fear of Freedom**

The Buddha said that the letting go of the sense of "I" is the supreme happiness (e.g., in UD. 2.1, and 4.1). But over the years we have become very fond of this character, haven't we? As Ajahn Chah once said, "It is like having a dear friend whom you've known your whole life. You've been inseparable. Then the Buddha comes along and says that you and your friend have got to split up." It's heartbreaking. The ego is bereft. There is the feeling of diminution and loss. Then comes the sinking feeling of desperation.

To the sense of self, being is always defined in terms of being some *thing*. But the practice and teachings clearly emphasize undefined being, an awareness: edgeless, colorless, infinite, omnipresent—you name it. When being is undefined in this way, it seems like death to the ego. And death is the worst thing. The ego-based habits kick in with a vengeance and search for something to fill up the space. Anything will do: "Quick, give me a problem, a meditation practice (*that's legal!*). Or how about

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some kind of memory, a hope, a responsibility I haven't fulfilled, something to anguish over or feel guilty about, *anything!*"

I have experienced this many times. In that spaciousness, it is as if there's a hungry dog at the door desperately trying to get in: "C'mon, lemme in, lemme in." The hungry dog wants to know: "When is that guy going to 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 *saṅkhāras* are impermanent. All dharmas are such and empty. There is no other. . . ." [*makes forlorn hungry-dog noises*].

These experiences have provided some of the most revealing moments in my own spiritual practice and exploration. They contain such a rabid hungering to *be*. 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 responds, "No."

It takes incredible internal resources and strength to be able to say "no" in this way. The pathetic pleading of the ego becomes phenomenally intense, visceral. The body may shake and our legs start twitching to run. "Get me out of this place!" Perhaps our feet even begin moving to get to the door because that urge is so strong.

At this point, we are shining the light of wisdom right at the root of separate existence. That root is a tough one. It takes a lot of work to get to that root and to cut through it. So we should expect a great deal of friction and difficulty in engaging in this kind of work.

Intense anxiety does arise. Don't be intimidated by it. Leave the urge alone. It's normal to experience grief and strong feelings

of bereavement. There's a little being that just died here. 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 deceptive message of desire. Whether it's a subtle little flicker of restlessness or a grand declaration—"I am going to die of heartbreak if I don't follow this!"—know them all as desire's deceptive allure.

There is a wonderful line in a poem by Rumi where he says, "When were you ever made any the less by dying?" Let that surge of the ego be born, and let it die. Then, lo and behold, not only is the heart not diminished, it is actually more radiant, vast, and joyful than ever before. There's spaciousness, contentment, and an infinite ease that cannot be attained through grasping or identifying with any attribute of life whatsoever.

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.



## Cessation of Consciousness

**T**HE TRANSLATION OF TERMS can be very interesting, especially out on the borders where words expire. I remember years ago looking in the glossary of a collection of Vedanta teachings. Where the Sanskrit had a one-word term, the English explanation was a paragraph long. In refined areas of consciousness, English is pretty impoverished. Our language is great at emotions. We've got scads of words for every shade of feeling. But for the fine details of the inner reaches of consciousness, it's hard to find words that really give an accurate and complete picture and that do not cause us to lose our way.

### **Attending to the Deathless**

In the Theravāda teachings, one of the ways the Buddha talked about how to be liberated is very similar to a central principle of Dzogchen. As far as I can gather, both traditions emphasize that at a certain point we need to let go of everything and awaken to

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the presence of the Dharma. Even the most skillful states must not be clung to. This principle is translated in various ways, but the one that feels most accurate is “attending to the deathless.” In Pali, that last word is “*amata dhātu*.”

A great passage in the suttas (A 3.128) presents an exchange between two of the Buddha’s elder monks. Venerable Sāriputta is the Buddha’s chief disciple, the one most eminent in wisdom and also in meditative accomplishments. Although he had no psychic powers whatsoever, he was the grand master of meditators. The other elder disciple of the Buddha, Venerable Anuruddha, had spectacular psychic powers. He was the one most blessed with “the divine eye”; he could see into all different realms.

The two disciples were an interesting mix. Sāriputta’s weakness was Anuruddha’s great gift. Anyway, shortly before his enlightenment, Anuruddha came to Sāriputta and said, “With the divine eye purified and perfected I can see the entire 10,000-fold universal system. My meditation is firmly established; my mindfulness is steady as a rock. I have unremitting energy, and the body is totally relaxed and calm. And yet still my heart is not free from the outflows and confusions. What am I getting wrong?”

Sāriputta replied, “Friend, your ability to see into the 10,000-fold universal system is connected to your conceit. Your persistent energy, your sharp mindfulness, your physical calm, and your one-pointedness of mind have to do with your restlessness. And the fact that you still have not released the heart from the *āsavas* and defilements is tied up with your anxiety. It would be good, friend, if rather than occupying yourself with these concerns, you turned your attention to the deathless element.” (By the way, the Pali Canon has a lot of humor in it like this, although it’s rather similar to English humor and sometimes is

easy to miss.) So, of course, Anuruddha said, “Thank you very much,” and off he went. Shortly thereafter, he realized complete enlightenment. This was very understated humor.

The point of their discussion, however, is really quite serious. As long as we are saying, “Look at how complicated my problems are” or “Look at my powers of concentration,” we will stay stuck in *samsāra*. In essence, Sāriputta told his colleague, “You’re so busy with all of the doingness and the effects that come from that, so busy with all of these proliferations, you’ll never be free. You’re looking in the wrong direction. You’re heading *out*, looking at the meditation object *out there*, the 10,000-fold universal system *out there*. Just shift your view to the context of experience and attend to the deathless element instead.”

All it took was a slight shift of focus for Anuruddha to realize: “It’s not just a matter of all the fascinating objects or all the noble stuff I have been doing—that’s all conditioned, born, compounded, and deathbound. The timeless Dharma is being missed. Look within, look more broadly. Attend to the deathless.”

There are also a few places in the suttas (e.g., M 64.9 and A 9.36) where the Buddha talked about the same process with respect to development of concentration and meditative absorption. He even made the point that, when the mind is in first *jhāna*, second *jhāna*, third *jhāna*, all the way out to the higher formless *jhānas*, we can look at those states and recognize all of them as being conditioned and dependent. This, he said, is the true development of wisdom: the mindfulness to recognize the conditioned nature of a state, to turn away from it, and to attend to the deathless, even while the state is still around. When the mind is concentrated and very pure and bright, we can recognize that state as conditioned, dependent, alien, or something that is void, empty. There is the presence of mind to reflect on the truth that:

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All of this is conditioned and thus gross, but there is the deathless element. And in inclining toward the deathless element, the heart is released.

In a way it is like looking at a picture. Normally the attention goes to the figure in a picture and not the background. Or imagine being in a room with someone who is sitting in a chair. When you look across the room you would probably not attend to the space in front of or beside that person. Your attention would go to the figure in the chair, right? Similarly, if you've ever painted a picture or a wall, there's usually one spot where there's a glitch or a smudge. So where does the eye go when you look at the wall? It beams straight in on the flaw. In exactly the same way, our perceptual systems are geared to aim for the figure, not the ground. Even if an object looks like the ground—such as limitless light, for example—we still need to know how to turn back from that object.

Incidentally, this is why in Buddhist meditation circles there's often a warning about deep states of absorption. When one is in one, it can be very difficult to develop insight—much more so than when the mind is somewhat less intensely concentrated. The absorption state is such a good facsimile of liberation that it feels like the real gold. So we think: "It's here, why bother going any further? This is really good." We get tricked and, as a result, we miss the opportunity to turn away and attend to the deathless.

In cosmological terms, the best place for liberation is in the human realm. There's a good mixture of suffering and bliss, happiness and unhappiness here. If we are off in the deva realms, it's difficult to become liberated because it's like being at an ongoing party. And we don't even have to clean up afterwards. We just hang out in the Nandana Grove. Devas drop grapes in our mouths as we waft around with flocks of adoring beings of our favorite



gender floating in close proximity. And, of course, there's not much competition; you're always the star of the show in those places. Up in the brahma realms it's even worse. Who is going to come back down to grubby old earth and deal with tax returns and building permits?

This cosmology is a reflection of our internal world. Thus the brahma realms are the equivalent of formless states of absorption. One of the great meditation masters of Thailand, Venerable Ajahn Tate, was such an adept at concentration that, as soon as he sat down to meditate, he would go straight into *arūpa-jhāna*, formless states of absorption. It took him 12 years after he met his teacher, Venerable Ajahn Mun, to train himself *not* to do that and to keep his concentration at a level where he could develop insight. In those formless states, it is just so nice. It's easy to ask: "What's the point of cultivating wise reflection or investigating the nature of experience? The experience itself is so seamlessly delicious, why bother?" The reason we bother is that those are not dependable states. They are unreliable and they are not ours. Probably not many people have the problem of getting stuck in *arūpa-jhāna*. Nonetheless, it is helpful to understand why these principles are discussed and emphasized.

This gesture of attending to the deathless is thus a core spiritual practice but not a complicated one. We simply withdraw our attention from the objects of the mind and incline the attention towards the deathless, the unborn. This is not a massive reconstruction program. It's not like we have to *do* a whole lot. It's very simple and natural. We relax and notice that which has been here all along, like noticing the space in a room. We don't notice space, because it doesn't grab our attention, it isn't exciting. Similarly, *nibbāna* has no feature, no color, no taste, and no form, so we don't realize it's right here. The perceptual systems and the

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naming activity of the mind work on forms; that's what they go to first. Therefore we tend to miss what's always here. Actually, because it has no living quality to it, space is the worst as well as the best example, but sometimes it is reasonable to use it.

## Unsupported Consciousness

In the Theravāda teachings, the Buddha also talked about this quality in terms of "unsupported consciousness." This means that there is cognition, there is knowing, but it's not landing anywhere, it's not abiding anywhere. "Attending to the deathless" and "unsupported consciousness" are somewhat synonymous. They are like descriptions of the same tree from different angles.

In describing unsupported consciousness, the Buddha taught that "Wherever there is something that is intended, something that is acted upon, or something that lies dormant, then that becomes the basis for consciousness to land. And where consciousness lands, that then is the cause for confusion, attachment, becoming and rebirth, and so on.

"But if there is nothing intended, acted upon, or lying latent, then consciousness has no basis to land upon. And having no basis to land, consciousness is released. One recognizes, 'Consciousness, thus unestablished, is released.' Owing to its staying firm, the heart is contented. Owing to its contentment, it is not agitated. Not agitated, such a one realizes complete, perfect nibbāna within themselves." (S 12.38 and S 22.53)

The Buddha used a whole galaxy of images, similes, and forms like this because they spoke to different people in different ways. In another passage the Buddha asked his disciples, "If there was a house with a wall that faced out towards the east and in that wall there was a window, when the sun came up in the morning, where would the shaft of sunlight fall?"

One of his monks replied, “On the western wall.” The Buddha then asked, “And if there’s no western wall, where would the sunlight land?”

The monk answered, “On the ground.” Then the Buddha responded, “And if there’s no ground, where will it land?” The monk replied, “On the water.”

The Buddha pushed it a bit further and asked, “And if there’s no water, where will it land?” The monk answered correctly when he said, “If there is no water, then it will not land.” The Buddha ended the exchange by saying, “Exactly so. When the heart is released from clinging to what are called the four nutriments—physical food, sense contact (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch), intention, and consciousness—then consciousness does not land anywhere. That state, I tell you, is without sorrow, affliction, or despair.” (S 12.64)

### **Consciousness: Invisible, Radiant, Limitless**

In several instances, the language of the Dzogchen tradition seems strikingly similar to that of the Theravāda. In Dzogchen, the common description of the qualities of rigpa, nondual awareness, is “empty in essence, cognizant in nature, and unconfined in capacity.” A different translation of these three qualities is “emptiness, knowing, and lucidity, or clarity.” In the Pali scriptures (D 11.85 and M 49.25), the Buddha talks about the mind of the *arahant* as “consciousness which is unmanifest, signless, infinite, and radiant in all directions.” The Pali words are *viññāṇaṃ* (consciousness); *anidassanaṃ* (empty, invisible or signless, non-manifestative); *anantaṃ* (limitless, unconfined, infinite); and *sabbato pabham* (radiant in all directions, accessible from all sides).

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One of the places the Buddha uses this description is at the end of a long illustrative tale. A monk has asked, "Where is it that earth, water, fire, and wind fade out and cease without remainder?" To which the Buddha replies that the monk has asked the wrong question. What he *should* have asked is, "Where is it that earth, water, fire, and wind can find no footing?" The Buddha then answers this question himself, saying it is in "the consciousness which is invisible, limitless, and radiant in all directions" that the four great elements "and long and short, and coarse and fine, and pure and impure can find no footing. There it is that *nāma-rūpa* (body-and-mind, name-and-form, subject-and-object) both come to an end. With this stopping, this cessation of consciousness, all things here are brought to an end."

Such unsupported and unsupportive consciousness is not an abstract principle. In fact, it was the basis of the Buddha's enlightenment. As the Buddha was sitting under the bodhi tree, the hordes of Māra attacked him. Armies were hurling themselves at the Buddha, and yet nothing could get into the space under the tree. All the weapons and spears they threw turned into rays of light; the arrows that they fired turned into flowers that came sprinkling down around the Buddha. Nothing harmful to the Buddha could get into that space. There was nowhere for it to land. Sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, long and short, coarse and fine, pure and impure are all aspects of body and mind. They represent attributes of all phenomena. Yet none of them could find a footing. The Buddha was in a non-stick realm. Everything that came toward him kept falling away. Nothing stuck; nothing could get in and harm the Buddha in any way. To get a better sense of this quality of unsupported consciousness, it's helpful to reflect on this image. Also very useful are the

phrases at the end of the passage just quoted, particularly where the Buddha says, “When consciousness ceases, all things here are brought to an end.”

### **The Anatomy of Cessation**

The concept of cessation is very familiar in the Theravāda tradition. Even though it’s supposed to be synonymous with nibbāna, it’s sometimes put forth as some event that we’re all seeking, where all experience will vanish and then we’ll be fine. “A great god will come from the sky, take away everything, and make everybody feel high.” I don’t want to get obsessed about words, but we suffer a lot, or get confused, because of misunderstandings like this. When we talk about stopping consciousness, do you think that means “let’s all get unconscious”? It can’t be that, can it? The Buddha was not extolling the virtues of unconsciousness. Otherwise thiorazine or barbiturates would be the way: “Give me the anesthetic and we’re on our way to nibbāna.” But obviously that’s not it. Understanding what is meant by stopping or cessation is thus pretty crucial here.

I’ve known people, particularly those who have practiced in the Theravāda tradition, who have been taught and trained that the idea of meditation is to get to a place of cessation. We might get to a place where we don’t feel or see anything; there is awareness but everything is gone. An absence of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, the body—it all vanishes. And then these students are told, “This is the greatest thing. That’s what there is to look forward to.” The teacher encourages them to put tremendous hours and diligence into their meditation. When one of these students told her teacher that she had arrived at that kind of state, he got really excited. He then asked her, “So what did it feel

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like?" and she said, "It was like drinking a glass of cold water but without the water and without the glass." On another occasion she said, "It was like being shut inside a refrigerator."

This is not the only way of understanding cessation. The root of the word "nirodha" is *rudh*, which means "to not arise, to end, check, or hold"—like holding a horse in check with the reins. So nirodha also has a meaning of holding everything, embracing its scope. "Stopping of consciousness" can thus imply that somehow everything is held in check rather than that it simply vanishes. It's a redrawing of the internal map.

A story from the time of the Buddha might help to expand our understanding of what this means. One night while the Buddha was meditating, a brilliant and beautiful devatā named Rohitassa appeared in front of him. He told the Buddha, "When I was a human being, I was a spiritual seeker of great psychic power, a sky walker. Even though I journeyed for 100 years to reach the end of the world, with great determination and resolution, I could not come to the end of the world. I died on the journey before I had found it. So can you tell me, is it possible to journey to the end of the world?"

And the Buddha replied, "It is not possible to reach the end of the world by walking, but I also tell you that unless you reach the end of the world, you will not reach the end of suffering." Rohitassa was a bit puzzled and said, "Please explain this to me, Venerable Sir." The Buddha replied, "In this very fathom-long body is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world." (A 4.45, s 2.26)

In that instance the Buddha used the exact same formulation as in the Four Noble Truths. The world, "*loka*," in this

respect means the world of our experience. And that's how the Buddha almost always uses the term "the world." He's referring to the world *as we experience it*. This includes only sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought, emotion, feeling. That's it. That's what "the world" is—my world, your world. It's not the abstracted, geographical planet, universe-type world. It's the direct experience of the planet, the people, and the cosmos. Here is the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world.

He said that as long as we create "me and my experience"—"me in here" and "the world out there"—we're stuck in the world of subject and object. Then there is dukkha. And the way leading to the cessation of that duality is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. Geographically, it is impossible to journey to the end of the world. It's only when we come to the cessation of the world, which literally means the cessation of its otherness, its thingness, will we reach the end of dukkha, unsatisfactoriness. When we stop creating sense objects as absolute realities and stop seeing thoughts and feelings as solid things, there is cessation.

To see that the world is within our minds is one way of working with these principles. The whole universe is embraced when we realize that it's happening within our minds. And in that moment when we recognize that it all happens *here*, it ceases. Its thingness ceases. Its otherness ceases. Its substantiality ceases.

This is just one way of talking and thinking about it. But I find this brings us much closer to the truth, because in that respect, it's held in check. It's known. But there's also the quality of its emptiness. Its insubstantiality is known. We're not imputing solidity to it, a reality that it doesn't possess. We're just looking directly at the world, knowing it fully and completely.

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So, what happens when the world ceases? I remember one time Ajahn Sumedho was giving a talk about this same subject. He said, "Now I'm going to make the world completely disappear. I'm going to make the world come to an end." He just sat there and said: "Okay, are you ready? . . . The world just ended. . . . Do you want me to bring it back into being again? Okay . . . welcome back."

Nothing was apparent from the outside. It all happens internally. When we stop creating the world, we stop creating each other. We stop imputing the sense of solidity that creates a sense of separation. Yet we do not shut off the senses in any way. Actually, we shed the veneer, the films of confusion, of opinion, of judgment, of our conditioning, so that we can see the way things really are. At that moment, dukkha ceases. This is what we can call the experience of rigpa. There is knowing. There is liberation and freedom. There is no dukkha.

### **Is the Sound Annoying You?**

In this respect, it's again striking to me how closely the language of the Dzogchen teachings matches the kind of expressions used by the Thai forest masters. These are exactly the kinds of teachings they dwell on and employ a great deal, particularly my own teacher, Ajahn Chah.

If people were trying to meditate and wanted to shut the world out, he used to give them a very hard time. If he came across a nun or a monk who had barricaded the windows of their heart and was trying to block everything out, he would really put them through it. One monk of this type he drew in as his attendant for a while and he would never let him sit still. As soon as he saw the monk close his eyes to "go into meditation" he would imme-



diately send him off on some errand. Ajahn Chah knew that cutting yourself off was not the place of true inner peace. This was because of his own years of trying to make the world shut up and leave him alone. He failed miserably. Eventually he was able to see this is not how to find completion and resolution.

Years ago he was a wandering monk, living on his own on a mountainside above a village and keeping a strict meditation schedule. In Thailand they love outdoor night-long film shows because the nights are cool compared to the very hot days. Whenever there was a party, it tended to go on all night. About 50 years ago, public address systems were just starting to be used in Thailand and every decent event had to have a PA going. It blasted as loud as it possibly could all through the night. One time, Ajahn Chah was quietly meditating up on the mountain while there was a festival going on down in the village. All the local folk songs and pop music were amplified throughout the area. Ajahn Chah was sitting there seething and thinking, "Don't they realize all the bad karma involved in disturbing my meditation? They know I'm up here. After all, I'm their teacher. Haven't they learned anything? And what about the five precepts? I bet they're boozing and out of control," and so on and so forth.

But Ajahn Chah was a pretty smart fellow. As he listened to himself complaining, he quickly realized, "Well, they're just having a good time down there. I'm making myself miserable up here. No matter how upset I get, my anger is just making more noise internally." And then he had this insight: "Oh, the sound is just the sound. It's me who is going out to annoy it. If I leave the sound alone, it won't annoy me. It's just doing what it has to do. That's what sound does. It makes sound. This is its job. So if I don't go out and bother the sound, it's not going to bother me. Aha!"

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As it turned out, this insight had such a profound effect that it became a principle that he espoused from that time on. If any of the monks displayed an urge to try and get away from people, stimulation, the world of things and responsibilities, he would tend to shove them straight into it. He would put that monk in charge of the cement-mixing crew or take him to do every house blessing that came up on the calendar. He would make sure that the monk had to get involved in things because he was trying to teach him to let go of seeing meditation as needing sterile conditions—to see, in fact, that most wisdom arises from the skilful handling of the world's abrasions.

Ajahn Chah was passing along an important insight. It's pointless to try to find peace through nullifying or erasing the sense world. Peace only comes through not giving that world more substantiality or more reality than it actually possesses.

## **Touching the Earth**

Sometimes when I use the example of the Buddha sitting under the bodhi tree, people still feel that this is a negation of the sense world. There is an intimation of condescension, a looking down on that. We get afraid when we hear people talking about dispassion towards the sense world as it can offend our habits of life affirmation.

The balance—and this is something we can experience for ourselves—is not in negation. It comes from when we stop creating each other and allow ourselves to relax into a pure quality of knowing. In not fabricating the world, our selves, or our stories, there is a gentle relaxation and, ironically, we find ourselves far more attuned to life than ever. This cannot happen while we are busy carrying around “me and you” and “it's my life” and “my

past" and "my future" and the rest of the world with all its problems. Actually, the result of this relinquishment is not a kind of numbness or a distancing but an astonishing attunement.

Buddhist cosmology and the stories of the suttas always have an historical, a mythical, and a psychological element to them. When we talk about the Buddha under the bodhi tree, we sometimes wonder, "Was it actually *that* tree? Are we sure that he *really* sat beside the river Nerañjarā near Bodh-gayā? How can anyone know it was actually there?" The story goes that perhaps the Buddha did sit under a tree, or a Nepalese prince sat under a tree, and something happened (or stopped happening) somewhere in India a couple of thousand years or so ago. In other words, there are both historical and mythological aspects to the story. But the most crucial element is how this maps onto our own psychology. How does this symbolize our experience?

The pattern of the story is that, even though the Buddha has totally penetrated the cycles of dependent origination and his heart is utterly free, Māra's army doesn't retreat. Māra has sent in the horrors, he has sent in his beautiful daughters, he's even sent in the parental pressure factor: "Well, son, you could have done a great job; you're such a natural leader, you would have made a great king. Now there's only your half-brother, Nanda, and he's a bit of a wimp, no good on the battlefield. Well, I guess if you're going to do this monk thing, the kingdom is going to rack and ruin. But that's all right, it's fine. You just do whatever you want to do. Just be aware that you're ruining my life, but don't worry, it's fine, it's okay."

The forces of allure, fear, and responsibility are all there. Yet the Buddha doesn't just close his eyes and escape into blissful absorption. As the armies of Māra come at him, he looks straight

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at them and says, "I know you, Māra. I know what this is." The Buddha doesn't argue with Māra, he doesn't give rise to aversion towards Māra. He stays undeluded; he doesn't react against what's happening in that moment. No matter what Māra's armies do, none can get into that space under the bodhi tree. All their weapons turn to flowers and incense and to beams of light illuminating the *vajra* seat.

But even when the Buddha's heart is totally liberated, Māra still won't retreat. He says to the Buddha, "What right do you have to claim the royal seat at the immovable spot. *I'm* the king of this world. *I'm* the one who should be sitting there. *I'm* in charge here. *I'm* the one who deserves to be there, aren't I?" And he turns around to his horde, his army 700,000 strong, and they all say, "Yes, indeed, Sire!" "See," says Māra, "everyone agrees. I belong there, not you. I'm supposed to be the great one."

What happens then is that, just as Māra has called his witnesses to back him up, the Buddha calls on the mother goddess, Maer Toranee, as his witness. The Buddha reaches down to the ground, touches the earth, and calls forth the earth mother. She appears and says, "This is my true son. He has every right to claim the vajra seat at the immovable spot. He has developed all the virtues necessary to claim the sovereignty of perfect and complete enlightenment. You do not belong there, Māra." The mother goddess then produces a flood from her hair, and the armies of Māra are all washed away. Later they come back full of apologies, offering gifts and flowers and asking for forgiveness: "Terribly sorry about that, Mother, I didn't really mean it."

It's very interesting that he thus did not become a fully enlightened, teaching Buddha without the help of the mother goddess and then, later, of the father god. It was Brahmā Sahampati, the creator god, the CEO of the universe, who came

and asked the Buddha to teach. Without those two figures, he would not have left the immovable spot and he wouldn't have started teaching. So, mythologically, there are some interesting little quirks to the tale.

The Buddha's gentle gesture of touching the earth is a magnificent metaphor. It is saying that even though we might have this enlightened, free space internally, it needs to be interfaced with the phenomenal world. Otherwise, there is no completion. This is why meditating with the eyes open is, in a way, such a useful bridge. We cultivate a vast internal space, but it is necessarily connected to the phenomenal world. If there is only an internal, subjective experience of enlightenment, we're still caught. Māra's army won't retreat. The hassles are everywhere—the tax returns, the permits, the jealousies. We can see that they are empty, but they are still coming at us from all directions.

But in reaching out to touch the earth, the Buddha recognized, yes, there is that which is transcendent and unconditioned. But humility demands not simply holding to the unconditioned and the transcendent. The Buddha recognized and acknowledged that: "There is the conditioned. There is the sense world. There is the earth that makes up my body and my breath and the food that I eat."

That gesture of reaching out from the transcendent is saying: "How could fully engaging with the sense world possibly corrupt the innate freedom of the heart? This freedom is uninterrupted, incorruptible, unconfusable by any sense experience. Therefore why not allow it all in? By openly, freely acknowledging the limited—needing to call the great mother to bear witness, for example—the unlimited manifests its full potential. If there is hesitancy and the caution to keep the conditioned at bay, that

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betrays a basic lack of faith in the natural inviolability of the unconditioned.”

Another phrase that expresses this same principle is “*cittaṃ pabhassaraṃ, akandukehi kilesehi,*” meaning “the heart’s nature is intrinsically radiant; defilements are only visitors.” (A 1.61) It’s pointing out the fact that the heart’s nature is intrinsically pure and perfect. The things that appear to defile this purity are only visitors passing through, just wandering or drifting by. The heart’s nature cannot truly be corrupted by any of that.

## Immanent and Transcendent

**I**F THE PRACTICE THAT WE DO is going to result in true and unshakeable freedom, we need to pay close attention to the motivations that guide our hearts.

In working with the mind, it is very easy to become unconscious of a somewhat fierce and self-obsessed attitude. The Tibetan word “*trekcho*” means “cutting”—and the cutting of the cord of clinging is a very important part of the practice of wisdom. We see beautiful images of Mañjushri with his flaming sword that severs delusion, and as a religious symbol, that’s very significant. It’s that kind of clarity we need to cut through the tangle of ignorance, to snap out of it, to be able to break through the blockages. But it is also very easy to make that cutting gesture the sole habit, pervading all of our efforts at meditation, even when we are aiming to practice within the mindset of *non*-meditation. We can get pretty brutal and imbalanced in the way

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that we operate. I'm definitely speaking from personal experience here; I have often found that tendency in myself.

When I first came across the Buddha's wisdom teachings, my attitude—even though I'm a friendly sort of fellow, quite a chummy, kindly type—was: "Give me the essence of the vajra teachings. Let's just get in there and cut off all the defilements. Compassion and loving-kindness, that's kindergarten stuff; give me the ultimate!" Most of us want the best, the highest, the ultimate, the purest, the mostest, the secret essence of the essence—"the most precious and refined essential quintessence of all possible teachings"—we don't want to muck around with what seems like something inferior or shallow. We want the real goods, the deep-tissue stuff. People hear teachings or read books and feel, "Yeah, wow, right, ultimate emptiness, I want that. Let's do it." And even though that element is a crucial part of it, it's also significant how the chanting we all do on this retreat includes the dedication of merit with every teaching. This Dzogchen practice is, in essence, dedicated to the realization of these same ultrahigh wisdom qualities, yet here too, as in the Mahāyāna tradition as a whole, there is a constant recollection of dedicating our practice for the benefit of all beings.

Some of the chants I like to do on retreat are "The Four *Brahma-vihāras*," the "Discourse on Loving-Kindness," the "Reflections on Universal Well-being," and the "Sharing of Blessings." These "soft" recollections are the sweet, gentle, loving expressions of the Dharma. I feel it is really significant that we do these chants. Probably many people, especially those who have practiced a lot of vipassanā in the West, are not used to doing much chanting during retreats. There's not a big devotional or ceremonial element in these circles. Personally, I encourage



everyone not to look at these chants just as little mood embellishments, like the flowers on the shrine, but to see them as a very significant part of the practice. Chanting is not just about brightening up the general environment. Chanting reflects our collective commitment to embody the Buddha's way. After all, the words are his but the voices are ours. Again, this is something confessional. I treated the morning and evening chanting with absolute contempt for years and years. I recited all the words and made all the requisite gestures, but my inner feeling was: "Let's get to the real stuff. Let's get down there and cut through. Let's be done with all of this pussyfooting and mucking around. Loving-kindness, devotion, humbug!"

### **Clarifying Compassionate Intention**

The first time I had a revelation about this was nearly 20 years ago now. I was a very zealous young monk. And, although my mind was often extremely busy and all over the place, after three or four years of monastic training, I found that meditation came quite easily to me and that I could attain quite strong states of concentration. This was also the early years of our community in England, when Ajahn Sumedho would be giving two or three Dharma talks a day and it seemed like there was a constant stream of high wisdom. It was a very inspired time. There was a feeling that enlightenment was just so close, that it was an obvious reality. It was just a matter of cutting through the last few defilements and, boom! it would all be there.

We developed a tradition of having a winter retreat during the cold, dark months of January and February. About three weeks into one of these early retreats, I was working very diligently and was extremely focused on the meditation. I wasn't talking

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to anyone or looking at anything. Every lunar quarter we would have an all-night meditation vigil. This was the full moon in January. I was really charged up and was convinced, "Okay, tonight's the night." It was a crystal clear evening in the middle of an English winter. There were brilliant stars in the sky, and the full moon was blazing brightly. I really had the juice going. We came to the evening sitting, did the chanting, listened to the Dharma talk, and so forth, and then, once those were over, the rest of the night was open—just walking and sitting meditation, as one chose.

So, I'm sitting there with a very bright and clear mind and this thought keeps floating in, "Any minute now, any second now." We all know that one: "Left a bit, right a bit, okay, now relax a bit, straighten up a bit, looking good, okay, hold steady, don't do anything, all right, all right." It's very familiar terrain to everyone, I'm sure.

This was going on for hours. My mind was getting more and more energized, brighter and brighter, cutting through defilements and obscurations left and right. The clues were getting more and more prolific, like: "Something big is about to happen." At about two in the morning, noises began to filter into my consciousness: thump, thump, thump, rumble, rumble, rumble, doors opening and closing, heavy footsteps in the hallway. I thought, "Shoes in the hallway? Who's wearing shoes in the hallway?" Thump, thump. "What's going on out there?" As you can tell, there was a little interference to my enlightenment program. But I decided just to ignore it, telling myself, "It's only a noise [*humming*]. Just me and the moon humming our way to nibbāna." Even though I tried my best to ignore the noise, I then noticed there was a presence in front of me. I opened my eyes.

One of the monks was leaning down and saying, "Um, could you come outside for a moment?" And my first thought was, "What do you mean, 'come outside'? This is my big night. I'm busy." I resisted the impulse to act out my thoughts, left the room, and found policemen in the hall. "Police? What's going on here?"

What had transpired was that one of the novices, a very erratic young man called Robert, had got himself into some trouble. All the meditation during the winter retreat, coupled with never having done that kind of concentrated practice before, could send many people to the wrong side of the border. Young Robert not only had gone over the border but had traveled many miles. He also had emptied the petty cash box before leaving. Down at the local pub, Robert had bought everybody drinks and was discoursing to the entire assembly. Because he was in a slightly crazy but hyperlucid state, he also found he now could read people's minds. He was eyeballing people in the pub and saying, "You're doing this and you're thinking that; I know what you're up to." So people were seriously freaking out. Remember, this was England, and English village life really isn't ready for shaven-headed young men in white coming into the sanctity of the local pub, offering gifts, and revealing people's inner secrets. The English really are not very good at revealing secrets in the best of times. But to have someone behave so strangely and to divulge people's thoughts was distinctly unacceptable. So they called the law. The police, with equally great English common sense and compassion, understood this fellow was a little bit off and brought him back to the monastery. By then he really had lost it. He started raving and ranting, saying he wanted to kill himself.

The monk standing above me said: "Robert's in deep trouble. He's in a very weird state and wants to throw himself in the lake."

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Can you go help him? You're the only one who can do it." This was true. Because I was one of the most junior members of the Sangha, like him, I had been quite close to this novice and was one of the few people in the community who could relate to him at all.

At the time, Robert was living in a *kuṭī* in the forest. Most of the community lived either in the main house or at the nuns' cottage, and the *kuṭī* in the forest was about a half-hour walk away. Part of my mind was going, "But, but, but, look, this is my big enlightenment night." And so my first impulse was to say, "Not tonight." But then something in me said, "Don't be stupid, go, you have no choice." So they loaded me up with thermoses of hot chocolate, candies, and other allowable goodies that monastics can have at that hour, and I went charging up to the woods. To cut a long story short, I spent the next three hours or so in his company drinking tea and cocoa and trying to talk him down. I let him talk and talk and talk and talk and talk. Finally he exhausted himself, and around dawn he wanted to sleep. I realized he was okay and knew he was not going to do anything stupid. So I left him and set off back to the house.

I was charging down the hill when I suddenly thought, "What's the hurry? Why am I racing?" I slowed down and slowed down and finally I just stopped and looked up. There was the full moon setting on the other side of the lake. And then all of the voices that had been going on in my mind during the first part of the night started coming back to me: "Any minute now. This is my big night. I'm really going places." And it also came to me that, throughout that entire scenario, I hadn't for one second thought about anyone but me—me and my enlightenment program, me awakening, me getting liberated. I realized I hadn't had a vestige of concern for practicing for anyone else's benefit. I felt about

*this* small. [*Holds finger and thumb a quarter inch apart.*] How could I have been so incredibly stupid?

Just through having been in the presence of one suffering being, I could now see how my attention while meditating had shrunk so much that all other beings had been completely shut out. What started with a good intention—wanting to develop spiritually and be liberated, which seemed like the finest thing anyone could do with a life—had narrowed, narrowed, and narrowed until it became a matter of me winning the big prize. The incredibly shallow motivation of my practice was revealed. I wondered, “What was all that effort really for?”

It then struck me deeply how important the altruistic principle is. For even though one might be doing a lot of inner work and developing very good qualities and skillful means, that kind of neglect of others undermines the true purpose of our practice. Other beings aren’t just a token reference. Our community used to chant the “Sharing of Blessings” every day, and it was only after this incident that I realized, “Oh, real people really suffering. Oh, right, *real* people . . . oh.”

Having been so close to Robert when my mind was in a very alert and sensitive state, this notion of practicing for the benefit of all beings really sank in. From that time on, I started paying a lot more attention to the whole element of altruism and to consciously bringing in a concern for other beings. This wasn’t just a concept. I really internalized it.

At that time, many of the Mahāyāna teachings started to make considerably more sense to me. I saw how that narrowing emphasis on enlightenment for the individual had become one of the driving spirits behind what I was doing. Through that “personal enlightenment” perspective, the mind naturally starts to drift towards a neglect of the greater picture.

## Clarifying the Practice of Wisdom

During the early years of our community in England, there had been something of an “onwards and upwards” spirit to life. It was as if we were saying, “At last, the Dharma is coming to the West!” Ajahn Sumedho was the glorious leader. Everything was golden, fertile, and expansive, and there was a tremendous vigor and enthusiasm. A Dharma charge was in the air.

The first monastery we had, down in West Sussex, had a large forest but was limited in the way of buildings; it wasn’t really conducive to a large communal living situation or to group retreats. We had been expanding very rapidly, so the community had bought an old school in Hertfordshire, and many of the Sangha had moved up there. This was Amaravatī Monastery. About 30 to 35 monastics and probably about 20 laypeople were in residence there.

By 1986 the onwards-and-upwards theme had been developing for a while, and it peaked at the winter retreat that year. We decided on a “no prisoners taken, death or glory” approach. The practice schedule went from three in the morning until eleven at night; it was a nonstop routine. Some of the really vigorous folks were breaking the ice on the fishpond and jumping in at 3:00 A.M. to freshen themselves up for the morning sitting. (We had spare testosterone floating around, so that was very popular with the males.) The monastics lammed into this whole program with great glee.

Even though Ajahn Sumedho didn’t say much at the time, the next year, when we were talking about how we were going to run the winter retreat, he said, “Well, I didn’t really like the results of what we were doing last year; there was certainly some fire in the air, but it didn’t have a good effect on people.” After surveying the terrain of what was happening with the Sangha, he

concluded, "I don't really like this kind of spirit; this is going in the wrong direction."

And so for about the first two or three weeks of the winter retreat in 1987, Ajahn Sumedho kept telling people *not* to meditate: "Just be awake."

He would say to us over and over again, "Stop it, stop meditating!" He stressed this repeatedly and gave two or three Dharma talks a day on not meditating. He would tell people to open their eyes and stop trying to concentrate. Sometimes there would be the plaintive cry, "But what are we supposed to *do*?" For which the person would receive a response in thunderbolts saying, "DO!? Don't *do* anything. You already are it. Don't *do* anything." The methodology was identical to the "undistracted nonmeditation" employed in Dzogchen practice.

He was trying to point out that dimension of doingness, busyness, that *becoming* quality that so easily takes over the meditation. It can permeate the whole effort of spiritual practice. The becoming tendency takes over and gets legitimized by being called meditation or "me becoming enlightened." Meanwhile, we miss the fact that we are losing the main point and that what we are doing has turned into a self-based program. We get caught in the illusion, trying to make the self become something other. As a result, we lose track of the real essence of the practice. Making the effort to see how this happens made this a very fruitful retreat. After about two or three weeks we were beginning to get a sense of what it means to stay present: "Don't do something now to become enlightened in the future. Just be awake now."

## Being Buddha

Ajahn Sumedho also began to talk a lot about "being Buddha." I came to appreciate this teaching greatly because, even though

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my practice was by then a lot more balanced in terms of altruistic motivation, I still had been motoring at full speed and still thought I was going places. This was the first time it dawned on me that perhaps any kind of “going places” wasn’t necessarily such a good idea.

When I came across the Dzogchen teachings a while ago, they reminded me very much of that quality of “being Buddha.” How do we balance, within undistracted nonmeditation, both acute attention—clear, highly focused awareness—and not *doing* anything? A phrase I like to use in this context is “diligent effortlessness.” There is a putting forth of energy. There is a commitment. There is a unity or integrity of purpose. Yet there is also effortlessness. Not pushing, not straining, not trying to get something, but just allowing the natural energy of the heart to function in a focused and free way. “Be still and you will move forward on the tide of the spirit,” as they say in the Taoist tradition.

### **Compassion and Wisdom: Immanent and Transcendent**

This “being Buddha” essentially involves the integration of compassion and wisdom and getting a sense for how they work together.

Mañjushri wielding the flaming sword, symbolizing the wisdom element, is a very masculine portrayal of the archetype of a penetrating light and an energy that cuts through. Avalokitesvāra, also known as Kuan Yin in Chinese and Chenrezig in Tibetan, characterizes compassion, which is a receptive energy, often symbolized by a gentle feminine form. The name means “The One Who Listens to the Sounds of the World.” Whereas Mañjushri has the masculine, outgoing, cutting-through energy and the imagery of vision, Avalokiteshvāra has the imagery of listening, receptivity, and acceptance.



It is also interesting that Avalokiteshvāra, in all the scriptures from India, China, and Tibet, started out as male. In China, as the centuries went by Avalokitesvāra transformed into a female figure. The current images most often have a feminine form. He became a she. And it's quite appropriate and understandable for her to manifest as female because this image represents that quality which is intrinsically more receptive and feminine.

If our practice doesn't embrace both qualities—wisdom and compassion, Mañjushri and Kuan Yin—if we lean too far in one direction or the other, we tend to become seriously imbalanced. It's always a question of holding that duality. It's the challenge of emptying everything out and yet also appreciating the wholeness of things.

One other way that I reflect on this is in the word the Buddha used to refer to himself, "Tathāgata." The Buddha coined this word, and it's made up of two different parts. The first part, "*tathā*," means "such" or "thus"; and the second part, "*agata*," means "come." Meanwhile the word "*gata*" means "gone." So a long debate has been going on: Is it "Tath-āgata" or "Tathā-gata"? Is the Buddha "thus come" or "thus gone?" Is he totally here or is he totally gone? Is he utterly immanent or utterly transcendent? Scholars have been bashing each other over the heads with this issue for millennia.

The Buddha loved wordplay and irony. He used double entendre many times, so my feeling is that he deliberately used an ambiguous term. It means both "completely gone" and "completely here." The "gone" aspect is that of transcendent wisdom: gone, empty, no thing, utterly transparent. "Thus come," "come to thusness," "come to suchness," are the aspects of being utterly here, completely immanent, utterly attuned to all things, utterly attentive to and embodied in all things. The compassion

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element is what represents the “thus come” meaning, where everything is self. In the wisdom element, nothing is self.

In the *Sutta Nipāta*, the Buddha says, “The wise do not take anything in the world as belonging to them, nor do they take anything in the world as not belonging to them either.” (SN 858) This is a wonderful illustration of what it means to hold that duality.

## Wise Kindness: Loving Is Not Liking

How should we use and understand kindness and compassion in this respect? For myself, I don’t like to teach loving-kindness meditation as a separate feature of spiritual practice. I find that it’s far more skillful to cultivate loving-kindness as a background theme, as a kind and loving presence that informs and infuses every effort that is made in our spiritual training. The way that we pick up any aspect of the training needs to have this quality of loving-kindness in it. As a preface to that, it’s also important to understand that *loving* everything doesn’t mean we have to *like* everything. Sometimes it’s misunderstood that to have loving-kindness we need to attempt to make ourselves like everything. For instance, we may try to convince ourselves that we like pain, grief, unrequited love, an overdraft, decaying sense faculties, or an ex who continues to haunt us. This is a misguided way of practicing loving-kindness.

*Mettā* is better understood as “the heart that does not dwell in aversion.” Not dwelling in aversion towards anything, even our enemies. Someone quoted me a passage in one of the Dalai Lama’s recent books where he was talking about the Chinese. He referred to them as “my friends, the enemy.” So loving-kindness is that quality whereby we are able to refrain from piling on aversion, even toward that which is bitter, painful, ugly, cruel, and

harmful. It's a matter of realizing that place in our hearts where we know that this too has its role in nature. Yes, including the whole spectrum of the seemingly unlikable, the repulsive, and the utterly despicable.

Loving-kindness is the quality of allowing and accepting these things as part of the whole picture. It's not about saying we approve of everything or we think things like torture, deceit, and malice are good. It's about accepting that they exist and fully acknowledging that they are a part of life's panorama. Here they are. When we establish loving acceptance as a basis for practice, then whatever we're dealing with in terms of our own minds and our world, there's the fundamental quality of accord. And for myself, I find that that needs to be there whether I'm doing concentration practice, insight practice, or the nonduality practice of Dzogchen—completely letting go of everything in the subjective and the objective realms. We need to recognize that there is no enemy. There is Dharma. There is no them or that or it. It all belongs. Fundamentally, everything belongs and has its place in nature.

The brahma-vihāras chant that we do in English appears in the Buddha's teaching called "The Simile of the Saw." What he teaches there is that, "If you were captured by bandits and they were sawing your body into pieces, limb by limb with a two-handled saw, anyone who gave rise to a thought of aversion towards them on account of that would not be practicing my teaching." (M 21.20)

I realize that some people find this an incredibly daunting and unrealistic teaching. But to me it is actually extremely helpful and skillful. It's saying that hatred cannot be in accord with Dharma and is therefore never justified.

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The Buddha used an extreme, almost absurd example where it would seem utterly reasonable to feel *some* aversion toward those sawing you up bit by bit. One would think a little irritation, just a snippet of negativity here or there, would be quite allowable. But the Buddha didn't say that, did he? He said, "Not one hair's tip of aversion is appropriate." As soon as the heart lurches into, "No, this doesn't belong, this shouldn't be. You are evil. Why me?" then the Dharma has been obscured, lost. That's the fact. Something in us may revolt, but the heart knows it's true. Any dwelling in aversion points it out very clearly, and because of that, the aversion is a unambiguous sign that "the Dharma has been lost."

As soon as we find ourselves judging our own minds or the people around us with harshness, cultivating justifiable hatred for the government or our thinking minds or our erratic emotions or our damaged lives, there's no vision of reality; it's obscured. The attitude is not in accord with truth. So that hatred, that aversion becomes a sign for us that we've lost the path.

This standard of training described by the Buddha may seem totally impractical, but it is doable. I think it's helpful to recognize this because what we think we're capable of is very different from what we actually are capable of. We might think, "I could never do that. That's impossible for me." Yet I tell you, it is possible. That potential is there for all of us. And when we find that quality of total acceptance and absolute nonaversion, where there's kindness and compassion, then there's a tremendous quality of ease and release, a real nondiscrimination at last. For what kind of wisdom are we developing if it packs up and departs as soon as the going gets rough—as soon as the weather gets too hot, the "wrong" person is put in charge, or the body gets sick and uncomfortable?

A sincere spirit of loving-kindness is the most challenging thing to establish in the face of extreme bitterness and pain because to do so requires finding spaciousness around these experiences. This is where the heart most easily contracts and impacts itself. But we can pick up that quality and say, "Yes, this too is part of nature. This too is just the way it is." Then, at that moment, there's an expansion around it. We feel the space of emptiness that surrounds and pervades it and we see the whole thing is transparent. No matter how dense and real the feeling of "I and me and mine" is in that holding, we see in that spaciousness that not only is there space around it, but there is also light coming through.

### **When the Worst Happens**

One of the stories I like to tell in this regard is a tale of Venerable Master Hsüan Hua's teacher. Master Hua was the abbot of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. He was the person who gave us the land where our monastery is situated, and he and Ajahn Sumedho were very good friends. Master Hua's teacher, Venerable Master Hsü Yün, was the patriarch of all five lineages of Buddhism in China and was very highly respected. He was the head of the Ch'an lineage, the sutra lineage, the mantra lineage, the Vinaya lineage, and the esoteric lineage. It's no secret that different sects tend to argue with each other. Yet he was so indisputably pure and skilled that everyone wanted him to be the head. When the Red Chinese took over, they were trying to wipe out religion altogether and so he became a very obvious target. The Chinese army attacked his monastery when he was about 110 years old. They beat him with wooden clubs until he was a bloody heap on the ground and left him for dead. Even though he had broken bones and damaged organs, he recovered. The news of his survival spread around the area. A while later the Red

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Army came back and used iron bars to beat him until he was a complete mess. This frail old man was really smashed up and seriously injured, and yet he still didn't die.

His disciples were nursing him and trying to help heal his deep and serious wounds. All of them were amazed that he was still alive. Needless to say, he had incredible meditative powers, so his disciples were convinced that he was sustaining his life energy for them. They believed that the master realized the feeling of grief they would have when he died because they were all very devoted to him. And so they implored him: "Please, don't stay alive just for our sakes. We're very touched that you would endure the weeks and weeks of pain and misery because of not wanting to leave us grief stricken. But if it's time for you to die, we would prefer that you just let yourself go peacefully instead of enduring all this agony." And he said, "What I'm doing is not for you. It's true I'm keeping myself alive, but it's not for your sake, it's for the soldiers. If I died as a result of their beatings, the karmic retribution for those who attacked me would be so great, I couldn't bear to be responsible for that." After that, the army left him alone. He survived and even taught retreats again. The books *Ch'an and Zen Training*, translated by Charles Luk, are from the Dharma talks that he gave at a retreat four years later. He died when he was 120. He had made a vow to be a monk for one hundred years.

So not dwelling in aversion toward anything is, in fact, doable.

There's another relevant story about a slightly less exalted being, one of our monks, who was on a pilgrimage in India. He was visiting the holy places as part of 1,000-mile walk. Together with a layman, they traveled around India for six months, living mostly on alms food. Village India can be pretty dangerous in many respects, and they kept being told, in different places they

went to, "Be careful, be careful, there are bandits out there; you might get robbed." They walked right on in spite of these warnings and thought, "Oh, no, not us, we're on this holy pilgrimage, nothing's going to touch us." They were doing protective chants and had received blessings from various great masters before they left. And since they had already gone through some dangerous areas without any kind of hassle at all, they were getting a little cocky: "Hey, we're doing pretty good here."

Before this monk had left for India, Master Hua had been visiting Amaravati Monastery. One time, when he was giving an informal talk to a whole group of us, the monk who went on the pilgrimage asked him a question. Master Hua, who didn't know he was going to go to India, answered the question by saying, "When you go to practice in the place of the Buddha, you should not find fault with anyone for any reason." So, when he went to India, the monk took that as something of a mantra and embedded it in his consciousness.

The monk and his lay companion were traveling through the forested countryside between Nālandā and Rajgir, and, lo and behold, they met up with a group of surly-looking men who had been cutting trees in the forest. They all had axes and staves of wood. It was a very lonely area and this group immediately surrounded them. They wanted to take all their things. So the layman who was with our monk, trying to be protective, started fighting with the men. After getting knocked around, the layman ran off and a couple of the robbers ran after him. This left four of them alone with the monk. They made it obvious that they were going to kill him. Because the monk spoke a little bit of Hindi, he was able to understand what they were saying. Also the head bandit was brandishing an axe over his head. The situation was pretty unambiguous.

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Then suddenly the thought flashed into his mind, "When you go to practice in the place of the Buddha, do not find fault with anyone for any reason." He realized, "If this is what's happening, I can't escape. I'm not going to fight these people, and if I did, they would win anyway. So I'll just give myself to them." He then bowed his head, put his hands together, and started chanting, "Namo tassa . . ." He stood calmly waiting for the axe to fall. But nothing happened. He looked up and saw that the man holding the axe over his head couldn't bring it down. Then the monk got a bit cheeky and went like this. [*Drawing a line down the middle of his head with his finger.*] But again the bandit couldn't bring himself to harm him.

At this point, the layman, who'd been hiding, realized, "Hey, wait a minute, I'm supposed to be protecting the monk. I'm not doing my job." He ran back and tried to help out. They had another scuffle. The layperson realized he was in real danger again and ran off once more. He hid in the bushes at the bottom of some scree. As it turned out, the bandits took all of their things. The monk was left with his lower robe and his sandals. Everything else went.

However, through all this, the monk didn't get a scratch on him. The layman who fought back got thumped around quite a bit and was torn up by thorn bushes and the tumble down the scree. Later on, when they were discussing what had happened, the monk realized that, "If I had died, I would have died with my mind focused on the Triple Gem." The layman realized, "If I had died, I would have died with the mind of a hunted animal."

These are deliberately dramatic images. Yet they characterize a certain precious quality very clearly. These stories encourage us to turn towards that which is most frightening or most off-putting. When the man with the axe is threatening us, we can



turn towards him and say, "Please, I'm ready." Even when we're getting the axe internally, such as intense waves of greed or waves of fear and anxiety or waves of nostalgia and longing, it's that gesture of turning towards these experiences and accepting them as they are that allows the heart to be free. True wisdom, far from being beyond the practice of kindness, actually depends on such indiscriminating acceptance of the beautiful and the ugly alike. When we stop running away from things that are apparently painful, even unbearable, and fully engage in the gesture of acceptance and surrender, there is a magical transformation. We transform the so-called difficulty and move into an entirely different state.

When we look back to a situation where someone came at us in a rage and we just received that energy without any reaction, we became a mirror, right? Or if we go flying at someone and the person just gently says, "Oh, you're having a really bad day today, aren't you?" it comes straight back to us. We recognize, "Oh, right, sorry about that." Intensity is transformed by the purity of reflection. And when we are dealing with our own emotional life, that same kind of open and clear reception has a way of transmuting the emotional state. It doesn't suppress it. The emotion shrivels; the energy of it gets changed into something that actually enlivens and brightens the mind—the heat is transformed into light.

### **Two-Way Traffic**

There are many structures that we come across in the Buddha's teaching—such as the *brahma-vihāras*, (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity)—that are talked about as specific practices we can develop. It's the same with the seven factors of enlightenment. With effort, these states of heart and

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mind can be cultivated. But it's helpful to understand the whole picture. When the heart is completely enlightened and liberated, when there's rigpa, nondual awareness, then the natural disposition of the heart is loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. These qualities naturally radiate forth when the heart is completely free. This is not some "thing" that "I do." This is the innate disposition of the pure heart. It's the same with the factors of enlightenment (mindfulness, contemplation of reality, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity). These are intrinsic qualities of the liberated mind, of the awakened and enlightened heart. They are the immanent manifestations of that transcendent reality.

Or take the five precepts: when the heart is completely liberated, it's impossible to deliberately harm another being. It's impossible to act acquisitively. It's impossible to take advantage of another being sexually or use your sense world indulgently. It is simply impossible. You can't lie or use speech in a harmful or deceitful way. It's as if the force of spiritual gravity won't allow it. There's nothing there that could cause you to bend the truth.

When we say, "I will now practice loving-kindness" or "I will develop compassion" or "I will keep the five precepts," we overtly take that particular quality as a practice. In fact, what we are really doing is aligning the conditions of our dualistic mind with the reality of our own nature. We are helping the conditioned be resonant, harmonious with the unconditioned, and through that resonance, that synchrony, there is a spaciousness between conditions that opens up through which the unconditioned is realized. By practicing the seven factors of enlightenment or the brahma-vihāras, we set the conditions so the gap is right there. What's "outside" in terms of the conditioned is completely attuned to what is "inside." It's a practice and process that works

both ways. As we practice loving-kindness, our heart automatically comes into accord with reality and we feel good. And when our heart is awakened to reality, it automatically functions with loving-kindness or with one of the other brahma-vihāras. It's like two-way traffic on a highway between the conditioned and the unconditioned.

There are the intrinsic qualities that come forth and the practices that lead in. We get the strings in tune so that we line up our behaviors and attitudes "outside" with what is already the case "inside." Goodness feels good because the attitude resonates with reality. Lying and harming feel bad because they are dissonant with that reality of what we are. It's as simple as that. The Buddha said the brahma-vihāras are not transcendent qualities; they are a peaceful and a beautiful abiding. By doing these kinds of practices, we create an alignment so that things match up. The conditions are set so that the gap is visible and very close. Then as soon as the gap opens, boom! It's right there, in alignment, and in that moment, the heart is free.



As a postscript to the story about the monk and his attendant who got robbed: within about three days, not only were all of their things replaced, but many of the things they were given were much better than what they had before.



WHO ARE YOU?





## No Buddha Elsewhere

VIPASSANĀ PRACTICE IS USUALLY TAUGHT and cultivated with a very particular and detailed attention placed on mental objects, objects of experience. Regardless of whether the objects are physical sensations or thoughts, feelings, sounds, or emotions, we pay scrupulous attention to their nature, watching very closely how the objects of experience come, go, and change. Also, we meet each of those objects with the recognition of their impermanent, selfless, and unsatisfactory natures. So the primary focus of the practice is the fine attention on the object, the objective world.

My own training in vipassanā, both in Ajahn Chah's monasteries and in the Thai forest tradition in general, has not been quite so fixed or associated with such a specific technique. The attention is on the object, but there is also a sense of the field of awareness in which the object appears. There is the observing of the coming and going of feelings, thoughts, and perceptions

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and so on, but there is also the holding of that experience within the space of awareness. The object is perceived within a context. These distinctions are sweeping generalizations, but I would like to offer this as a somewhat more expansive picture of vipassanā practice than that which is often presented.

### Being the Knowing

It is also important to extend from the objective realm to the subjective one and to the quality of knowing. Various masters in Thailand, such as Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Buddhādāsa, and Ajahn Brahmamuni, as well as other leading meditation teachers, would often talk about letting go of the objective realm altogether and just being the knowing. In Thai, there's an expression, "*yoo gap roo*," which literally means "there with the knowing."

It seems that the practice of rigpa deals with something very similar. It includes a specific turning away from the object. We deliberately do not pay much attention to it. Instead we put most of our attention on the nature of the subject. There is an inclining away from the seductive pull of the senses and a focus on, and a nonidentification with, the subject.

Similar to the Thai forest teachings, rigpa is ultimately about emptying out both the subjective and objective realms. The aim of the practice is subjectless, objectless awareness. The heart rests in rigpa, the quality of open, spacious knowing and there is the recognition of the mind's own intrinsic nature: it is empty, lucid, awake, and bright. The Thai people love alliterations, and Ajahn Buddhādāsa and Ajahn Chah used to use the phrase "*sawang sa-aht sangoup*" to speak about this quality. Sawang means "radiance" or "bright light." Sa-aht means "pure." Sangoup means "peaceful." Sawang sa-aht sangoup: radiance, purity, and peacefulness.



So in using the term “vipassanā,” it is important to know that it includes a variety of ways of practice, such as this “being the knowing;” and it doesn’t refer just to one particular systematic technique. We can employ a range of practices to arrive at the quality of liberation, of realizing the mind’s own nature. There are many ways to support emptying out and letting go, disidentification with thought, feeling, the body, the mind, and the world around us. All can help us toward such realizations.

When I listen to the Dzogchen teachings, I am often reminded of a couple of lines from the verses of the Third Zen Patriarch, where he says, “All is empty, clear, self-illuminating, with no exertion of the mind’s power.” These teachings have been around for years, haven’t they? It seems to me that this is exactly the guidance we receive from the Tibetan tradition, particularly that last line, “with no exertion of the mind’s power”—no person doing *anything*. This is pointing to the intrinsically pure and free quality of mind. We take on certain conventional practices, like calming or brightening the mind, or waking up the mind, but we are just bringing the conditioned realm into alignment with the already existent basic reality. The intrinsic nature of mind is already totally peaceful, totally energetic, and totally awake. That’s its inherent nature.

### **Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha**

It is also interesting to reflect on ordinary taking refuge and extraordinary taking refuge (see “Selected Chants” on page 159) and on the different levels of understanding they reflect. How can we look at Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as aspects or ways of talking about the qualities of emptiness, knowing, and lucidity? One way of speaking about lucidity is to regard it as being a combination or the coexistence of knowing and emptiness. Another is by

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seeing the two as manifesting together as compassion, or innate compassionate activity.

I find this a very helpful way of talking about it: the Buddha is that which is awake, that which knows, so taking refuge in the Buddha is taking refuge in the awareness of the mind. The Buddha arises from the Dharma. The Buddha is an attribute, knowing is an attribute of that fundamental reality. The Dharma is the ultimate object, the way things are. Its characteristic is emptiness. The Buddha is the ultimate subject, that which knows, that which is awake. So when the ultimate subject knows the ultimate object, when the mind that knows is aware of the way things are, what comes forth is Sangha, compassionate action. Sangha intrinsically flows forth from that quality. When there's awareness of the way things are, then compassionate skillful means naturally arise and flow from that. The three refuges, as you can see, are all interwoven.

It is useful to think of them simply as separate attributes of the same essential quality. For example, water has wetness. We can talk about wetness, but we can't separate wetness from water. And there's such qualities as the fluidity and the temperature of the water that we also can't extract. They are distinct qualities; we can distinguish them, but we can't separate them. When we are investigating this quality of rigpa, the nature of mind, it is helpful to see how all its attributes are intrinsically interwoven and intermingled with each other. We can't actually separate them out; they are of one piece.

A way of holding this all together is reflected in a phrase often used by Ajahn Chah: "Inside is Dharma. Outside is Dharma. Everything is Dharma." Whether we can see it or not, it is all Dharma. It is like saying of the sea: "This is water. Inside is water. Outside is water. Everything is water." The mind is Dharma.

The knowing is Dharma. The physical world around us is Dharma. All the beings around us, every one, are all a part of nature. "Nature," by the way, is another translation for Dharma.

### **Dharma Aware of Its Own Nature**

When the heart is resting in rigpa, we can say that this is Dharma being aware of its own nature. Now it's easy to think that this way of phrasing things might make us a bit inflated. However, during certain visualization practices, such as seeing our body, speech, and mind as the Buddha's body, speech, and mind, we are also creating an ideal that we can live up to. These practices and ways of speaking help us to arouse our intuition of what is already the case.

We visualize the Buddha sending forth qualities of kindness, compassion, and wisdom, beaming that into us, and this body, having been beamed into, then becomes filled with brightness. We become completely possessed by this radiant being. All of the "little me" has been driven out, and there's just this Buddha occupying our frame. It's a way of using our imagination, but it's also designed to trigger an intuition or recognition. Perhaps it is already the case that the wisdom of our mind is no different by a hair's breadth from the wisdom of a Buddha. It's just that that quality here is somewhat more obscured than that which is going on in the mind or the life of a Buddha. We can get very personal about such things and start questioning this method: "Am I just trying to fool myself? Is he telling me that I'm some kind of wonderful avatar?" Try to lay all that aside and use these phrases as a way of helping to illuminate those self-limiting restrictions and let them go; use them as ways of helping the heart awaken to that realization.

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When we say to ourselves, “This is just Dharma aware of its own nature,” we are reflecting the basis of faith. What aspect of you is not Dharma? What aspect of you is not a part of nature? Can you name one? Your problems? Your obsessions? Your ingrown toenails? Your mind? Mind essence? Your ideas? All of it, every single part, is a part of the natural order. There is no element of our being or anything around us, physical or mental, that doesn’t belong to the natural order. And when we say, “this is Dharma aware of its own nature,” even that knowing mind is an aspect of Dharma.

Seeing in terms of Dharma knowing itself can be used to permeate our self-centered perceptions and habits of thinking. It’s like blasting them through with the light of wisdom—irradiating, pervading them so that something in us starts to awaken to the realization, “Oh, maybe me too. . . .” “Me? A swan?” [*Singing.*] “And a very fine swan indeed! Look in the lake, look in the lake.” That’s exactly what we’re doing. Go take a look.

There are the wonderful words in the verses of the first Tsoknyi Rinpoche: “There is no Buddha elsewhere. Look at your own face” (see page 164). “Look at your own face” doesn’t mean look at your wrinkles or pimples, your beautiful eyes. It means look at your *original* face. There is something beyond the wrinkles, the beauty, and the mediocrity. So when we go to the lake, what does it mean to look at our original face?

During this retreat we have all been participating in the practice of visualizing the Buddha Vajrasattva, the embodiment of purifying wisdom. The question might arise (as it did for the young man asking about Tārā): “Does Vajrasattva really exist or does he not?” Many students unfamiliar with these practices may have been slightly taken aback with some of the visualiza-

tions and instructions. I must say I blinked a couple of times when I was first instructed: “Imagine Vajrasattva with consort, replete with jewelry, floating on a lotus in front of you with a moon disk and a vajra, while both repeating the hundred-syllable mantra and visualizing it circling round them.” The presumption being that, to begin with, we can actually spell in Sanskrit! Then being asked to visualize *amrita* dripping down over Vajrasattva and the consort and then flowing onto you. I could maybe conjure up a little feeling of some sort of goldenish light somewhere in the vicinity, but my Sanskrit spelling was not up to snuff.

Of course for some people it may be all be marvelously clear, blissful, and liberating from the start. But for many, it really triggers a Western skeptical materialist program: “Am I supposed to believe in this, or feel like I am just not good enough because I can’t buy into it? Or do I just sit here and mindfully tolerate my emotional reactions?” Or alternatively, “Do I give my heart to the visualization and hope that the meaning will become clear sometime?” We can be stuck with this puzzle.

### “To Be, or Not to Be” Is the Wrong Question

A large chunk of the Buddha’s teaching explores this very question. One of Ācārya Nāgārjuna’s treatises, the *Mūla Mādhyamaka Kārikā*, is based partly upon a passage from the Pali Canon. Nāgārjuna was a great philosopher, and many of his teachings became central tenets of the Mahāyāna tradition. But apparently many of his teachings and commentaries were based upon the Pali Canon. The particular passage that this exegesis is derived from goes something like, “When one sees the arising aspect of experience, the coming into being of the world, with right wisdom, then ‘non-existence’ with respect to the world does not occur to one. And when one sees with right wisdom, as it actually

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is, the cessation of the world, the fading away of conditions, then 'existence' with respect to the world does not occur to one. . . . 'All exists' is one extreme; 'Nothing exists' is the other extreme. Instead of resorting to either extreme, the Tathagata expounds the Dharma by the Middle Way: It is with ignorance as condition that formations come to be; it is with formations as condition that consciousness comes to be. . ." (S 12.15) Then he continues with the whole pattern of dependent origination.

It is interesting that the word "rigpa" is a translation of the Pali word "*vijjā*." What we have in this passage is what usually begins the cycle of dependent origination. "With ignorance as condition formations come to be. . ." When there's marigpa, when rigpa is lost, then the whole cycle begins. The Buddha wouldn't take the side of existence, being, and he wouldn't take the side of nonbeing. He points out that "being is true" and "I am" both side with eternalism. And to say "nonexistence is true" or "I am not" sides with annihilationism, with nihilism.

This used to frustrate his contemporary philosophers like crazy because they felt he wouldn't give a straight answer. But every single time, he would point out that the teaching of the Tathāgata is the middle way. And he would say that the whole duality of existence/nonexistence—really there/not really there—arises because of ignorance, because of not seeing clearly. When vijjā is lost, when knowing is lost, there is *sankhāra*, duality, this/that, subject/object, here/there; and the whole cycle of self/other, me here and the world out there, kicks into being. All these dualistic judgments arise from that.

When people would try to nail the Buddha down to the question of being or nonbeing, they would get answers like: "'Exists' does not apply. 'Does not exist' does not apply. 'Both exists and does not exist' does not apply. 'Neither exists nor does not exist'

does not apply. The Tathāgata teaches the fact that the truth is other than this. It is with ignorance as condition that formations . . ." To the critical mind this sometimes can look like a completely pointless approach. "Look, just give me a straight answer: once and for all, does the self exist or not?" What is perhaps more helpful is to come at these issues from the experiential side so we can find out for ourselves.

### **The Power to Purify**

We need to ask ourselves, "What can these teachings be talking about?" It is a matter of investigating what "Vajrasattva as the embodiment of all the Buddhas" might mean beyond its face value. In practical and more realistic terms, the important question is: What could that quality be? What is that quality of being, either internal or external, that could completely purify our karma, completely purify the heart from any kind of fault, any kind of wrongdoing, any kind of negative obstacle? What has that power to purify?

When reflecting on this, we see that it can only be the insight into emptiness, nonidentification, complete letting go. This is the recognition that nothing whatsoever *could* be me or mine, whether material, physical, or mental. Whatever occurs, whatever is experienced, this is not me, this is not mine, this is not my self, this is devoid of real existence. That insight itself, not the idea, but that actual quality of seeing, means that regardless of what Māra is throwing at us, regardless of how fierce, strong, or wild these things are, we invite them in, "Come in, come in, yes, you're all welcome. Whoever shows up, you're all welcome to join the party." It's no problem, because there is this fundamental recognition of emptiness.

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The verses of the first Tsoknyi Rinpoche tell us:

*Māra 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.*

What these teachings are saying to us is that this visualization, the invocation of the principle of Vajrasattva, is intended simply to help us awaken to that quality of transcendent wisdom within us. We take an external object because generally we are more able to idealize something external. This is usually much easier than idealizing something about ourselves. We then revere that object and thereby awaken and cultivate the intuition that actually that quality is already here within each one of us. Eventually it leads the heart to the realization of this vivid emptiness, and this is what we mean by “looking at our original face.”

## No Buddha Elsewhere

This central teaching reminds me of a story about Ajahn Sumedho when he was a young monk in Thailand. He started out life at Ajahn Chah’s monastery as a very zealous, hyperkeen monk. Within a few months of being there, he was convinced that Ajahn Chah was the greatest Dharma teacher and the most enlightened master on the planet. He was also certain that Wat Pah Pong was the greatest monastery in the world and that Theravāda Buddhism was the answer to all problems. He was really flaming. But of course, as we all know, after a while the fuel runs down.

The months and years went by, and Ajahn Sumedho started to notice a few faults in the way Ajahn Chah handled certain sit-



uations, and in some of his personal habits, such as the way he chewed betel nut. No one else at the monastery was allowed to chew betel nut. Not that Ajahn Sumedho wanted to chew betel nut, but a lot of the other monks did. Although Ajahn Chah banned it, he could do as he pleased. He also banned cigarettes, which are quite popular amongst the monks in Thailand. His was the first monastery in Thailand where cigarettes were banned, but Ajahn Chah still smoked on occasion. And then, even though he had said he was going to stop smoking, Ajahn Sumedho came across him on a back path one day with a cigarette in his mouth. He caught the master in the act, but Ajahn Chah just looked at Ajahn Sumedho and gave him a big grin. Then he took a deep toke and carried on. So these kinds of frustrations were mounting slowly but surely.

More time went by. Being a true Western rationalist, Ajahn Sumedho eventually decided enough was enough. Ajahn Chah was so exalted by all of the Thai people—the monks, the laypeople, and the larger monastic community—that no one would ever dare criticize him. There was no way the nuns would ever say a word. Even the monks, some of whom were quite tough guys and straightforward people, all held Ajahn Chah in such high respect that none of them was ever going to say anything. Ajahn Sumedho thought it over and decided: “Well, I know I’m only a junior monk, but I really should do my duty. I’d better get prepared for this.”

He developed a list that carefully enumerated all of Ajahn Chah’s faults. He wanted to be prepared and to have all the facts straight and ready for his teacher. So he got his list together, chose a moment, and asked Ajahn Chah: “Would it be convenient to talk sometime? I have a few things to discuss.”

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Ajahn Chah's life was pretty open and uncomplicated. Actually, he didn't have a private life. He would sleep in his little hut for about four hours a night maybe. That was it, that was his private life. The rest of the time he was fair game.

Ajahn Chah agreed to talk with his student. And because Ajahn Sumedho didn't want to embarrass his teacher in front of everyone, he tried to choose a time when there weren't too many other people around. How very thoughtful of him. You can imagine the blade hovering overhead, ready to fall. Ajahn Sumedho plucked up his courage and finally approached Ajahn Chah. He had earnestly memorized his list of all the things he felt compelled to bring up. He began to recount it to his teacher: "You're really putting on weight, and you're actually quite a bit heavier than you need to be. You spend so much time talking with people instead of meditating with the rest of us, and often what you are saying is not really good Dharma. It's just kind of chitchat and shooting the breeze, such as talking about this year's mango crop or how the chickens are doing or giving someone advice about how to look after the water buffalo. What's the purpose of discussing life in northeast Thailand so much? And then there's the double standard around betel nuts and cigarettes when you are supposed to be setting an example for the monks."

By the way, I'm extemporizing a little bit here, taking poetic license, but please be aware that Ajahn Sumedho has told this story himself uncountable times, so it is not privy information.

Finally he completes his long, detailed delivery and is just waiting the cold rebuff, or to get blasted. In normal human circumstances it is reasonable to expect that kind of reaction. But Ajahn Chah looked at him gently and said, "Well, I'm very grateful to you, Sumedho, for bringing these things up to me. I'll really consider what you've said and see what can be done. But also you

should bear in mind that perhaps it's a good thing that I'm not perfect. Otherwise you might be looking for the Buddha somewhere outside your own mind." There was a long and poignant silence. Then the young Sumedho crawled away simultaneously heartened and chastened.

### Entering Room 101

I mentioned the insight that Ajahn Chah had in studying with Ajahn Mun when he spent a few days with him: there is the mind and there are its objects, and the two are intrinsically separate from each other. In Theravāda phraseology, this is the way it's put: mind with a big "m," Mind, and mind-objects. The Dzogchen tradition has a similar way of addressing this same insight: there is mind (small "m") and there is mind-essence. The word "mind" is used here as meaning the conditioned mind, the dualistic mind, and the term "mind-essence" is used for the unconditioned mind. There is the conditioned and the unconditioned. As you can see, a powerful resonance exists between the two practices even though they might use the same words in different ways.

Another way that Ajahn Mun phrased it, in his enlightenment verses called "The Ballad of Liberation from the Khandhas," is with this show stopper:

*The Dhamma stays as the Dhamma,  
the khandhas stay as the khandhas.  
That's all.*

In the Sanskrit that would be *skandhas*: the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness. So the Dharma is the Dharma and the skandhas are the skandhas. There is the conditioned; there is the unconditioned. There is mind; there is mind-essence. That's it. This is all we need to know.

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Ajahn Chah had heard that from Ajahn Mun and was profoundly affected by it. But then he also used to talk about the occasion when the principle really came to life for him. In Thailand, there's a very strong ghost culture. Although many of us last worried about ghosts when we were small children, in Thailand ghosts are a very strong cultural presence. We had some pretty scary ghost stories when I was a child, but the ones the Thais tell their kids are really gory, nasty. They are filled with all sorts of blood and guts, evil and malevolence. Everyone is raised with these kinds of images, so culturally there is an immensely powerful fear of ghosts.

This fear was something that had really bothered Ajahn Chah. He had been a monk for quite some time and was well aware that he had been avoiding this fear. It was something he had never really resolved. When he was a young kid, he was known to be both strong and self-reliant. As an adult, he was also a pretty tough nut. Yet well into his monastic life, he was terrified of ghosts and had a very strong fear of corpses. Whenever he went to stay on his own in the forest, he would recite protective verses to keep the ghoulies and the ghosties at a distance.

Being a deep-end kind of guy, he decided to go straight at this fear. He would deal with his problems this way whenever there was something he needed to learn. He decided he had been running away from his fear of ghosts for long enough; he was going to confront it once and for all.

Ajahn Chah decided to set up his mosquito net and camping place in the burning ground outside the village where he had been staying. Probably it is difficult for us to comprehend what this might have been like, but the monk who wrote his biography said that it was rather like what happened in the novel *1984*. It was in Room 101 where you met the most visceral fear, the

most nameless and primordial terror for you. Going into the burning ground for Ajahn Chah was like the protagonist of 1984 going into Room 101. He said it took every ounce of his effort and his willpower to put one foot in front of the other.

As dusk was falling, his mind was screaming: "Don't be ridiculous. Don't do this. It's not good for your *samādhi*. Be reasonable. Maybe you can do this later, next year when you've got your practice more together." But he willed himself to stay and set up his camping place. Once he put up the mosquito net, he went in and just sat there.

There had been a cremation of a young child that day. During the funeral, Ajahn Chah was fine since everyone was around. Then everyone left and he was there on his own. His biography contains a long description of the first night that is filled with lurid images and an account of the sheer willpower he needed to get through to the next day. Ajahn Chah was so afraid he just locked himself in one spot. When dawn came, he said to himself, "Ah, great, I've done it. I've done my cremation thing. I'm off." You know that kind of reaction: "I've done my bit. OK, I've qualified now. I've done my suffering. I don't have to do that anymore. Please, can I go now, sir?"

But Ajahn Chah realized, "No, no, no, no, no. That's not transcending fear; that's just enduring it. I haven't got through this at all. I'm still absolutely terrified. I can give myself the excuse that I don't have to do it, but the terror is still here in front of me and I'm determined to get through this."

He was really pleased that he was going to stay on. And then he thought, "At least there isn't going to be another burning." But sure enough, an adult died that second day. So Ajahn Chah stayed there through that cremation and then, again, everyone left. All he had to protect himself was his practice and his mosquito net.

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Now you might not think that a mosquito net provides very much protection. But any of you who've camped out in the Himalayas, Yosemite, or some other place where there are dangerous wild animals know that the thinnest little layer of netting or plastic can make you feel protected. "Grizzly bears? Hah! No problem. Grizzlies, schmizzlies. Easy."

I found this out for myself when I was camping in the middle of our forest at Abhayagiri last year, where we have bears and some mountain lions. I was camped by this little creek way off in the woods a mile and a half away from everyone else, fasting for a few days and living off the water from the stream. For the first couple of days, every leaf and twig that dropped from the trees was the equivalent of at least three bears and a mountain lion. Every time. When night fell, the animals tripled in number. After a few days I got used to this, but believe me, having the mosquito net set up with a candle inside made me feel like I was in Fort Knox. No problem. Put the candle out and it gets a bit hairier. Then lift the mosquito net and . . . you've got almost 360° vision.

Ajahn Chah said that, "My mosquito net felt like a fortress circled with seven concentric walls. Even the presence of my almsbowl was reassuring." He made the resolution to sit there and to be with his feelings, knowing this was the best way to get through the fear. The night before, as he had sat locked in place, there had been the usual animal noises, crickets going on all night long, and leaves and twigs dropping from the trees. There was nothing special, just familiar sounds. On the second night, things changed. He was sitting there around midnight when he thought he heard footsteps. When you live in the forest you get to know what animals make what kinds of sounds. You know the difference between deer and bear sounds. Lizards and snakes make very distinct noises.

Ajahn Chah was sitting there thinking: "I hear footsteps. It's not an animal. It's a two-footed creature, and the person is coming from the fire." So he said to himself: "Don't be ridiculous. Maybe it's one of the villagers coming to see if I'm all right. Maybe they've come to offer me something and, if they do, they will come up and say hello." Nevertheless, he was determined to just sit there with his eyes closed. Then he heard these footsteps—thump, thump, thump, thump—getting closer and closer. He started to tighten up. The sweat poured out of him, and he told himself: "Oh, don't panic. It is just one of the villagers with heavy steps."

In his mind's eye he could see the charred body. He could see a skeleton with guts hanging out, the scorched bits of flesh hanging off, skin and eyes dropping down the cheek, and a half-burned mouth. As he felt this rank mess of flesh walking towards him, he told himself: "Don't believe it. This is just your imagination. Stop, be still, concentrate, and let go of the fear." In the meantime, the footsteps were getting closer and closer. Then he heard the steps going around and around him. Thump, thump, thump, circling around again and again. By this time he was in a state of white-hot fear. He had gone beyond anxiety. His body was locked solid and sweating bullets; he was absolutely rigid.

Then this presence came and stood right in front of him. Ajahn Chah was still determined to keep his eyes closed, not even a peek. At this point, he was so completely fear-stricken it burst. The fear system was going at absolutely full force when suddenly he had the thought: "All these years I've been reciting, 'The body is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perceptions are impermanent. The body is not self, feelings are not self, perceptions are not self, mental formations are not self, consciousness is not self.'" So he wasn't just afraid, he was also very con-

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centrated and very alert. The insight flashed into his consciousness: “Even if this is some terrible ghoulish monster that is going to attack me, all that it can attack is that which *is not me*. All that it can harm is the body, the feelings, the perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. That is the only stuff that can get damaged, and that’s not me, that’s not self. That which knows all of these cannot be touched.”

And instantly the feelings of terror evaporated. It was like switching on a light. It disappeared completely and he went into an incredibly blissful state. He went straight from total dukkha—pain and incandescent fear—to an extraordinary bliss. His mind was alert, and as that happened he heard the footsteps—thump, thump, thump—getting fainter. Eventually the footsteps disappeared. He never found out their source.

Ajahn Chah sat there without moving until dawn. During the night it poured. Tears of rapture ran down his face and mixed with the rain. Nothing in the world could have moved him.

Comparing that experience of freedom from fear with the abject terror of the first half of the night burnt into him the fact that the Buddha is our true refuge. The Buddha-mind is our refuge. That is the safe place. Or as the first Tsoknyi Rinpoche said: “There’s nothing else to search for. Rest in your own place.” And he realized: “That is it. Regardless of the situation, no matter what I meet, it is just a matter of doing this, of remembering this.”

## Fear of Failure

This is quite a dramatic tale. We might think, “Cremation grounds, ghosts and stuff, what does this have to do with me?” So maybe I can bring this teaching a bit closer to home. One of the things I am fond of quoting is a little fact I find extremely significant. A number of years ago, a survey was done with many



thousands of people. I think it was conducted by Harvard's psychology department. The purpose of the survey was to find out what makes people afraid. In the top ten, dying of cancer was about number four. I forget what number three was; number two was nuclear war. The number-one fear was public speaking.

Essentially, this says that we are more prepared to live with the destruction of the entire planet than we are to live with public embarrassment (also known as ego death in some circles). Isn't that interesting? The other top-ten items were things like losing all your possessions or being physically attacked. None of these are exactly fun, but it is notable that the number-one fear was public speaking. We are more afraid of dying on stage than we are of our own physical demise.

A lot of this has to do with the fact that nowadays physical death is abstracted and not allowed in American society. Even when you're in the coffin, you're supposed to look like you're on your way to a dance. You're dressed in a nice frock or suit, there's a little carnation in your lapel, and you're all made up and ready to go.

Aging is also out. And if a patient dies, the doctor has failed. There's no recognition of the fact that the cause of death is birth. Culturally we sustain a massive denial of physical death, so it is off the screen for a lot of us; it's just an abstraction. Most of us don't live with any contact with physical death. If you don't do hospice work or work in a hospital, you may live well into adult life without seeing a dead body. My mother said when my father died at the age of 80 that his was the first corpse she had ever seen.

Perhaps this denial is related to a fear of failure. Just reflect on how many times you've said to yourself or have heard other people say: "Well, I don't mind dying; I just don't want to experience a

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lot of pain. I'm not really afraid of death." But then if you ask someone: "How do you feel about failing? How do you feel about making an idiot of yourself in public? How do you feel about launching some project and then having it collapse? How do you feel about being rejected by your lover? How do you feel about being told that what you've done or what you represent is completely useless or even just boring?" Get the taste? We only have to run a few of these scenarios. We all have our favorites, such as: "I'm no longer a very attractive person; I used to be quite good-looking, but now it's all gone." We can see that there is more identification with our appearance, personality, and ego than there is with the very life of the body. For most of us anyway, that is the case.

It thus may be more skillful and appropriate just to work with those situations where our ego is challenged rather than to seek out dramatic physical dangers or adventure sports. For myself, I realized that I had a lifetime fear of failure. I found I was competent in a lot of things, but I also could see that I only chose to do things that I would succeed at. I wouldn't participate in things that I wasn't good at. Well into monastic life, I could see that there was this serious investment in looking good all the time. Dharma teachers know that one of the most radical places of exposure is giving Dharma talks. When I first started doing this, I noticed I would give a talk and then, even though it might feel like it had gone down well, I wanted more validation than that provided by my own intuition. Sometimes, particularly in monasteries, people can be quite unresponsive. The lights are dim, and you're up on the high seat, and you can't really see whether the monks and nuns are snoozing. The sleeping monastic posture is perfectly balanced but totally unconscious. Anyway, after my talks, I would find myself at Amaravatī in this little

vestibule room, hanging out by the doorway. All the monks would have to pass through this room before leaving the building. I would hover around in a nebulous state of fear and anxiety. "Oh my god, how did it go? Did people like it? What did they think of me? Am I OK?"

All it would take would be someone to say, "Great talk!" and then, aahhh, bliss. Or sometimes it would not be until the next day. People would be walking by me and I would still be tense with unknowing about the talk. "Did I totally blow it? Do people think I'm a complete idiot?" And then somebody would come up to me and say: "You know, what you said last night was the most useful thing I've ever heard said. It was really a treasure." Aahhh, bliss again. "What a wise and discerning nun. She really understands the Dharma."

What I really meant was, "Thanks for pampering my ego." I began to notice this trait and realized, "Hey, this is an ailment that needs some attention."

We'd have a big breakfast-time meeting every day during which Ajahn Sumedho would give teachings and we'd organize the day's work. Ajahn Sumedho would be at the center of the group and the rest of the community would be arranged around the hall; I'd be near him off to one side. Every so often there'd be an opportunity for a comment or a wisecrack, and I would jump in and make some remark. I began to notice that when I said something and everyone laughed I would feel a distinct glow, like the cat that got the cream. "Ooh, feels so good." And I began to realize that this was pretty sick. I was so addicted to that relishing feeling—"Didn't Amaro do good? Scored a point there." Similarly, if I chimed in and then said something that I thought was witty but that fell completely flat, I would find myself breaking into a million pieces. "Oh my god, this is terrible. This

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is a disaster. This is awful." And it wouldn't even take the form of words. It was a feeling of being shattered. I began to realize: "Oh, one feeling I chase after with great vehemence and the other I run from. Interesting."

So I made a conscious decision to deliberately allow myself to fail. This approach took a lot of doing. Granted, it was not quite as dramatic as Ajahn Chah in the burning ground, but to me it was. I began to take more risks by putting myself into situations where I knew I wasn't particularly skilful and by letting my selfishness be seen, and by learning just to stay with that feeling of shatteredness, of the ego being broken apart (when, for example, it didn't get what it wanted or didn't get the strokes). Actually it took a long time just to be able to stay with those feelings bubbling and blabbering inside me, even for five or ten minutes. I finally realized, "This is just a feeling." And then, as I turned towards the feelings and allowed myself to risk that much more, I began to see how much energy I'd put into avoidance. There'd been a strong undercurrent of fear and terror.

Actually turning towards a feeling, allowing its presence, and going into the avoidance, just as Ajahn Chah had done in the burning ground was half the solution. After a time I really began to see how this was a prime opportunity to witness the collapsing of the ego program. To my amazement, after a couple of years, I began to find myself relishing being misunderstood or misrepresented, of people not liking me or having critical opinions. It was amazing. I'm not just saying this because there was a kind of achievement. But it was staggering to me. The heart actually rejoices in seeing the reality of the way things are, rather than in having the ego flattered.

So in terms of learning to trust the quality of knowing, of establishing rigpa and cultivating it, one of the most difficult

areas is this ego charge. The whole area of "I" making choices, "me" succeeding, "me" failing, anything that gets loaded with I-ness and me-ness and my-ness is very interesting to investigate. When we make a choice that gets labeled success, we feel beautiful. There is a soft, warm, golden glow that feels so good. And when we make a choice or a decision that collapses and falls apart, we take the failure personally. "I have failed." And yet no element of that is shut out of insight. All of it, every place where the ego feeling arises, needs to be brought into awareness so that it doesn't obstruct the innate spaciousness and brightness. Regardless of how dense and thick that self-sense might seem or feel, it is actually transparent. Isn't it a great relief to find this is so?



## Off the Wheel

**I**N THE THERAVĀDA BUDDHIST WORLD, the *Sutta on Loving-Kindness* is one of the best known, best loved, and most often recited of the Buddha's discourses. I had known the Pali version for a long time, but when my community first translated it into English and we started reciting it regularly, it struck me that only 90 percent of the teaching was about having kindness for all beings.

The first part was a straightforward description of sending forth this quality of pure love. For example:

*Wishing: In gladness and in safety,  
May all beings be at ease.  
Whatever living beings there may be;  
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,  
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,  
The seen and the unseen,*

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*Those living near and far away,  
Those born and to-be-born,  
May all beings be at ease!*

But then the last four lines of the sutta presented a very different message:

*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.*

Until those last four lines, there's a seamless flow of ideas, a deeply inspiring sentiment that the Buddha encourages for all of us. It continues to get more exalted and bright, and suddenly there's the punch line: "Not born again into this world." That's quite a dramatic change of gear. And it takes us aback. What happened to loving all beings? Something else has come into play, but what is it?

These last lines remind us of something that many of us would like to forget: the notion of not being born again. This has not exactly taken root as a cultural ideal in the West. Instead, things like comfortable retirement plans and good medical coverage are very popular. There's nothing wrong with these things, but they are not our lives' purpose.

Particularly in the Western Buddhist world, we don't really think in terms of birth and death. We may have a vague idea that after death something might happen, but we're not quite sure what and most of us don't seem to care very much. Our main concern is getting on with our practice, which is all well and good, but even this important focus is not the culmination. So it can be useful to take a step back and consider our cultural con-



ditioning and how that has an impact on our understanding of what it means “not to be reborn.”

### **Life Affirmation and Negation**

The West is a very life-affirming culture. We look upon our lives and the world and we want to respect all living things, to develop a sense of love, unity, and being at one with nature. We want to have compassion and kindness for our bodies and to be healthy and happy. Having “a full life” means doing lots of things, enjoying ourselves, and feeling contented. These are sweeping generalizations, of course. Nevertheless, they reflect the culture that surrounds us. So when there’s a suggestion that the consummation of the path is not being born again, people often say, “Oh, well, actually I’d rather like to come back. Now that I have it together and have got used to this human business, why would I want to give it up?” With that kind of mind-set, there can be disappointment and strong feelings that this teaching runs counter to the notion that life is good. Some people protest: “There’s the whole ecological movement to attend to, and the ambition to love the planet and cherish nature. Why would I want to leave it all for ever?”

Such responses may have some legitimacy. Some translations of Theravāda teachings, particularly in the Commentaries, give the impression that the whole material world is a botched experiment. If you get your stuff together and get yourself out of this place, you don’t look back. “Bye-bye, cheerio. I’m off. Good luck to all of you left behind.” It’s rather a coarse way of putting it, but there is that side of things. When it is presented like this, some people say, “Well, that’s strange. What is that about?”

Throughout the generations, people have picked up Theravāda teachings and fallen in love with meditation and

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many of the principles, yet when they learn about not being reborn, some go into major doubt mode. Things take on a negative tinge: “Hmm, I’m not too sure about that. Maybe the Buddha was secretly a sourpuss who just wanted to get out of the whole thing, who just didn’t want to bother.”

The criticism that Buddhism is nihilistic is not at all unique to these times. The Buddha was regularly accused of being a nihilist, of having a negative view of life and the world. He responded by explaining that this was a misunderstanding of the teaching. “Those who say that I teach the annihilation of an existent being misrepresent me, misunderstand me. They do not teach what I teach. They do not say what I say.” (M 22.37)

The Buddha’s analogy of the snake and the rope is very relevant here. Suppose you are walking along through the grass when suddenly you see a circular shape on the pathway. It looks like a snake, and you become frozen with fear. But when you look closely you see that it’s not a snake at all, it’s just a coil of rope. Relief rushes through your body and the fear disappears. Everything is OK again. After offering this analogy, the Buddha would pose the question, “What happened to the snake when the coil of rope was recognized?” The answer is, nothing. Nothing happened to the snake because there never was one.

So, similarly, when people ask, “What happens to the self when the body dies?” The answer is basically the same. The whole conception of the self is based upon a misapprehension, so the question doesn’t apply. The way we see our “selves” is a fundamental misapprehension that needs to be corrected. The practice is about learning to see clearly, to awaken to what really is.

There is a well-known character in the Theravāda teachings called Vacchagotta. He started out as a member of another sect, but he was one of these wandering yogis who often showed

up for the Buddha's teachings. At different times he came and asked the Buddha questions. On one occasion, he approached the Buddha and asked, "What happens to enlightened beings after their bodies die?"

Vacchagotta probed for what he thought might be the answer: "Do they reappear in another realm?" The Buddha said, "'Reappear' does not apply."

Vacchagotta tried again. He asked, "Well, do they *not* reappear somewhere?" The Buddha said, "'Do not reappear' does not apply."

A persistent seeker, Vacchagotta then tried, "So do they *both* reappear and not reappear?" The Buddha said, "'Both reappear and not reappear' does not apply."

Vacchagotta inquired yet again, "Do they *neither* reappear nor not reappear?" And the Buddha said, "'Neither reappear nor not reappear' does not apply." This time Vacchagotta surrendered: "I'm really confused. How can this be? At least one of these four must somehow be applicable."

"Not so, Vacchagotta," said the Buddha. "Let me give you an example. Suppose we have a little fire burning here, made out of grass and sticks. And I say to you, 'Have we a little fire here?' You would say, 'Yes, there's a fire here.' If we put the fire out, and then I ask you the question, 'Where did the fire go? Did it go north, south, east, or west?' What would you reply?" Vacchagotta said, "Well, the question doesn't apply. It didn't go *anywhere*, it just went out." And the Buddha said, "Exactly so, Vacchagotta. The way you phrased the question presumes a reality that does not exist. Therefore, your question is not answerable in its own terms. 'Reappear' does not apply; 'does not reappear' does not apply . . ." (M 72.16-20)

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This is one point on which the Buddha was extraordinarily thorough. No matter how many times he was pressed, or what situation he was in, he would never try to describe how it is. People would ask: "So, you do all this practice, cranking it out for years and years, doing walking and sitting meditation, keeping all these rules. Finally you get off the wheel, and then, and then . . ." And the Buddha would reply, "Nothing is spoken of; this is not referred to" (e.g., at M 63, s 44, and A 10.95.) And then he would encourage people to get on with their meditation practice. Not getting an answer to such an enquiry about what happens can be very frustrating and really get the mind going.

## The Unrevealed

When I first came across these teachings in Thailand, I thought that perhaps there were some secret oral transmissions that had been passed down through the ages. Maybe Ajahn Chah was one of those who had received this hidden teaching and he had it under wraps. This was not for public knowledge, of course, but only for the really committed and developed meditators. I thought that maybe if I hung around long enough I'd get the real scoop. As you can see, I had my own brand of confusion about what the Buddha was teaching.

Since the Buddha consistently refused to respond to certain questions, many people thought that he didn't really know the answers. Again, the teachings seem to have a nihilistic tinge to them: the disappearance of the self, not being born again, and not even a hint of eternal bliss. We may feel that the whole off-the-wheel thing is a bit off-putting. And this is something that the Theravāda masters have referred to again and again. People like the idea of going to heaven, but they get afraid of meditating too much because they might end up in the high brahmā realms and

start to miss their families, their spouses, and the kids. So who knows what's going to happen if they realize nibbāna? Then you're really gone. At least in the deva realms you might have your family and friends so you could all hang out in bliss for a few thousand eons. But nibbāna, now that's serious. It's like the bell rings and you say good-bye to everything.

Even in Asian cultures it comes up over and over again—people are often frightened of nibbāna. There are these hilarious dialogues that go on between seekers and great masters: “Do you think that the Buddha would have promised you something or encouraged you to do something that was really horrible?” And they say, “Oh, no, no, of course he wouldn't.” “Then do you want to go to nibbāna?” And their response is: “No. We'll go to heaven first, thank you.” It's like they're aching to spend some time in one of these retirement communities where they can play golf, swim around in the lakes, enjoy gardens with beautiful flowerbeds, beautiful people, and beautiful surroundings. Then, when they get tired of all of that, maybe nibbāna will become more attractive.

I recently finished editing a Buddhist novel that was written in 1906. At that time, there was a lot of criticism of Buddhism by the Christian establishment. It was seen as a negative, nihilistic teaching, and nibbāna was viewed as some kind of glorious extinction. The author does a good job of righting that misunderstanding.

One of the main plot features of this novel is the hero, Kāmanīta, unknowingly meeting the Buddha. Before they meet, Kāmanīta has already committed himself to being a disciple of the Buddha. Knowing that he is the greatest master around, and convinced that the Buddha has promised a blessed and eternal life after death, Kāmanīta sets out to find him. After some years of wandering, the hero stays one night in a little *dharmasālā*, a pilgrim's shelter, at the house of a potter. The Buddha happens

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to be traveling through the same town. He also happens to stop there and stay in the same shelter.

The roommates begin talking, and the Buddha inquires, "Who are you, and where do you come from?"

The young man replies, "My name is Kāmanīta. I'm a disciple of Gotama Buddha."

"Oh," says the Buddha. "Have you ever met him?"

"No," says Kāmanīta, "unfortunately I never have."

"If you met him would you recognize him?"

"I don't think so."

"So why are you a disciple of the Buddha?"

"He teaches bliss in the beginning, bliss in the middle, bliss in the end. And after a lifetime of sincere devotion, one can look forward to blessed and eternal life after death."

"Oh, really," says the Buddha. Having the sense of humor that he did, the Buddha doesn't reveal who he is. He lets Kāmanīta talk a bit longer. Then the Buddha says, "Well, I could recount the Buddha's teaching to you if you like."

"Really? That would be marvelous," says the enthusiastic Kāmanīta. (This initial part of the story is derived from Sutta M 140.)

The Buddha first gives his teaching on the Four Noble Truths. Then he teaches the three characteristics: *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. Finally he teaches dependent origination. In the meantime, Kāmanīta is getting antsy and thinking: "Oh, this doesn't sound right at all. I don't like this." He keeps pressing the Buddha: "What about after death? Maybe life is unsatisfactory, but what about *after* death?"

The Buddha responds simply, "The Master has revealed nothing concerning this."

“Well, that’s impossible,” says Kāmanīta. “He must have said something. How can you keep going if you don’t have a life of eternal bliss to look forward to?”

The Buddha offers an analogy as a way of making his point: If a house is burning and the servant rushes to warn the master that they all have to leave immediately, it would be ludicrous for the master to respond to the emergency by asking, “Is there is a rainstorm outside or is it a fine moonlit night?”—implying that, if the former were the case, he would choose not to leave. One would have to conclude that the master of the house doesn’t understand the gravity of the situation. Otherwise he wouldn’t make such a foolish response; he wouldn’t ignore reality. In this vein, the Buddha tells Kāmanīta: “You should also act as if your head were encompassed by flames, as if your house were on fire. And what fire? The world! And set on fire by what flame? By the flame of desire, by the flame of hate, by the flame of delusion.”

He also made the point that, if the Tathāgata had talked in terms of an “eternal and blessed life,” many of his disciples indeed would have been delighted with the idea but would have tended to cling to it with a passionate longing that would disturb all true peace and freedom. They thus would have become enmeshed in the powerful net of craving for existence. And while clinging to the idea of a beyond, for which by necessity they had to borrow all the coloring from this life, would they not have clung even more to the present, the more they pursued that imaginary beyond?

Kāmanīta took offense at what was being taught and refused to believe it. He remained convinced that the Buddha’s *true* teachings led to an eternal life, full of supreme joy. It’s a long, long story, but the thrust of it is that Kāmanīta has the same experience that many people do. He meets this supposedly

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negative expression and does not want to give up the notion of eternal bliss. It's not until a lot further along in the book that Kāmaṇīta realizes that he actually had shared a room with the Buddha and had received the true teachings directly from him.

This exchange and others like it perplexed me for some years. Why didn't the Buddha just say something? Every religious tradition has a way of expressing what the destination of the path is. Yet all we get as Theravāda Buddhists is that we need to understand what it means to be reborn, and to stop doing it.

### The Unapprehensible

Actually, in a couple of places the Buddha is asked similar questions about the nature of an enlightened being after death and he gives us a little more to play with. He says, "Such a one, after the breaking up of the body after death, passes out of the range of knowledge of gods and humans." (D I.3.73) That gives us a little snippet. At another point, a young man called Upasiva asks him: "Those who have reached the end, do they no longer exist? Or are they made immortal, perfectly free?"

The Buddha replies: "Those who have reached the end have no criterion by which they can be measured. That which could be spoken of is no more. You cannot say 'they do not exist.' But when all modes of being, all phenomena, have been removed, all ways of speaking have gone too." (SN 1076)

This is what we refer to as *parinibbāna*; it is where words and thoughts run out. It's the rigpa zone. All language is based upon dualistic conceptions. So the Buddha is really being resolute by saying, "All ways of speaking have gone, too." Beyond here, the buses don't run. This is the end, the borderline. Language and concept can apply up to this point but not any further.



As I have contemplated this principle over the years, it has slowly begun to make more and more sense. Now I have a profound respect for the Buddha for saying absolutely nothing. And I feel that it was through a true faithfulness to reality that he was that resolute when he said: "No, nothing can be said. Any image, any form, any description has to be wide of the mark. It cannot represent the reality."

In another situation, one of the Buddha's disciples has been asked the question, "What does your teacher say about what happens to an enlightened being when he dies?" The disciple responds, "The Tathāgata has revealed nothing concerning this." His questioners then say, "You must be either newly ordained or, if you are an elder, you must be an incompetent fool," and they promptly get up and leave. The disciple returns to the Buddha to see if he has answered rightly, and the Buddha then questions him back and forth.

He asks, "Here and now, Anurādha, with the Tathāgata sitting in front of you, can you truly say that the Tathāgata *is* the five khandhas (body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness)?"

"No, one cannot truly say that is so."

"Can you say that the Tathāgata is *in* the five khandhas?"

"No, one cannot truly say that."

"Can you say that the Tathāgata is *apart from* the five khandhas?"

"No, one cannot truly say that."

"Can you say that he *owns* the five khandhas?"

"No, one cannot say that."

"Can you say that he *does not own* the five khandhas? That he does not have the five khandhas?"

"No, one cannot say that either."

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The Buddha then says, “If the Tathāgata is not in truth apprehendable while sitting in front of you here and now, then how much more so after the breaking up of the body after death can nothing be said?” (s 22.86)

The Buddha is trying to discourage the habit of filling up space with ideas or some kind of belief or form. Instead, he is encouraging a direct realization of the truth so that we know for ourselves what that transcendent quality is.

He’s encouraging us to establish that quality of knowing, of *rigpa*. Rather than creating an idea about something or an image or a memory of it or a plan to get it, we need to keep waking up to that, to keep coming to that. And that in itself is indescribable. We can talk about things like knowing, emptiness, lucidity, clarity, and so forth, but when the mind is fully awake to its own nature, the words run out. This is the “*parinibbāna effect*”; it is an event horizon and marks a boundary with that which is beyond the realm of words.

When the mind is truly awake, do we evaporate? Are we frozen solid? No. In fact, we are more alive than we have ever been before. There is a quality of total aliveness. Yet there’s also a complete lack of definition. In that moment we’re not male, we’re not female, we’re not old, we’re not young, we’re not any place, there is no time. It’s ownerless, timeless *is-ness*. When we experience that, does that feel good? It feels good to me; it feels very good. This is the result of ending rebirth.

## The Process of Rebirth

When we talk about being born again, what we’re talking about is that moment when the clinging strikes and the heart gets caught and is carried away. The verse at the end of the *Mettā Sutta* encourages us to let go of clinging and thus not be born

again. Not being born again is like the consummation of pure love or rigpa. We don't get identified with any aspect of the internal, external, psychological, or material worlds of our bodies, thoughts, feelings, emotions, Buddha-fields, or whatever. As soon as there is that formulation, that crystallization, there's birth.

What are the four kinds of clinging? They are:

*kāmupādāna*: clinging to sense pleasure;  
*diṭṭhupādāna*: clinging to views and opinions;  
*silabbatupādāna*: clinging to conventions, to gurus,  
to meditation techniques, to an ethic, to specific  
religious forms; and  
*attavādupādāna*: clinging to the idea of self.

The last four lines of the *Mettā Sutta* are about the ending of clinging:

*By not holding to fixed views (diṭṭhupādāna),  
the pure-hearted one (silabbatupādāna, clinging to  
virtues, to ethics, to rules, to forms),  
having clarity of vision (this has to do with clinging  
to self, attavādupādāna),  
being freed from all sense desires (kāmupādāna),  
is not born again into this world (as the clinging stops,  
so does being born again).*

There is no loss of rigpa. If avijjā, ignorance, does not arise, there is no ignorance. As soon as avijjā kicks in, the rebirth process is triggered. Rebirth cannot happen without ignorance and clinging.

The Buddha discovered a way of mapping out the path to freedom. This insight, which came at the time of his enlightenment, was formulated in terms of the process of dependent origination.

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The first week after his enlightenment he spent his entire time sitting under the bodhi tree investigating the pattern of how dukkha, suffering, arises.

In the beginning, when there is avijjā, then sankhārā (mental, volitional formations, separateness) come into being. Sankhārā condition consciousness. Consciousness conditions nāma-rūpa: body-and-mind, name-and-form, subject-and-object. Nāma-rūpa conditions the six senses.

When there's a body and a mind, the six senses are present.

Because of the six senses, there are sense contacts: hearing, feeling, smelling, tasting, and touching.

Because of sense contact, feeling arises—pleasant, painful, and neutral feelings.

And when a feeling kicks in, if there is enough ignorance in the mix, the feeling conditions craving: “That’s nice; that looks good; I want more of that,” or “I don’t like that; how dare he?” Feelings of discomfort condition aversion.

Craving (*taṇhā*) conditions clinging (*upādāna*).

Clinging conditions becoming. There is a sense experience: “Oh, what’s this? Hmm, very nice. I wonder whom this belongs to? Can I keep it?” There’s an attraction toward it. Then there’s an absorption into it. “Oh, that’s very nice. Great, must get some more of that. I wonder if they have any of this in the refrigerator. I’ll go help myself to it.” This is becoming.

Contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming. Then becoming leads to birth.

At birth, there’s no turning back. The baby can’t go back inside again. At becoming it is almost too late to break the cycle. Once there is birth then it’s sealed—there is necessarily the whole lifespan, and during that lifespan there’s going to be sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, despair, aging, sickness, death.

Dukkha. Although there are sure to be some pleasant bits, too.

Once there is birth, once we have grabbed hold of the condition, once we've followed something, we've given our hearts to it; we're hooked. The becoming moment is the time of maximum gratification; it is when we get what we want—the sweetness of the bait. The entire consumer culture runs on the hit of bhava, of becoming. It's that YES moment: "I like it, I've got it, and it's mine." Everything is geared to that thrill, that electric charge. Once that process has kicked in, then there's the charge on your credit as well: "Whoops, how did that number get so big? Who has been playing with this? Who took my plastic?"

The Buddha spent this whole first week watching how the rebirth process works. He spent the second week watching how the process *does not* get launched. If the mind stays in vijjā, in knowing, in rigpa, then there is no ignorance. If there is no ignorance, there's no sankhāra. If there's no sankhāra, there's no nāma-rūpa, and so on and so forth. The process doesn't kick in.

He spent the whole second week exploring this pattern of how the heart breaks free of the cycle. He contemplated that when there's no ignorance, there's no trouble. There's no arising of the alienation, the separation, the confusion of being pulled by thoughts or feelings or sense objects. In the third week under the bodhi tree he investigated both the arising and cessation of dukkha together—contemplating the process both "with the grain" (*anuloma*) and "against the grain" (*patiloma*).

So he spent three weeks simply sitting and reflecting on this process. The core of the Four Noble Truths is described here—how dukkha arises, how it ceases, and what we need to do in order to make it cease. In terms of Buddha-Dharma, this is the seed, the heart of the seed, the kernel, the quintessence.

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In very practical terms, the nature of ultimate reality is not the problem—it sustains itself. The problem is that the heart loses sight of reality because of its addiction to craving.

The Buddha's first teaching after his enlightenment was given to a wanderer he met on the road. The Buddha was unusually tall, incredibly handsome, and had the bearing of the warrior noble prince that he had been. He was also radiant, shining with his recent experience of illumination. Clearly he was an extremely striking figure, and as he was walking, this other character, called Upaka, stopped him and said: "Excuse me, you are so radiant and bright. Your face is so clear. Surely you must have had some wonderful realization. What kind of practice do you do? How have you got to this? Who are you? Who is your teacher?"

The Buddha responded: "I have no teacher. I am fully self-enlightened. In fact, I am the only enlightened being in the entire world. There is no one I can look to as my teacher or my elder. I alone am fully awakened."

Upaka said, "Good for you, friend," and, shaking his head, quickly left by another path. (MV 1.6)

The Buddha realized that this kind of response didn't work. Meeting someone who says, "You look happy; how did you get this way?" and telling them, "I'm the ultimate reality" obviously was not the best way to communicate the insight.

So the Buddha changed his approach. He realized that, "Perhaps introducing the ultimate truth straight into the system doesn't work. Perhaps if I started at the other end of the story. . . . Let's go to marigpa, ignorance; let's go to how life is habitually experienced." We don't feel unremitting bliss all the time, do we? If we intuit that there is an ultimate reality, which is pure and perfect and blissful, why don't we continually experience that? What's in the way? That is why the Buddha began with dukkha. If we intuit

the perfection and purity of our own nature, it's reasonable to want to know how come it's not on the screen the whole time. The reason is because of *avijjā* and *taṇhā*, ignorance and craving.

We pursue the analysis just like a medical diagnosis. The problem is "there is *dukkha*"; the cause is self-centered clinging; the prognosis is "it is fixable, the ending of *dukkha* is possible"; the medicine is the Noble Eightfold Path.

### **Exit Points from the Cycle**

Many people are concerned as to whether these teachings on dependent origination are practical or not. However, we don't need to look very far to see this pattern in our everyday lives. We can see how over and over again the cycle of dependent origination is enacted in our being, moment after moment, hour after hour, day after day. We get caught in things we love, things we hate, things we have opinions about, in feelings about ourselves, feelings about others, in liking, disliking, hoping, fearing. It goes on and on. The good news is that there are several different places where we can catch this cycle and ultimately free the heart.

One could do a month-long workshop on dependent origination and not exhaust it. So I will just give a few of the key points here.

Let's say the worst has happened. Something very painful has taken place. We've come to surrounded by broken glass. We've had an argument with someone. We took something that wasn't ours. We were selfish or greedy. Someone has hurt us. How did we get ourselves into this mess? This is life. We are experiencing the anguish of *dukkha*. But we don't need to feel like a victim or fly into a "Why me?" tantrum.

One of the Buddha's most beautiful teachings is that the experience of suffering can go in two directions. One, it can compound our misery and confusion. Two, it can ripen in search.

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When everything has gone wrong, we have a choice. Do we just wallow? Or do we say: "Why is it like this? What am I doing to make this a problem?" The search kicks in, to find where we are clinging and why we are looking for happiness where it cannot be found. (A 6.63)

Even at the birth, aging, sickness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair end of the cycle, we can use that pain as the cause to help us wake up. Actually, the Buddha points out in some of his teachings that the very experience of dukkha can cause faith to come into existence. (s 12.23) The pain is saying: "This really hurts. But somehow I know that this is not the ultimate reality." We also know that "I *can* do something about this; it's up to me." So the faith that something is doable arises, and that faith is what launches us on the path of transcendence.

Another place to investigate is at the link between feeling and craving, between *vedanā* and *taṇha*. *Taṇha* literally means "thirst." Often it is translated as "desire," but there are wholesome desires as well as unwholesome ones. That's why craving is a much better word. It has an intrinsic agitated, frantic, "me, me, me" element to it. Feeling is a world of innocence. We can have an intensely blissful, exciting, pleasant feeling. We can have an extremely painful feeling. We can have a fuzzy, neutral feeling through the body or the mind. Feeling by itself is utterly innocent. There is no intrinsic positive or negative quality to it at all. If there's sufficient awareness, then all mental and sense phenomena, and the pleasant, painful, or neutral feelings associated with them, can be known, without clinging, as appearances. As soon as ignorance, *marigpa*, enters the picture, the heart begins to crave: if it's beautiful, "I want it." If it's ugly, "Get it out of here; it stinks." Somewhere between these two we will generally create an opinion about it. This is a point in meditation where



we can clearly cut the cycle, where we can avoid getting reborn, where we can stay with the quality of the wholeness of the Dharma. There is feeling, sight, smell, taste, and touch, and we recognize the emotions that go along with them, but it's just the world of feeling—pure and innocent.

Often I encourage people to do clinging exercises so they can really get to know the quality of that experience directly. Crave or cling deliberately, until you know the texture of it so clearly that, as soon as it kicks in, even in the simplest ways, you're aware of it. It's like picking up an object and clinging [*picks up the bell striker and grasps it tightly*]. This is clinging. There is clinging, and as you hold it within awareness, slowly the clinging stops [*hand relaxes*]. We don't throw it away; we don't break it. We loosen the grip. We do these little exercises so that we know as soon as a feeling turns into "I want it" or "I have got to" or "they shouldn't" or "more" or "less" or "let me out of here" or "ouch," we recognize it as craving and clinging. Even in the subtlest areas, we can see, "There is clinging."

The Dzogchen teachings offer a wonderful analysis of the anatomy of clinging. They describe all kinds of subtle areas and types of it. It's very useful to have it matched so finely with our own direct experience, like mapping the fine details of the tissues that we're physically made from. By getting to know the quality of clinging, we can recognize that, as soon as we let go of it, there's no problem. Everything is absolutely fine just the way it is. The cycle of rebirth is broken right there.

A story that Ajahn Sumedho tells is relevant here. It's one of his stories that has stuck vividly in my mind. It took place many years ago when he was a young monk at Ajahn Chah's monastery. It was a superstrict monastery, so life was pretty austere. And there was always a somewhat desolate aura there; not a lot

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of thrills going on, and everything very plain for the senses. What's more, Wat Pah Pong had the worst food in the world. If the cooks tried to make it tastier, Ajahn Chah would go to the kitchen and scold them. Maybe there was a cup of tea once or twice a week. Sometimes it was a hot fruit juice or some of a local brew known as *borupet*. Borupet is a bitter vine, and it is a challenge to describe its taste. If you strip the bark of an elder tree and taste the sap, it's like that. The taste is really foul and astringent. It is supposed to be very good for you, but it is ghastly stuff to eat or drink.

Every week there was an all-night vigil and the novices would bring out a few big steaming kettles. Once Ajahn Chah asked the newly arrived Ajahn Sumedho, who had a big cup, "Would you like some?" and Ajahn Sumedho, not knowing the contents of the kettle, said, "Fill 'er up!" or words to that effect. They filled his big cup with borupet. He took one sip and reacted with a loud, "Waaaaa!" Ajahn Chah smiled and said, "Drink up, Sumedho." Yes, clinging to desire is dukkha.

### **"I Like, but I Don't Want"**

Here's another story Ajahn Sumedho often tells. Sometimes Ajahn Chah would invite him out to meet visitors to the monastery. One day a group of attractive young women came to Wat Pah Pong. I believe they were students from the local nursing college in Ubon Ratchathani. A few dozen of them were sitting there, all arranged very respectfully in their beautiful turquoise and white uniforms. Ajahn Chah gave them a Dharma talk and chatted with their teachers, professors, and so on. Ajahn Sumedho sat next to him for the several hours that this session went on. Sitting in the company of several dozen attractive young women

at such close quarters was not something that happened often to the young Bhikkhu Sumedho.

Ajahn Chah liked to test his disciples every so often to see where they were at, so after the party from the college had gone, Ajahn Chah turned around and asked, "So, Sumedho, how do you feel? What did that do to your mind?" Bear in mind that the whole relationship to sexuality is much more simple and straightforward in Southeast Asia. And Ajahn Sumedho said in Thai, "*Chorp, daer my ao,*" meaning, "I like, but I don't want." Ajahn Chah was very pleased with this response. In fact, he was so impressed by it, that at every Dharma talk for the next two or three weeks, he referred to it, "This is the essential practice of the Dharma. There is the acknowledgement that this is attractive, this is beautiful, but then there is also the choice: Do I *really* want it? Do I have to possess it? Do I need to chase after it? No, I don't have to. Without fear, repression, or aversion, there is a turning away."

If Ajahn Sumedho had snarled, "I sat there turning them all into corpses," then Ajahn Chah might have thought, "OK, very good. But it sounds like he is probably an aversion type, frightened of sexual attraction or of the realm of sex. He's doing his duty as a monk trying to restrain the passions but perhaps not aware of the deeper Dharma." Or if he had said, "It was all I could do to hold myself down on the floor," Ajahn Chah would have then thought, "OK, duly noted. He's a greed type; we'll need to navigate that carefully as time goes by." But Ajahn Chah saw that Ajahn Sumedho had really found the middle. "This is what it is: it is very attractive, beautiful, and delicious, but I don't want to possess it. I am not pushing this away, but I don't need to own it either. It is the way it is."

## In the Beginning

The last part of the pattern I want to discuss is actually at the beginning of the story, at the very start of the dependent origination cycle: *Avijjā paccayā sankhārā*, ignorance conditions formations. I've been on retreats during which Ajahn Sumedho spent three weeks on this one phrase: "Ignorance conditions formations." Literally every Dharma talk, two or three times a day, on "Ignorance conditions formations." He would condense this Dharma teaching down to one phrase and would repeat it endlessly, "Ignorance complicates everything." What does this mean?

Sankhāra is a broad term that fundamentally means "that which is compounded," and it gets translated many ways: karmic formations, concoctions, fabrications, volitional formations, subject/object duality—there's a large constellation of meanings.

What this phrase, "Ignorance complicates everything," is saying is that as soon as there is no vijjā, as soon as rigpa is lost, then instantly the seeds of duality start to form and sprout. There's an observer and an observed; there is a this and a that; a here and a there; a me and a world. Even at its most subtle, germinal stage, this is what it is talking about. As soon as there is avijjā, sankhāra is caused to be there. Then it becomes a vortex; the tiniest little movement and it starts to grow, to spiral out.

*Sankhārā paccayā viññanam*: sankhāra conditions consciousness. Consciousness conditions mind and body. Mind and body conditions the six senses. The six senses condition feeling, craving, and so on.

By the time we get down to the six senses, there is the body here and there's the world out there, and we experience them as apparently solid realities.

If it's only just started to head down the line, it's a matter of quickly catching it. We can step back and see where an observer

and an observed have already been created. As it is said, “San-khāra sticks its head out” like a tortoise—meaning some form is trying to poke its head into rigpa. But if 80 percent of the rigpa, the knowing, is there, we can still catch it and come back to rest in that open awareness.

We are talking about the subtle area of movement where, as soon as there is a slippage of mindfulness or the faintest coloration or distortion of that awareness, duality kicks in. And that’s the seed of the whole thing. If it’s seen at that point and not followed, then that seed, that primal movement, will not grow further, it will cease right there. If it’s not seen, the vortex will build and build until there is “me in here, the world out there.” And then: “I want it, I can’t stand it, I’ve got to have it. How marvelous, how wonderful, I am going places”—sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

### **Endless Hunger**

What happens at that latter end of the cycle, when the dukkha hasn’t ripened in the search for truth and we’ve let our misery get compounded? We feel incomplete. There’s “me” feeling unhappy, miserable, insecure, incomplete, alienated. Then as soon as there’s an idea or a feeling or an emotion or a sense object that might possibly make us feel complete again, we jump on it. “Well, that looks interesting. Perhaps this will do the trick.”

There is a feeling of hunger, a lack, or a longing that comes from the experience of suffering. If we are not awake to what’s going on, we think that what we lack is some *thing*—the new job, the new car, the new partner. Or we lack perfect health. We lack a decent meditation practice. We shouldn’t be hanging out with the Tibetan lamas; we should join the Theravādins at Abhayagiri. We should rejoin the Christians. We should move to

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Hawaii. It goes on and on. We go after any kind of external object or internal program to find the missing piece.

This is the cycle of addiction, and it is a very common experience. I am sure everyone has had such experiences. In spite of our best intentions, we find ourselves back in trouble again. We see that we have pursued some kind of desire—for a job, a partner, a meditation technique, a teacher, a car, something to satisfy us. Then we get it and believe, “Ah, this is great.” But is it really?

A while back, we got two new vehicles at our monastery. One is a pickup. It’s a Ford F250 V8 5.7-liter with a timber rack. On the first day we had it I noticed that somebody had put a big dent in the back license plate. We had had this pickup only one day and the clinging was already there. I was upset and wanted to know, “Who did this? Who backed into our truck?” This is dukkha.

It was so easy to fall into the feeling that the new white Ford F250 V8 5.7-liter pickup was going to make us happy and make things so completely better. And to a certain extent it has, no question about it. There is gratification for a while. That feeling is definitely there and it is real. The mind contracts around it and at that moment of “Yes!” we are absolutely gratified. The universe has shrunk to that one minuscule zone: “Me happy. Got nice thing.” The trouble is that the universe is not actually that small. We can only hold it together while the thrill lasts. We taste delicious food, we have an inspiring retreat, we see an exciting movie, we enjoy the smell of a new car, and then it’s gone. These objects don’t satisfy us anymore. The place where the piece was missing opens up again and there is dukkha once more. If we don’t realize what is happening, we seek another object to fill that gap, and the cycle of rebirth goes around and around, again and again. It happens thousands of times a day.

Map the process out for yourself. Take notes. You'll see that it happens very quickly. Ajahn Chah used to say that following dependent origination is like dropping out of a tree and trying to count the branches on the way down. It's that quick. The whole process can play out from beginning to end in a second and a half. Pow. We can hardly track what's happening but—thump!—we know it hurts when we hit the ground. We can see the urge to cling in any moment. When we see this clearly, when we have made it deeply familiar to us, we can stop the process and let go of the cycle of birth and death.

To encourage this familiarization and relinquishment it's important to experience and acknowledge the disadvantages of cyclic existence. Above all, it hurts. Just as the thrill is real, so is the pain. We don't get the thrill without the pain. That would be nice, wouldn't it? When the pain comes, we see that it is empty. When the thrill comes, we experience it as absolutely real. You've got to be really quick on your feet to pull that one off. There are a lot of people trying it, that's for sure. As the pleasure is rising, we feel "real, real, happy, happy, happy, happy." As the pleasant feelings diminish, we try to see that the pain and disappointment is "empty, empty, empty, empty." As we say in California, "Dream on." Life is not that way.





## The Portable Retreat

**T**HE END OF A RETREAT is a special time. For the past ten days we have created a safe haven by observing the precepts and respecting each other's personal space. This refuge has allowed us to practice the Dharma intensively and to see the laws of nature for ourselves. But like everything in life, our precious time together soon will end. The inevitable and delicate process of being dispersed into the differentiated will begin. Some people are holding on to every last moment of silence and reflection, while others probably can't wait to bolt out the door. Whatever your mind is doing, let it be. Try to relax and enjoy these final moments we have together.

Unlike traditions, including Dzogchen, that are known for their elaborate rituals, the Theravāda school has rituals that are quite plain. Wine and fancy foods are not passed around, and there is no drumming or costumed dancing. Nevertheless, our rituals are very beautiful in their simplicity and profundity. The

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custom of ending retreats with a ceremony of blessing and farewell helps us make the transition between retreat life and the life of work, family, dirty dishes, carpools, and so on. It's another level of experience we share together, one that is participatory, tactile, and rich in meaning. The ritual of chanting the refuges and precepts helps complete the circle; we chanted them on the day we arrived, and we chant them now before we leave. By now, however, everyone is probably aware that there is no real beginning or ending. Integrity and wholeness are always here.

### Anatomy of a Ritual

This ceremony involves some basic principles and symbols. The symbols include a long thread of pure cotton, a bowl of water, a few drops of fragrant oil, a beeswax candle, and a Buddha image. The Buddha represents the primordial spiritual principle, and the thread represents the quality of purity, that fundamental spiritual principle as it manifests in the world of form. The ceremony begins by wrapping the thread three times around the Buddha image and then three times around the bowl of water.

The thread then passes through the hands of the monastics and goes around the whole room, weaving in and out of everyone else's hands. It physically connects us and symbolically represents the intrinsic purity that both unites us as human beings and binds our hearts to the Buddha principle; it reminds us that our hearts, in essence, *are* the Buddha principle.

The ceremony is primarily focused on the bowl of water. Of the four elements—earth, water, fire, and air—water represents cohesion and symbolizes compassion. It is the symbol for that which holds everything together. Some special holy fragrant oil, with sandalwood and other precious substances in it, is sprinkled into the water.

As the chanting begins, I burn the beeswax candle over the top of the bowl. The wax drips into the water, and as the burning wax hits the water, the four elements are brought together. The earth element is embodied in the wax of the candle; the fire is the flame; the air is that which the fire is burning in and the wax falling through; and lastly there is the water. The four elements are also fused with the presence of the Buddha's teachings, as embodied in the sound of the chanting, and with the final element of consciousness—the attention we pay to the whole event.

On a symbolic level, at least, the four elements of our own physical nature are being infused with the presence of the Buddha-Dharma, for the thread connects it all to us, the participants.

The first part of the chanting is an invocation. It calls upon the brahmās, the devatās, the earth spirits, the nāgas (celestial dragons), and all beings in the universe that might be benevolently disposed toward this gathering. It is an invitation for them to come and bless us with their presence, empower our lives, and strengthen us in our spiritual endeavors.

We can look at this aspect of the ceremony in several ways. Sometimes people have trouble with the idea of invisible beings such as angels, brahmās, Buddhas, and bodhisattvas. If that's the case with you, feel free to think of this as a calling forth from inside of all the benevolent forces that are intrinsic to our fundamental nature, all the bright, wholesome states within our own being. So the first level of invocation could be said to involve the external radiant and wholesome beings, and the second the internal "beings"—those states of our own mind that are comparably resplendent, noble, and potent. Thirdly, there's the level of invocation where the Dharma is simply blessed by its own nature; here occurs the great effortless gesture of the heart realizing its innately sacred essence.

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However we view it, remember that inside and outside are convenient fictions, conventions; they are not ultimate truths. So whether we call the blessing forces out from within or in from without, or simply realize them, basically we are inviting those radiant qualities to the surface of consciousness.

The chanting is a recitation of the Buddha's teachings, verses of praise about him, and verses recited by him for protection, healing, and the dispelling of demonic forces. I will chant these in the Pali language as you, the Dharma assembly, listen in silence. Many of the words might not be recognizable. Rather than let the mind get tangled up in a search for meaning, however, just relax. The point is to provide an opportunity, through the agency of the sound and the ritual itself, for the blessings to be received and for them to manifest and blossom.

In this ceremony, the quality of right attitude is crucial on the part of both the persons conducting the ritual and those who are receiving the blessings. If we genuinely wish to be blessed, we need to "make a hook" to snag the wholesome and help it grow in the Dharma garden of our heart. Even if there are a multitude of benevolent beings out there or radiant virtues in here, that openness of the heart, like a fertile field, is necessary in order for the blessings to "catch."

If the heart holds this in the correct way, then true blessings will rain upon us, emerge from us, manifest within our hearts. So sit and be open. Don't try to do anything (of course). Simply allow the sound to wash freely through your awareness.

Once the chanting ends, we wind up the thread. Later on the thread is cut, as in the Tibetan tradition, and everyone is given a length of it to be tied around their wrist as a kind of "Dharma handcuff," a visible reminder of this retreat and of our primordial connection and commitment to the Buddha-Dharma.

I was performing this ceremony once as a wedding blessing at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, a large monastery in the Chinese tradition, near Ukiah, California. One of the monks there asked to watch the ceremony, as he had never seen a wedding blessing before in either the Northern or the Southern Buddhist tradition.

At the end of the ceremony, he said, "I thought Theravādins didn't have this kind of stuff! You do realize that this is pure Tantra!?"

The resonance of the four elements externally (in the bowl), and internally (in our bodies), together with the transformation of energy, is something the ceremony can accomplish if the quality of right attitude is present.

### **Refuges and Precepts**

If there is one predictable question that people ask at the end of retreats, it is: "How can I sustain the practice once the retreat is over and I'm back in the world of violence, greed, starving children, poor health care, and not enough parking space?" This is a wonderful question because it requires us to pay attention to the skillful desire to integrate our spiritual practice into our daily lives. For spiritual life to develop, there's no need to become a "retreat junkie," begrudgingly tolerating the periods when we have to deal with family and work just so that we can gather enough time and resources to go on retreat again. Probably more useful than this is making a commitment to establish a basis of moral conduct in daily life. In this light, the five precepts are offered not as rigid commandments but as guidelines for living. They are practical strategies to help us exist and function more harmoniously.

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I could suggest many ways to sustain the spirit of retreat after you leave here, ranging from meditating daily to creating a sacred space somewhere in your home. But the single most important guidance I can offer is this: along with internalizing the three refuges (as was talked about in Chapter Six) I would encourage you to cherish the five precepts deeply. Abide by them as a devotional practice, as a mindfulness practice, as a concentration practice, and as a practice of conduct. All these different elements are contained within these simple principles. Taking the precepts is an act of arousing the intention to accord with and to be as kind as possible to yourself and to the world around you.

When visitors go to monasteries in Theravāda countries, it is customary for them to take the refuges and precepts as a simple and regular reminder. In the West, we take them at the beginning and ending of retreats, at daylong sittings, and even before Sangha meetings. Taking precepts is not a one-shot deal, as if when we take them they transform us forever—not at all. They are principles that require constant recollection, cultivation, and exploration. Wisdom can develop only in a mind that is continually reoriented and grounded in truth and selflessness.

## Two Kinds of People

Two kinds of people are described in the Theravāda scriptures: *puggalas* and *manussas*. Being a *puggala* means that you have a human body but might not be fully human—internally you might be operating more like an animal or a hungry ghost. If you are a *manussa*, you are truly human. In Buddhist cosmology the realms of existence are divided into the heavens (*devas*), the jealous gods (*asuras*), the animals, the hungry ghosts (*petas*), the denizens of hell (*niraya*), and the humans. To be born in the human division of the six realms means that you are a *manussa*.

A manussa is one who lives at least according to the five precepts. That is to say, the chief characteristic of one who is truly human is the quality of virtue, of beautiful conduct.

I find this to be a helpful reflection and one that we can test for ourselves: when we behave in ways that are ugly, selfish, cruel, or greedy, what does that feel like? At those times we are less than human; we are out of harmony with life; we feel bad about ourselves. There is an imbalance in the system. The heart can't open in the midst of this chaos.

We can also see for ourselves what happens when we behave in kind and skillful ways. What does *that* feel like? We feel good about ourselves, and there's a sense of harmony with all things. The heart is open and receptive to the whole panoply of life. We still may be ignorant in many ways, and still prone to all kinds of suffering, but to have this basic sensitivity and nobility of conduct is synonymous with true humanity.

### **A Natural Law**

The five precepts were not just conjured up by the Buddha. They are part of the natural order. They aren't imposed as a Buddhist idea, nor are they unique to the Buddhist tradition. Every country in the world has laws that enable human beings to function freely and harmoniously. These laws relate to respect for human life, to property, to the appropriate use of sexuality, and to honesty. The Buddha pointed out that they are innate to the human condition. If we take life, if we misappropriate things, if we take advantage of others—through our sexuality or by living indulgently—if we are deceitful or aggressive, harmful with our speech, then pain intrinsically will follow. In the opening verses of the *Dhammapada* it says, "If you speak or act with a corrupt mind, then pain will follow like the wheels of the cart following

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the ox that pulls it." The Buddha referred to these precepts as *pakati-sīla*—natural or genuine virtue. They are contrasted with *paññatti-sīla*—prescribed ethics—which are the product of local customs and religions or rules peculiar to certain professions.

I like to compare the five precepts to the driver's manual in a new car: "Congratulations! You are now the proud owner of a human life. Let me introduce you to your vehicle." Well, perhaps they're not so much like a driver's manual as they are like road signs, such as DANGEROUS CURVE OR DO NOT ENTER—WRONG WAY OR SLOW. Try to understand the precepts in this way. They are road signs for our life as human beings. They help us look and see that "life is really *this* way, not *that* way."

These signs protect us from danger. They warn us where the obstacles are and help the heart stay on track. Perhaps you've noticed that if you don't follow the road signs, you tend to get lost, problems start to multiply, and there is a lot of tension and frustration involved. But when you pay attention and follow the laws and road signs, there's flexibility, sensitivity to time and place, *and* we usually get where we're going. The precepts should be understood in exactly the same way. We pick them up and use them as helpful guides through the areas of life where we lose our way most easily, where there is the most emotional charge: around issues of life and death, around property and ownership, around sexuality, around honesty and deceit, around speech and communication.

### The Fifth Precept

It's interesting that when the Buddha describes the moral precepts, he often doesn't actually mention the fifth one. The Buddha did not always label the precept against using intoxicants as intrinsically moral. When I say this, some people perk up and get very interested! The point, though, is that when the mind is



in a heedless state, it is much easier to fall headlong into the first four danger zones than it is when the mind is attentive, balanced, and undrugged. To continue the driving analogy: just consider the number of accidents caused by people under the influence of drink and other intoxicants. So it may be that we wouldn't experience the inescapable negative karmic result that we would, say, when telling a deliberate lie, but the precept against using intoxicants is included in the five because it's a linchpin for all the others—when it goes, the wheels start to wobble.

For myself, I like to encourage the understanding of the fifth precept—"I undertake the precept to refrain from consuming intoxicating drink and drugs which lead to carelessness"—to be a refraining from consuming the substances at all, not just a refraining from intoxication. It's a favorite idea, isn't it, to think, "Just to have a beer now and then, or a glass of wine with dinner, that's not against the precepts, is it?" Quite, honestly, I'd say that it is.

To have the standard of abstinence is a great kindness to yourself and a kindness to other people by the example that you set. I'm not asking people to be rigid or fanatical about it, but it can be extremely helpful for ourselves to make a clear commitment. It is like saying, "Mindfulness is a precious and fragile commodity, why endanger or weaken it?" So, personally, I try to encourage a strict observance of the precepts, including that of refraining from intoxicants. This is out of no reason other than my love for you and all other beings. You will find it is the most helpful support to all dimensions of Buddhist practice to respect the precepts in this way.

### **Sila Is Another Word for Happiness**

The five precepts are not about morality alone. They are also a great mindfulness tool. We don't get a signal when we start to

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drift from rigpa to marigpa, from clear awareness to heedlessness, do we? It's not as though we have a little warning light on the dashboard for when a defilement or some deluded state comes into existence. It is not like when you create a document on your computer and the machine prints the file name and path, the date you wrote it, and so forth. "This is a greed condition, third degree, generated at 15:41, 1-6-02." "This is a self-based deluded condition. . ." They are not tagged like that.

But when we give our hearts to the precepts and really respect them, *they* let us know, they give a warning. As the heart drifts unwittingly into unawareness, deluded attractions, and aversions, there's a warning buzz in the system. It enables the heart to wake up before we lose sight of our innate purity, before the negative states have been compounded, and before we get ourselves into trouble. To go back to the driving analogy, they are like the serrated strip at the side of the freeway that makes the wheels vibrate when we drift too far toward the hard shoulder: "Oops! Dozed off for a moment there. How did that happen? Better brighten up or I'll be in trouble and never make it."

After the recitation of the precepts, the person who is giving them chants:

*Sīla is the source of happiness,  
sīla is the source of true wealth,  
sīla is the cause of peacefulness,  
therefore, let sīla be purified.*

So this is all about how to be happy. We take these principles of kindness and virtue to heart and let them guide us. The cradle of Dharma stays with us.

It is a portable retreat.





# Selected Chants

*Tibetan chants from translations by Tony Duff and Erik Pema Kunsang*

TAKING REFUGE      THERAVĀDA

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa  
Homage to the Blessed, Noble and Perfectly  
Enlightened One

*(3 times)*

Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi  
Dhammaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi  
Sanghaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

To the Buddha I go for refuge  
To the Dhamma I go for refuge  
To the Sangha I go for refuge

*(3 times)*

**Small Boat, Great Mountain**

ORDINARY TAKING REFUGE &  
AROUSING BODHICITTA TIBETAN

Until becoming enlightened, I take refuge  
In the Buddha, the Dharma and the Supreme Assembly;  
May the merits from my generosity and other virtues,  
Result in Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings.

*(3 times)*

EXTRA-ORDINARY TAKING REFUGE TIBETAN

NAMO: The essence, empty, Dharmakāya;  
The nature, clarity, Sambhogakāya;  
The compassion, manifold, Nirmāṇakāya;  
In that I take refuge until enlightenment.

*(3 times)*

NĀGĀRJUNA'S DEDICATION OF MERIT TIBETAN

By this merit may we obtain omniscience then  
Having defeated the enemies, wrong-doings,  
May we liberate living beings from the ocean of existence,  
With its stormy waves of birth, old-age, sickness and death.

REFLECTIONS ON SHARING BLESSINGS THERAVĀDA

Through the goodness that arises from my practice,  
May my spiritual teachers and guides of great virtue,  
My mother, my father and my relatives,  
The sun and the moon,  
And all virtuous leaders of the world;  
May the highest gods and evil forces;  
Celestial beings, guardian spirits of the Earth  
And the Lord of Death;  
May those who are friendly, indifferent or hostile;  
May all beings receive the blessings of my life,  
May they soon attain the threefold bliss  
And realize the Deathless.  
Through the goodness that arises from my practice,  
And through this act of sharing,  
May all desires and attachments quickly cease  
And all harmful states of mind.  
Until I realize nibbāna,  
In every kind of birth,  
May I have an upright mind  
With mindfulness and wisdom, austerity and vigor.  
May the forces of delusion not take hold  
Nor weaken my resolve.  
The Buddha is my excellent refuge,  
Unsurpassed is the protection of the Dhamma,  
The Solitary Buddha is my noble Lord,  
The Sangha is my supreme support.  
Through the supreme power of all these,  
May darkness and delusion be dispelled.

## Small Boat, Great Mountain

VAJRASATVA 100 SYLLABLE MANTRA TIBETAN

OM VAJRASATVA SAMAYAM ANUPALAYA  
VAJRASATVA TVENOPATIṢṬHA DR̥ḌHO ME BHAVA  
SUTOṢHYO ME BHAVA  
SUPOṢHYO ME BHAVA  
ANURAKTO ME BHAVA  
SARVASIDDHI MEM PRAYACCHA  
SARVA KARMASU CA ME  
CITTAṢ SHREYAM KURU HŪṢ  
HA HA HA HA HOḤ  
BHAGAVAN SARVATATHĀGATA VAJRA MĀ ME MUṆCA  
VAJRĪ BHAVA MAHĀSAMAYASATVA ĀḤ

THE BUDDHA'S

WORDS ON LOVING KINDNESS THERAVĀDA

This is what should be done  
By one who is skilled in goodness,  
And who knows the path of peace:  
Let them be able and upright,  
Straightforward and gentle in speech.  
Humble and not conceited,  
Contented and easily satisfied.  
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways,  
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skilful,  
Not proud and demanding in nature.  
Let them not do the slightest thing  
That the wise would later reprove.



Wishing: In gladness and in safety,  
May all beings be at ease.  
Whatever living beings there may be,  
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,  
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,  
The seen and the unseen,  
Those living near and far away,  
Those born and to-be-born—  
May all beings be at ease!  
Let none deceive another,  
Or despise any being in any state.  
Let none through anger or ill will  
Wish harm upon another.  
Even as mother protects with her life  
Her child, her only child,  
So with a boundless heart  
Should one cherish all living beings;  
Radiating kindness over the entire world:  
Spreading upwards to the skies,  
And downwards to the depths;  
Outwards and unbounded,  
Freed from hatred and ill will.  
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down  
Free from drowsiness,  
One should sustain this recollection.  
This is said to be the sublime abiding.  
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.

## Small Boat, Great Mountain

### VAJRA SONG OF THE FIRST TSOKNYI RINPOCHE    TIBETAN

Don't wander, don't wander, place mindfulness on guard;  
Along the road of distraction, Māra lies in ambush.  
Māra 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.

### SUFFUSION WITH THE DIVINE ABIDINGS    THERAVĀDA

I will abide pervading one quarter with a heart 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 heart imbued with loving-kindness;  
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,  
without hostility and without ill will.

I will abide pervading one quarter with a heart imbued  
with compassion—  
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 heart imbued with compassion;  
abundant, exalted, immeasurable  
without hostility and without ill will.

I will abide pervading one quarter with a heart imbued  
with gladness—  
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 heart imbued with gladness;  
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,  
without hostility and without ill will.

I will abide pervading one quarter with a heart imbued  
with equanimity—  
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 heart imbued with equanimity;  
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,  
without hostility and without ill will.

**Small Boat, Great Mountain**

ASPIRATION FOR BODHICITTA    TIBETAN

May the precious bodhicitta arise  
Where it has not arisen,  
And where it has arisen may it not decrease  
But increase further and further.

EXTRA-ORDINARY AROUSING BODHICITTA    TIBETAN

Ho: In order to set all living beings, as extensive as space  
On the level of a Buddha,  
I will use the *upadesha* of the Great Perfection  
To realize self-arising rigpa Dharmakāya.

REFLECTIONS ON  
UNIVERSAL WELL-BEING      THERAVĀDA

May I abide in well-being  
In freedom from affliction  
In freedom from hostility  
In freedom from ill will  
In freedom from anxiety  
And may I maintain well-being in myself.

May everyone abide in well-being  
In freedom from hostility  
In freedom from ill will  
In freedom from anxiety  
And may they maintain well-being in themselves.

May all beings be released from all suffering  
And may they not be parted from  
The good fortune they have attained.

All beings are the owners of their actions  
And inherit their results.  
Their future is born from such actions  
Companion to such actions  
And their results will be their home.  
All kinds of actions,  
Be they skillful or harmful,  
Of such acts,  
They will be the heirs.

## Small Boat, Great Mountain

### DEPENDENT ORIGINATION & CESSATION THERAVĀDA

With ignorance as condition formations come to be.

With formations as condition consciousness comes to be.

With consciousness as condition materiality/mentality comes to be.

With materiality/mentality as condition the six senses come to be.

With the six senses as condition contact comes to be.

With contact as condition feeling comes to be.

With feeling as condition craving comes to be.

With craving as condition clinging comes to be.

With clinging as condition becoming comes to be.

With becoming as condition birth comes to be.

With birth as condition, then old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair all come into being.

Such is the origination of this entire mass of suffering.

Now, with the remainderless fading, cessation and absence of that very ignorance comes the cessation, the non-arising of formations.

With the cessation, the non-arising of formations comes the cessation, the non-arising of consciousness.

With the cessation, the non-arising of consciousness comes the cessation, the non-arising of materiality/mentality.

With the cessation, the non-arising of materiality/mentality comes the cessation, the non-arising of the six senses.

With the cessation, the non-arising of the six senses comes the cessation, the non-arising of contact.

With the cessation, the non-arising of contact comes the cessation, the non-arising of feeling.

With the cessation, the non-arising of feeling comes the cessation, the non-arising of craving.

With the cessation, the non-arising of craving comes the cessation, the non-arising of clinging.

With the cessation, the non-arising of clinging comes the cessation, the non-arising of becoming.

With the cessation, the non-arising of becoming comes the cessation, the non-arising of birth.

With the cessation, the non-arising of birth, then old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair all fail to arise, they cease.

Such is the cessation, the non-arising of this entire mass of suffering.

## Small Boat, Great Mountain

### THE FIVE PRECEPTS THERAVĀDA

1. *Pāṇātipātā veramanī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*  
I undertake the precept to refrain from taking the life of any living creature.
2. *Adinnādānā veramanī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*  
I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given.
3. *Kamesu micchācārā veramanī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*  
I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct.
4. *Musāvādā veramanī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*  
I undertake the precept to refrain from false and harmful speech.
5. *Surāmeraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhānā veramanī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*  
I undertake the precept to refrain from consuming intoxicating drink and drugs, which lead to carelessness.

Leader: *Imāni pañca sikkhāpadāni*

*Sīlena sugatim yanti*

*Sīlena bhogasampadā*

*Sīlena nibbutiṃ yanti*

*Tasmā sīlaṃ visodhaye*

These are the five precepts:  
sīla is the source of happiness,  
sīla is the source of true wealth,  
sīla is the cause of peacefulness,  
therefore, let sīla be purified.



# Glossary

*In general, Pali terms have been used when referring to Theravāda teachings and Sanskrit when referring to Mayāhāna and Vajrayāna teachings, except when Sanskrit terms (for example, Dharma) are more commonly used in the West.*

**Ahaṃkāra** the feeling of “I-ness”; literally, “made of ‘I am’”

**Akālika** timelessness

**Amatadhātu** the deathless element; a synonym for  
nirvāna/nibbāna

**Amrita** (Skt.) the nectar of immortality

**Anāgāmi** literally, “non-returner”; one who has reached the  
penultimate stage of enlightenment

**Anatta** literally, “not-self”; one of the three characteristics  
of all phenomena

## Small Boat, Great Mountain

**Anicca** impermanence, uncertainty; one of the three characteristics of all phenomena

**Anantaṃ** infinite, limitless

**Anidassanaṃ** non-manifestative, invisible, formless

**Anuloma** literally, “with the grain”; referring to the arising dimension of the dependent origination cycle

**Arahant** a fully enlightened being

**Arūpa-jhāna** formless absorption; the most refined types of meditative concentration

**Āsava** the “outflows”; the unwholesome habits of the heart: sense desire, views, becoming, and ignorance

**Asurā** the jealous gods, titans; one of the six realms of Buddhist cosmology, symbolizing righteous indignation and power combined with violence

**Atammayatā** literally, “not made of that”; nonidentification or nonfabrication

**Attavādupādāna** clinging to ideas and feelings of self

**Atthi** the verb “to be,” implying the transcendent state

**Avalokiteshvāra** (Skt.) literally, “The One Who Listens to the Sounds of the World,” the bodhisattva of compassion; also known as Chenrezig (Tib.) and Kuan Yin (Chin.)

**Avijja** ignorance, nescience, unawareness; one of the links in the chain of dependent origination; “marigpa” in Tibetan

**Bhava** becoming, being; one of the links in the chain of dependent origination

**Bhikkhu** Buddhist monk; literally “one who sees the danger in saṃsāra” or “one who lives on alms”

- Bodhi tree** the tree under which the Buddha sat during the night of his enlightenment
- Borupet** a bitter medicinal vine, native to Thailand
- Brahmā** the gods of the most refined realms in Buddhist cosmology
- Brahma-vihāras** the four sublime or divine states of mind, representing the emotional world at its most refined and wholesome; mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (joy at the good fortune of others), upekkhā (equanimity); also known as “pleasant abidings,” although not transcendent in themselves
- Buddha-Dharma (Skt.)/Dhamma (Pali)** the teachings of the Buddha
- Ch’an (Chin.)** literally, “meditative absorption”; Chinese for the word “jhana” in Pali and “zen” in Japanese
- Chenrezig (Tib.)** *see* **Avalokiteshvāra**
- Citta** heart or mind
- Cittaṃ pabhassaraṃ akandukehi kilesehi** “the heart is naturally radiant, defilements are only visitors”
- Deva/devatā** celestial beings in the heavenly realms
- Dharma (Skt.)/Dhamma (Pali)** the truth of the way things are; the teachings of the Buddha that reveal that truth and elucidate the means of realizing it as a direct experience
- Dharmakāya (Skt.)** literally, “the body of the Dharma”; the unmanifest element of the three bodies of the Buddha, in the teachings of the Northern tradition

## Small Boat, Great Mountain

**Dharmasāla** (Skt.) pilgrims' rest house

**Diṭṭhupādāna** clinging to views and opinions

**Dukkha** suffering, unsatisfactoriness; the inherent insecurity, instability, and imperfection of things; one of the three characteristics of all phenomena

**Dukkha-nirodha** the cessation of dukkha; the Third Noble Truth

**Dzogchen** (Tib.) literally, "the natural great perfection," "great peak," or "great summit"; Tibetan for the *mahā-ati* in Sanskrit

**Hoti** the verb "to be," implying the mundane, conditioned state

**Jhāna** meditative absorption

**Kāmapādāna** clinging to sense pleasure

**Khandha** (Pali)/**skandha** (Skt.) group, collection, or aggregate; usually meaning one of the five basic constituents of the mental and physical realm: form (esp. the body), feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness

**Kuan Yin** (Chin.) *see Avalokiteshvāra*

**Kuṭī** hut, monastic dwelling

**Loka** world, realm, or universe

**Luang Por** (Thai) a respectful and friendly form of address meaning "venerable father"

**Mahāyāna** the "Great Vehicle," or Northern tradition of Buddhism

- Mamaṅkara** “me-ness”; literally, “made of ‘me’”
- Mañjushri** (Skt.) the bodhisattva of wisdom
- Marigpa** (Tib.) ignorance (*see avijjā*)
- Mettā** loving-kindness, one of the brahma-vihāras
- Mind-essence** the transcendent, unconditioned attribute of mind
- Nahm lai ning** (Thai) still, flowing water
- Nāma-rūpa** mind-and-body; name-and-form; subject-and-object; one of the links in the chain of dependent origination
- Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa** “Homage to the Blessed, Noble, and Perfectly Enlightened One”; the classic phrase used to open most ceremonies, recitations of teachings, and blessings in Pali
- Nandana Grove** a pleasure garden in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods
- Ngondro** (Tib.) preliminary practices
- Niraya** the hell realms; one of the six realms of Buddhist cosmology, symbolizing states of rage, extreme suffering, and passion
- Nirodha** cessation; a synonym for nirvāna (Skt.)/nibbāna (Pali)
- Nirvāna** (Skt.)/**nibbāna** (Pali) peace, the goal of the Buddhist path; literally, “coolness”
- Nyingmapa** (Tib.) literally, “The Ancient Ones”; the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism, keepers and transmitters of the Dzogchen teachings
- Paccaya** to condition, cause, or affect
- Pārami/pāramitā** spiritual perfections

## Small Boat, Great Mountain

**Parinibbāna** (Pali) / **parinirvāna** (Skt.) complete or final nirvāna; a term usually used to refer to the passing away of an enlightened being

**Paṭiloma** literally, “against the grain”; referring to the cessation dimension of the dependent origination cycle

**Peta** (Pali)/**preta** (Skt.) hungry ghosts; one of the six realms of Buddhist cosmology, symbolizing the state of insatiable addiction

**Poo roo** (Thai) the “one who knows”; the faculty of knowing

**Pūjā** devotional recitation of scripture and ritual practice

**Rigpa** (Tib.) nondual awareness; authentic recognition of mind-essence; also known as “the view”; the Pali “vijjā” or Sanskrit “vidyā” are equivalent

**Rinpoche** (Tib.) literally, “precious one”; an honorific title usually given to lamas deemed to have developed many perfections (pāramitās) in previous lives

**Rūpa-khandha** the physical or form aspect of existence; one of the five khandhas (*see above*)

**Sabbato pabhaṃ** radiant in all directions or accessible from all sides

**Samāṇa Gotama** the Buddha; literally, “the ascetic wanderer of the Gotama clan”

**Samsāra** literally, “endless wandering”; the realm of birth and death

**Sankhārā** mental formations; one of the five khandhas; one of the links in the chain of dependent origination

**Sīla** virtue; moral precepts

**Sīlabbatupādāna** clinging to rules, conventions, and observances

**Skandha** (Skt.)/**khandha** (Pali) (*see above*)

**Suññatā** emptiness

**Sutta** (Pali)/**sutra** (Skt.) literally, “thread”; scriptural teaching

**Tan** an honorific meaning “venerable friend,” used in Thailand for younger monks and novices

**Tañhā** literally, “thirst”; craving; one of the links in the chain of dependent origination

**Tārā** (Skt.) literally, “She who carries across”; a bodhisattva who was born from one of the tears of Avalokiteshvāra; she is the wisdom aspect of Amoghasiddhi Buddha

**Tathatā** suchness

**Tathāgata** the epithet that the Buddha used to refer to himself; literally, “one gone to suchness and come to suchness”

**Theravāda** literally, “The Way of the Elders”; the Southern tradition of Buddhism

**Trekcho** (Tib.) literally, “cutting”; an aspect of Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice

**Udāna** the “Inspired Utterances of the Buddha”; one of the books of the collection of canonical discourses

**Upādāna** clinging, grasping; one of the links in the chain of dependent origination

**Upadesha** (Skt.) pointing out, instruction, indication

## Small Boat, Great Mountain

**Vajra** (Skt.) literally, “diamond,” “indestructible,” “thunderbolt”; usually refers to the supreme or ultimate aspect of things

**Vajrasattva** (Skt.) literally, “indestructible being”; a member of the Tibetan pantheon representing the embodiment of the wisdom of all the Buddhas – a highly significant figure in Dzogchen practice

**Vajrayāna** (Skt.) literally, “The Diamond Vehicle” or “The Supreme Vehicle”; the tantric aspect of the Northern tradition of Buddhism

**Vedanā** feeling; one of the five khandhas; also one of the links in the chain of dependent origination

**Vijjā** transcendent knowing; true knowledge; *see* **rigpa**

**Viññāṇa** discriminative consciousness; one of the five khandhas; also one of the links in the chain of dependent origination

**Vipassanā** insight; insight meditation

**Zafu** (Jap.) meditation cushion



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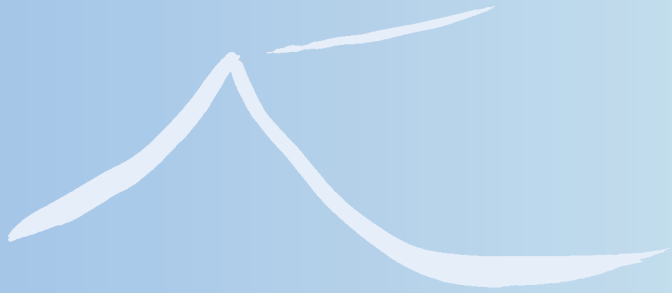
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