



FOREST SANGHA newsletter

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Sangha and the Basis of Community

Ajahn Santacitto shares some reflections on the workings and nature of community.

An order of monks and nuns is an example of a diverse community brought together by commitment to a shared aspiration. The aspiration is to follow the heart's call to discover the truth through unselfish living. This common intention, to dedicate oneself through service to what is true, is the key to the transforming power of community.

Free of political devices and ideologies, a monastic community experiences on the one hand the communal purification which lies at the heart of communism, and on the other hand the respect for individual human potential that forms the basis of democracy. A monk or a nun discovers how peace within community arises from peace within oneself; and peace becomes real when there is a willingness to give up selfish impulses. In practice, this supports the harmonious sharing of food, clothes, work and shelter. In doing so one offers one's life as an experimental laboratory to creatively rediscover, in evernew conditions, the validity of Buddha's 2,500-year-old experiment in community living called 'Sangha'.

This is my global vision for the future. I believe the ongoing, ongrowing extension of this Sangha experiment to ever wider human territory offers our mature human community a vision of hope. It provides practical guidelines on how to make this vision real through the creative power of skilful living.

The Buddha highly praised coming together to share our perceptions and experience of how to apply the skilful means of personal and communal development.

Being a monk in Thailand for 12 years was a constant source of reflection on what Sangha expressed and offered society. The relationship between the monastic Sangha and Thai society is based on mutual dependence - the Sangha providing spiritual support, teaching and guidance, and the society providing the material support of the Sangha's basic physical needs.

One sees how beautifully Thai society has used the joy of giving as a means of training - both communal and individual. Children learn happily by joining in; as, for instance, when praised for their respectful putting of cake in a monk's almsbowl. It is heart-warming to see a whole cross-section of society encouraging each other in celebrating communal generosity. This social unblocking of the hindrance of greed, so especially relevant to our highly materialistic society, opens channels that lead to a society rooted in what we can offer each other, and can bring very real happiness and harmony.

Indeed, the Thais' joy in giving is contagious. When they gather together with other South-East Asian Buddhists at Amaravati, the more reserved Westerners present are often drawn to share in this joy. Making a beautiful tradition a source of celebration is one of the ways the Thai people live the Buddha's ancient teaching for developing and maintaining a strong happy society.

To help accomplish this, the Buddha offered a specific teaching, which would always lead to welfare and prosperity and never to decline. Paraphrased, and in words intelligible to Westerners, this instructs us:

- to meet together regularly and often, always meeting and dispersing in harmony, and to carry that harmony into all our duties and dealings with each other;
- not to overthrow the established principles, or introduce new ones but to accept and abide by the original and fundamental ones;
- to honour and respect the elders and deem them worthy of being listened to;
- to ensure that women and girls can dwell in safety and without fear of being molested or exploited;
- to honour and respect shrines, images and other symbolic objects (of communal and individual devotion), and not to neglect or undervalue participation in ceremonies, which can help us reaffirm our right intention and establish our right effort;
- to provide rightful protection, shelter and support for those living the Holy Life and to be glad to be near them.

The last one of these is another example of how Thai society uses the Triple Gem to socialise forces for peace and happiness. This is in the ceremony of reaffirming and mutually supporting the development of the unselfish heart, individually and communally - through the five precepts. These precepts are guidelines and principles for restraining unskilful impulses - of taking life; stealing; committing adultery; engaging in harmful speech; and indulging in intoxication. They open channels for the flowing forth of the unhindered human heart's nature to be kindly and loving to all life (empathy); to be generous and respectful of property; to accept family responsibility; to preserve and encourage harmony through speech; and to value clarity of mind. This is the fundamental basis for genuine peace and harmony arising in any human community.



Sangha working well

The Buddha highly praised coming together to share our perceptions and experience of how to apply the skilful means of personal and communal development.

During the time I was preparing a talk on 'A Global Vision', with monks and lay guests of our monastery gathered together one day, a group discussion developed. From this shared offering came many worthwhile ideas - growing into a veritable edifice! This sincere sharing also showed, with quite unexpected vividness, how the human relationship of Sangha as community provided a real example of how we can actually live our vision.

I offer some of the reflections that arose:

- How can we help people to go beyond self-indulgent pleasure to realise their potential for inner happiness?
- Can people be helped to appreciate or discover how the Five Guidelines (described earlier) can greatly aid accomplishing this?
- Selfishness seems to be strengthened by some of the unwholesome social values absorbed in the socialisation process. How do we encourage generosity, a universal humanistic and spiritual teaching?
- Generosity is the opening of a closed heart. It is the open heart that will communicate and transform. If we can somehow help others to taste calm and peace, then generosity naturally blossoms.
- In our honestly practising, and manifesting it (especially in the catalyst of the monastic environment) others can experience recognition in their own hearts of the joy, the peace and the generosity.
- I mentioned how contagious joy can be, such as when Thais offer food. This is an instance when lay people are reminded how they can nurture the quality of generosity in their children at home - particularly by encouraging them to serve food to others.
- Can education in such values be encouraged - how can more training in generosity and more guidelines be brought into the system? For example: could children be involved more in moulding the school environment (cleaning it up, contributing cooking and serving), so that they would respect it more?
- Can educators be encouraged to find practical ways of transforming an institution into a community? For example: by encouraging teachers as well as students to develop a sense of community; by giving attention to environment and aesthetics conducive to community values; by having the classroom better reflect the world (having handicapped children participate, for example); by setting priorities carefully (already there are too many pressures on educators to get children to achieve worldly goals).

Interestingly, the discussion - in process, experience and in suggestions proposed - pointed very directly to a fundamental consideration in realising a global vision. As a Sangha, as a dynamic community, our personal responsibility to each other is in educating, encouraging and supporting each other towards practical manifestations of unselfishness, to experience the happiness and joy in generosity, in giving guidelines for conduct, and in developing the heart of kindness and a clearly alert and aware mind.

In our innermost hearts we know, feel or sense that, from the enlightened perspective, everything is basically already perfect - so there really is no need to struggle for, or force change; nor a need to resist it. Yet a seeming paradox is that emanating from the heart of this perfect vision is the radiance of compassion, which manifests spontaneous purity (of behaviour and relationship). In practical terms, this means one is still continually functioning

towards the well-being of all. This action is not motivated by hopes or expectations to make the world become like one's ideals, but by a totally selfless offering in response to the living need - a fluid vision of this living moment, evoking an immediacy of the spontaneous action. Through our ever stepping into the unknown - the future blossoming into The Now - we can be fully responsible for it; and we know what needs to be done, in the very act of doing it. Such wise living is the natural functioning of genuine faith.

In Buddhism we call this awareness 'mindfulness' - 'mind fullness'. This fills both the world within and the world around with that which heals our inner fragmentation and the false vision of our outer separateness from one another. The vision of this noble truth, and the way of manifesting it practically, is the Buddha's compassionate dispensation ('prescription') for the illusions of the world's problems and the sense of dis-ease we experience through our being born, not just physically but also mentally and spiritually, into such problems. Through it we are given the grace of discovering ourselves and developing skill in mindful living. This enables us to serve more wholly the world without, while making more whole (more holy) the world within.

Such a noble vision of mutual reflectiveness between the inner and the outer world is the keystone to our success in both inner and outer action. It is the natural root for the blossoming forth of personal responsibility and commitment to blessing the communion of our common humanity. In so touching each other, community becomes real and tangible, from the household up to the global family. In the well-rooted love, miracles and wonders arise in the ordinary. And in the mutually reflective vision, unifying the world within and without, self and other, the wondrous and the ordinary, we find the miracle of mindfulness has the power to dissolve all problems in our return to their source.

Though I have offered reflections from the perspective of a monastic community, offering humanistic and spiritual reflections on a global vision for the future, obviously it is not special to Buddhism or monasticism. All the great religious traditions have a tremendous wealth of wisdom, and skilful means and experience from which untold benefit can be drawn. But each of us must be willing to strive, offering ourselves individually and communally, as a courageous experiment to explore how these timeless teachings apply. Only by our living them can they become relevant and be communicated to the people of the world, both present and future.



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Learning to Accept the Way Things Are

Sister Thanissara offers some guidance and suggestions around the practice of acceptance.

The Buddha taught us that hatred can never be overcome through hatred, but only through love. Perhaps one of the most difficult lessons for humanity to learn is that of compassion. Compassion arises when we have insight into 'way things are' - the Dhamma. Before we can see clearly, we have to accept life in a way that is free from reaction. People sometimes think that one will be totally ineffectual if one just 'accepts'. However, compassion is not necessarily 'weak', actually it is one of the most powerful forces in the universe. The following meditation is offered to help us work more consciously on this quality of acceptance.

o o o ~O~ o o o

Light some candles and incense,
And then read this slowly to a friend ...

Stop for a few moments, sit quietly with a straight back and gently close your eyes. Feel the rhythm of the breath as it enters and leaves the body. Allow yourself to let go of the sense of past and future, and come into the present moment, being exactly with the way things are - now.

Accept all beings without the desire to change,
dominate or manipulate them.

Bring your attention to the body. How does it feel? Accept - with kindness - the feelings and sensations in the body and thoughts in the mind, just the way they are. Breathe in deeply, feeling a sense of trust and well being. Breathe out, allowing any tightness and holding to dissolve. Do this for a while, breathing in a sense of well being and on the out breath - letting go into the space, silence and support of each moment. Allow the body to relax and the mind to calm. When different feelings, sensations and thoughts arise within yourself, just note them, allowing yourself to be fully at peace with their flow. Don't struggle to hold on or push away, just witness - seeing all things as Dhamma, as a part of nature.

Now find a place within yourself where you can totally accept all aspects of your own being with kindness and love.... Your personality, the things you like about yourself and the things which you judge as 'bad'.

As you move deeper into this place, allow yourself to accept fully all the people you know. The ones you love and trust and also the ones you find difficult or have bad feelings towards. Just allow yourself to accept the reactions that different people bring up in your mind, without judgement. Accept all beings without the desire to change, dominate or manipulate them.

Contemplate the thought -May all beings be truly enlightened, may their hearts be at peace.

Being at ease with each moment, allow your attention to stay with the flow of the breath - with no force - breathing very gently and fully. Open your mind and heart to a sense of wholeness. There's nowhere to go, nothing to get and nothing to get rid of. All beings are a part of your own mind and share the same essence as you. Just be at peace with the way life is. Extend this sense of love and understanding to all beings as if they were your children - seeing the potential in them for enlightenment.

As you sit and breathe, bring to mind a sense of connectedness with the Earth. Extend a feeling of peace and gratitude to this ancient and powerful planet who nurtures and takes away life. Your body has arisen from the four elements and in its own time will return to the four elements, it belongs to nature. Accepting the way of nature, allow yourself to feel protected, supported and at ease. Trusting the perfection of the way things work out, see that you are not this body or mind, these are conditioned and must unfold according to the Laws of Karma. In this sense of acceptance, allow yourself to trust in the refuge of Dhamma.



Turn your attention to the breath, feel the life force bringing you energy and love. When you breathe in - breathe in a feeling of acceptance for all that is painful - breathing out - breathe out peace. Let the sense of peace expand outwards, without limit, allowing the sense of 'me' and the 'world' dissolve into the stillness of the present moment.

Stay with the breath for a while, and when you're ready, and in your own time, slowly open your eyes.

o o o ~O~ o o o



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Declan's Gift

Venerable Kovido offers some reflections on the events following the death of Declan Griffin, who was taken ill during the Family Camp School. He died in hospital of a brain tumour on the last evening of the camp, and his parents brought his body back to the monastery.

At about 8.40 A.M., I put on my outer robes and walked over to the Dhamma Hall. When I entered, I was struck by the beauty of the scene before me. Declan had been placed on a small bier, at the base of the large Buddha-rupa with flowers all around. As I went closer to offer a plant, I saw that he was dressed in a simple white gown, with his hands by his sides. His skin had a golden hue about it and he looked like a beautiful doll. Altogether it seemed very peaceful.

After offering the flowers, I went to the back of the hall. There were quite a few people there, either sitting or talking quietly. Someone was bringing in cushions, and Pam was talking to the nuns. Ges came in. He seemed beside himself with grief and shock. One realised that words were of no value and I just wanted to touch him.

However, at that moment Ajahn Jun* came in, so I had to move with the events. Gradually all the people came in. The monks sat to the left of the Buddha Rupa, the nuns to the right and the lay people - who included about thirty children and parents - sat in a large semi-circle. In the middle, between Declan and the lay people, sat Pam and Ges.

(Ajahn Jun is the senior Thai disciple of Ajahn Chah, and was staying at Amaravati for Vassa (summer 'Rains' Retreat))

It was obvious that for the children, 'Declan's dead' did not have any real unpleasant connotation.

So we began to chant the funeral chanting, the sonorous, even sounds filling the room and calming the mind. After this, Ajahn Jun suggested that we each offer a stick of incense for Declan. The monks went up first, and then the nuns, followed by Pam and Ges. It was quite a long process, and during the nuns' offering my mind went quiet, and I felt the silence of the place. Into that space came the sound of birds singing in the sunshine.

During the whole ceremony, Ajahn Jun would direct the events in a natural way. I heard later that he had spent some time with Pam and Ges before the ceremony. Earlier on they had just been distraught, reminiscent of Kisa Gotami(§) not really knowing where they were or what they were doing. However, Ajahn Jun just sat stroking the baby and gently closing its eyes, while talking in a calming and soothing way to Pam and Ges.

(#) Kisa Gotami was a young mother who, beside herself with grief over the death of her child, was taken to the Buddha. He was able to help her by pointing out that death is atural and inevitable; every household at some time suffers the loss of loved ones.

Then Sister Abhassara led us in chanting the English version of the Metta Sutta (The Discourse on Loving-Kindness). She had been practising it daily with the families, so we had a lovely rendition. And somehow, having Declan there gave it more meaning. I had been watching the children quite carefully - 'even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child.' I guess there were about fifteen children around the age of eight. Although a few of the nuns were a bit weepy, it was obvious that for the children 'Declan's dead' did not have any real unpleasant connotation.

Then Pam and Ges made a traditional offering of candles, incense and flowers to Ajahn Jun, together with a big bowl of golden-wrapped chocolates. I noticed that whenever it was their turn to do something they had to be guided like little children, as they were still in shock. However, the ceremony and the peaceful presence of all those people seemed to have a calming effect on them, easing their condition.

Ajahn Jun suggested that the children give out all the chocolates, and placed his own at Declan's head. So the children went around distributing the chocolates, which the people proceeded to eat.

Then we did some more chanting: 'Anicca vata sankhara...' three times. The last line is translated as 'and when things pass away there is peace'. Certainly this was how it felt.

Later that day, when nobody was about, I went to sit with Declan for a while. Again, the feeling of peace and beauty was intensified by the candlelight. I noticed in my mind a slight fear of touching him, but leant forward and touched his hand and his head. It just felt cool, that's all. So I lit two big candles and some incense, and sat down. To begin with, I was a bit restless, but after a while settled down. I noticed how there was a slight expectation that this should be a special occasion - dead body, night-time, being alone - however, once these thoughts had dissipated, I was able to relax and experiece a sense of peace and love. There was a realisation that you didn't have to worry about Declan anymore; he didn't need to be fed, or wrapped up, or whatever. And I was with a dead baby; all the stuff happening had to be happening in my own mind, which was a bit revealing!

The next day, somebody said they felt sad at the unfulfilled potential - Declan having been only fourteen months old. It was strange, but I did not feel that way at all. I think I would have done, some time ago, but now I had the feeling that he had fulfilled his role perfectly. Looked at from outside, it would seem like just a chapter in an unfinished book, but to me it seemed that although the book was short, it was complete.



Over the next few days Pam and Ges had the opportunity to be with Declan, sometimes alone, sometimes with others, some times weeping or touching him, sometimes sitting silently. And gradually one could see the assimilation of the facts by their bodies and minds, so that by the day before the funeral their eyes were clear and steady, their manner composed and their speech quite joyful and lighthearted. In fact, people who came only for the funeral, and had missed the preceding events, understandably thought that the fact of Declan's death had not sunk in, and that the grieving process had yet to begin.

One evening I went there after watching a beautiful red sunset. The candles were lit and it had the feeling of a fairy tale, or the Crib. I lit some incense and just looked around. There were a number of cards from people, drawings and poems. There were also a few more flowers and some of his toys and a teddy. Also there were some lovely photos of him - a very happy child, smiling and contented.

I saw what a gift Declan had given us, because now, for the seventy-odd people at this service, death - rather than being morbid or something to be feared - could be something endowed with great beauty and peace. Although he had only lived a short while, this teaching was probably far greater than anything we would be able to say, even if we live to be a hundred.

Thank you, Declan, and thank you, too, Pam and Ges, for bringing him back to Amaravati and allowing us to be present in your time of grieving.

May all beings be well.



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In the Footsteps of the Wise

Ajahn Liam is the acting abbot of Wat Pah Pong. This piece, translated by Ajahn Jayasaro, is an exhortation he gave to monks from Wat Pah Nanachat who had come to pay respects to him before beginning the Vassa (Rains Retreat).

The real peace, the real seclusion, is that of peace or seclusion from the defilements. It is not a matter of detaching oneself physically from unpleasant sensations or unpleasant experiences, but being able to maintain equanimity and peace in the midst of all sense activity.

In the commentaries, there's a list of suitable conditions for meditation: suitable environments, suitable foods, suitable companions and so on, and advice that a meditator should seek to find an environment in which all of those suitable conditions are present. In fact, for someone who really understands practice, there isn't any sense of criticism and dissatisfaction with the place they are living in. Everything should always be 'grist for the mill', it should always be seen as something to be learned from.

You'll notice that even the Buddha himself in his practice wasn't always looking for the place which was just right, and that he didn't always have all the appropriate or helpful conditions. He just went straight from his life as a prince to living under trees. Whatever the climate was, he just practised - it wasn't something that was so important, because he really understood how to practice. So we should also be willing to learn to look on all things that we come into contact with as things to be learned from, rather than trying to manipulate conditions to suit what we think is best for us.

The arahant is the one who has abandoned all clinging,
who goes beyond all sankharas.

The practice in Buddhism is a practice of the mind. It's not particularly a practice of the body. We talk about the sankharas (1) and divide them into the physical reality and the non-material or formless reality, that which can't be seen with the physical eye. Then we divide those formless sankharas again into those which are positive, helpful and wholesome, and those which are harmful, painful and which lead to suffering or distress. We're learning how to look at these, and how to find skilful ways to develop the wholesome qualities in our minds and to abandon and eradicate the unwholesome.

(1) Sankharas can here be understood to mean phenomena as experienced from the subjective viewpoint, as distinct from dhammas, which corresponds to phenomena seen more impersonally.

The mind, like anything else, is something which has both its positive and negative aspects. We have to develop skill in working with the mind, to develop an understanding of which

sankharas are wholesome and which are unwholesome, and then learn to abandon or develop them appropriately. Even wholesome sankharas can cause us suffering if we attach to them, because the root of suffering is attachment. Goodness by itself can be a cause for suffering: the difference is that suffering which arises from the unwholesome sankharas is an open, obvious sort of suffering, whereas the suffering arising from wholesome sankharas is concealed somewhat. Often the appearance of something is very positive, but attaching to it causes us pain and distress.

Learning to come to an understanding of these things, but then going beyond them altogether so that there's neither one nor the other - this is the arahant. The arahant is the one who has abandoned all clinging, who goes beyond all sankharas. What that means is liberation from both the positive and negative, the wholesome and the unwholesome sankharas which arise from ignorance. Both the good and the bad are conditioned by ignorance and have come to an end in the arahant. Because the arahant is living, the five khandas (2) are still present; however, he himself is one that is free of those sankharas. This is the nature of a samana - no sankharas infected by ignorance arising in mind; and just to come into contact with samana, a peaceful one, is great auspiciousness.

(2) The five khandas - body, feelings, perceptions, volitions, and consciousness - are the categories which the Buddha used to describe the components of the personality.

All of us who have received ordination are Sangha in terms of convention, Sangha in terms of Vinaya. But the Sangha is of two sorts. There's the samutti Sangha, which we become a member of just by going through the ordination ceremony; and there is the Ariya Sangha, the Sangha by means of virtue, by means of attainment. 'Ariya' refers to the lessening and the eradication of defilements. Beginning with the sotapanna (3), the process continues up to the arahant. For the Sangha in the conventional sense, we need four monks or more to maintain the quorum, but any time there is a person, ordained or not, who is a sotapanna or further along the path, then the Ariya Sangha is already present. We come together as samutti Sangha in order to develop the qualities of the Ariya Sangha, in the footsteps of those great samanas who have gone before us.

(3) Sotapanna is the first stage (of four stages) of the realisation of Nibbana. Arahant is the culminating fruition of that realisation.

Looking at these particular qualities, one of the most essential is that of restraint, composure or care. On its most level, in terms of sila or morality, this is a way we have of maintaining harmony within the group. We come from many different backgrounds, and although at times we get on very well together, there may be times when some difficulty comes up to make us feel that we are adversaries. We can be full of irritation or aversion to other members of the community.

It is here that we see the value of Vinaya. The discipline, particularly that of showing respect according to seniority, is a way of restraining those unwholesome dhammas. In terms of Vinaya, it is not possible to commit an offence with the mind



alone: that is, just thinking unwholesome thoughts of feeling badly towards another is not yet anything too serious. Keeping unwholesomeness at the level of foolish thoughts is a way of maintaining harmony in the group. Even though we may feel certain things, we understand them as feelings which arise and pass away, and we don't let anything get out of hand. This is the value of sila - learning to develop that mindfulness of our actions and our speech. Before we say or do things we have the presence of mind to examine why exactly we wish to say or do them. 'Would saying this, in fact, be a cause of distress to ourselves or to others?' if we feel that it would be, then we should refrain. Don't allow yourself to be guided by greed, hatred and delusion. These are the roots of pain and difficulty. We are looking to lessen these, not to strengthen them by acting on them.

This is the sense of restraint in terms of the Patimokkha, patimokkha-samvara sila. Here, the most important condition for maintaining our sila purely is a sense of shame or conscience, learning to reflect on the nature and painful results of wrong-doing, until we feel repugnance for unwholesome actions and speech. With a sense of shame, keeping of precepts becomes much easier.

There is also restraint in terms of senses, and sense restraint is another important aspect of our practice. Eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body - we should watch them all the time, being very careful and composed.

Why did the Buddha want us to be restrained in the senses? Because it is right here that suffering arises; it is right here that contact takes place. There's contact, then feelings of happiness, unhappiness, indifference, craving, clinging. It all arises dependent on sense contact. If we can maintain a tight rein upon the sense activity, looking very closely and not allowing the mind to give rise to unbridled feelings of liking or disliking, then this is another virtue in which we follow in the footsteps of the Noble Ones. This is one of their most outstanding qualities - keeping that vigilance. When we can maintain that sort of mindfulness at sense con-tact, then the various things which used to sweep us away and used to really encompass our minds lose their ability to do so.

Consider praise and blame. As long as we're alive, we live in a world of praise and blame. No matter how wise or stupid we are, we have to put up with them. They are natural to the world. We can, however, have mindfulness at sense contact, and then when we hear something, we don't feel compelled to react. Then praise becomes merely praise, and blame becomes merely blame. There is praise, but there isn't anyone to receive the praise; there is blame but no one being blamed. Things are just as they are.

Things start to move into the realm of suchness. Things only become a problem when we take hold of them, proliferate and make something of them. If we maintain that very sharp, clear awareness of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, then before all those difficult problems can start to cause us misery, we have cut it off right there. This is another important aspect of practice - developing strong mindfulness, unshakeability of mind, strength of mind. This is developing samadhi, the stillness that remains unmoved in the midst of our experience.

The third important quality is the quality of wakefulness. Look at the practice as a way of understanding. Look at the mind and yourself, study the mind, not in order to praise or criticise, but to be able to understand it. Thus we're able to lessen the causes for the arising of unwholesome dhammas and allow them to gradually decline and wither. Look at the body. We begin to notice things about the body. On one level we can just notice how, although we have very different personalities and characters, our physical existence is all very similar. All of us have been born into the world, we're all getting older, and we're all subject to sickness and death. Noticing that common nature of the body is a way of enabling us to feel a sense of community with others, to feel kindness, and to have a willingness, to forgive and generate compassion for others. Notice the change in the body. This characteristic is immediately obvious. When we look, we see the body constantly changing. There is heat and cold, pain and pleasure, constant movement of the physical process - the digestion, the blood circulation. Everything is moving, everything is changing. Come to understand the body. Cut through the concern, the possessiveness and attachment to the body by just noticing and understanding its actual characteristics. Cut through the very conditioned ways we have of looking at the body.

Then there is the other aspect - looking at the mind. Notice the feelings, perceptions, and thoughts that are arising and passing away with time. Here, as with the body, the mode of contemplation, the important point, is the change and impermanent nature of things. It is from noticing and relying on penetrating this truth of impermanence that wisdom starts to grow. Our being samanas, our moving towards the clear enlightened state becomes that much more peaceful and real.

To see the changing nature and particularly the falling away, the degeneration, the ending of things - it is here that we start to give rise to that sense of dispassion and disenchantment. We begin to see the thoughts and emotions like a child's playthings. As long as we are fascinated they just go on and on. Once we see their foolishness and lack of substantiality, they begin to lose their ability to fascinate us and to defile our minds.

It's just like watching a play. If suddenly in the midst of the show we were to realise that every one of the actors was just playing a part, that they were all going to die someday, and the people watching the play were all going to die, we would lose interest. When we begin to see the nature of mental states and conditioned phenomena very clearly, seeing that they're constantly falling away, passing away, constantly leaving us, we too develop this disenchantment. Then we can start to let go.

These are the different aspects of our practice - the different virtues and qualities of the Noble Ones which we are trying to develop. Restraint in terms of sila, sense restraint, and wakefulness to the actual conditions, knowing the true nature of the body and mind. This is a way we have of following in the footsteps of the Buddha and his enlightened disciples.

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Question Time

Ajahn Sumedho replies to questions at the end of a dhamma talk.

What advice would you give to somebody who has suffered a sudden calamity?

To really accept the way it is; that is, to bring it to consciousness rather than to push it aside, or to just indulge in emotion, or to resist it. To just notice and accept that this is the way it is, and to bear the feeling of sorrow, or sadness that's there. Then you'll be able to let it go - which doesn't mean it will go when you want it to, but it means that you'll not be making any problems about it.

Life is like that. All of us, all human beings, experience the loss of someone they love. It's just part of our human condition, and human beings have always experienced that. We have to watch our parents die. Maybe we have to experience the death of a child, or someone who dies prematurely - a good friend who is in an accident. Sometime we have to accept horrendous things in life.

You can just involve yourself in self-pity and blame. Or you can look at it as a chance for awakening to life, and to really look and understand.

But then when we are mindful we have already accepted all possibilities one still feels the anguish, but, one can accept that feeling. That has its own peacefulness too; the experience of life has a sad quality to it. Every morning the monks and nuns chant: 'All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise...' You think: 'What a horrible thing to say.' But it's a reflection that what we love, what pleases us, is going to change. We suffer when we think it shouldn't and we don't want any changes. But in the mind that's open to life, it's often in the times when we suffer a lot that we grow a lot to.

People that have had life too easy sometimes never grow up; they just become kind of spoiled and complacent. It's where you've had to really look and accept things that are painful that you find yourself growing in wisdom and maturing as a person.

I was invited to give talks to people with AIDS in the San Francisco area in California. Of course that is a very traumatic disease, and has all kinds of ugly things connected to it. It's like having leprosy; having your immunity system pack up is probably one of the most miserable things that can happen to a human being. So there is the tendency to take it all personally, with bitterness and resentment, or with a tremendous guilt and shame and remorse - because the homosexual communities are mainly the ones that have it. There is often self-hatred and guilt connected to it.

But yet, this very thing could be seen as an awakening. You could determine it as 'God's justice', punishing you for living an immoral life - that's one interpretation. Or you can feel just terribly mistreated, and life has given you a pretty bad lot to handle and that you hate God because he gave you this terrible thing. You've always felt like a misfit or whatever. You can shake your fist at the heavens and curse them. You can just involve yourself in self-pity and blame. Or you can look at it as a chance for awakening to life, and to really look and understand.

When you know you're going to die, sometimes that can make the quality of the remainder of your life increase considerably. If you know you are going to die in 6 months, then that's 6 months. If you have any wisdom at all you're not going to go around wasting 6 months on frivolities, where you might, if you're perfectly healthy, think: 'I've got years yet ahead of me. No point in meditating right now because I can do that when I'm older. Right now I'm going to have good time'. But if you know you're going to die in 6 months ... in one way that can be a very painful realisation, but also it can be what awakens you to life. That's the important thing, the awakening and the willingness to learn from life, no matter what you've done or what's happened. Every one of us has this ever present possibility for awakening, no matter what we may have done.



I see our life in this form as a human being more as a kind of transition. We don't really belong here. This is not our real home. We're never going to be content with being human beings. But it's not to be despised either and rejected, but it is being awakened to and understood. You can say you've not wasted your life if you awaken to it.

If you live a long life - say 100 years - following foolish ideas and selfishness, then 100 years have been wasted. But if you've awakened to life - maybe the length of it's not so long but at least you have not wasted it.

How about non-attachment within a relationship?

First you must recognise what attachment is, then you let go; then you realise non-attachment. However, if you're coming from the view you shouldn't be attached, then that's still not it; it's not to take a position against attachment as a kind of command, but to observe: What is attachment? Does being attached to things bring happiness or suffering? Then you being to have insight, you being to see what attachment is, and then you can let go.

If you're coming from a high-minded position of thinking that you shouldn't be attached to anything, then you come up with ideas like: 'Well I can't be a Buddhist because I love my wife, because I'm attached to my wife. I love her, and I just can't kind of let her go. I can't send her away. I can't throw her into the volcano. That's coming from the view that you shouldn't be attached. But the recognition of attachment doesn't mean that you get rid of your wife, it means you free yourself from wrong views about yourself and your wife. Then you find there's love there, but it's not attached; it's not distorting, clinging and grasping.

The empty mind is quite capable of loving in the pure sense of love and caring about others, but any attachment will always distort that. If you love somebody and then start grasping them, it tends to go off; then what you love becomes painful for you. For example, you love

your children - but if you become attached to your children, then you don't love them any more, because you're really with them as they are. You've got all these ideas about what they should be and what you want them to be. You want them to obey you, and you want them to pass their exams. And then you're no longer loving them. Then if they don't fulfil all your wishes, you feel angry and frustrated and averse to them.

So attachment to children no longer allows us to love them. But as you let go of attachment, you find that your natural way of relating is to love, and you are able to be aware of them as they are, rather than having a lot of ideas of what you want them to be.

Talking to parents .. they say how much suffering there is in having children, because there's a lot of wanting. You know, when we're wanting them to be a certain way, not wanting them to be another way and so forth, we create this anguish and suffering in our minds. But the more we let go of that, then we find out that we can have an amazing ability to be sensitive and aware of children as they are. Then, of course, that openness allows them to respond, rather than just react to attachment. A lot of children, you know, are just reacting to: 'I want you to be like this.' And they get to that stubborn stage: 'I'm not going to be what they want.' It's just reaction going on.

The empty mind or the pure mind is not a blank kind of 'zero land' where you're not feeling or caring about anything. It's that effulgence of the mind, brightness, truly sensitive and accepting - an ability to accept life as it is. And then, because we accept life as it is, we can respond to the way we're experiencing it in appropriate ways, rather than just reacting out of fear and aversion.



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EDITORIAL

The Dhamma of Relationship

Ajahn Sumedho will be absent from Amaravati for most of the first half of 1990 (he'll be here for Wesak). While we are practising on our winter retreat, he will be taking up an invitation to have a retreat on his own in India - his first opportunity for more than a week of private practice in sixteen years. After that he will visit Thailand. One could have expected 'Ajahn Sumedho withdrawal symptoms' to manifest in the community, and to a certain extent this is inevitable; however, the response has mostly been a sense of happiness for his welfare. At such times, one recollects with gratitude the singleness of mind and tenacity with which he has pursued his aim of making the Dhamma available for such a wide range of people.

'Dhamma' is a very useful word. Among its meanings are: phenomena as contemplated objectively; the essential nature of a thing - the wetness of water, for example; the order that encompasses all created things - e.g., that they are impermanent; the Totality that includes the created and the Uncreated; and of course the teachings of the Buddha in their conventional (sammuti) and transcendent (paramattha) aspects. Transcendent Dhamma is based on the realisation of not-self and emptiness, or Deathlessness; conventional Dhamma works within the apparent reality of someone experiencing suffering, practising, having skilful results and so forth. This is where most people have to establish their practice, and it is very fully expounded and supported by precepts, observances and conventions. At the bottom line, this Dhamma can be understood to mean 'proper or appropriate conduct'.

Taken purely from the personality viewpoint,
mendicancy can make one feel either privileged (and
unworthy), or powerless (and useless).

For those gone forth, this area is mapped out in great detail by the Vinaya - the Dhamma of the Holy Life. Whatever opinion one might have about the content of the rules and conventions for lay or monastic, their essential nature is to bring around a high degree of personal responsibility and sense-restraint. And in total, they create a form that can be used as a reference point against which to measure the impulses and conditioned values of the mind. In the practice of Buddhism all these dhammas fit together - if we practice the Buddha-Dhamma and live with proper conduct, we live in harmony with our essential nature and realise Truth in relative and absolute terms.

Most Buddhists are familiar with the Buddha-Dhamma as it expounds the teachings on mind-cultivation, but can leave their practice rather slack when considering the area of suitable lifestyle. The conventions that lay Buddhists should make use of are set forth in many instances: there is an example of the 'Vinaya for lay people' quoted below; you can find more of it in the Suttas, especially the Mangala Sutta and the Meeta Sutta from the Sutta Nipata. Such teachings stress the importance of the quality of relationship between oneself, relatives, duties and ideals.

This Dhamma of relationship brings about a sense of interdependence, co-operation, and self-effacement that is the basis of the Sangha as an Order and a way of practice. And it allows virtues to arise that incline the mind to Nibbana.

Contemplated from the viewpoint of the personality, Buddhist conventions are not necessarily that attractive. They seem rather antiquated. It's not difficult to form critical judgements about the relationship of the Sangha to the laity: 'living off charity, not in touch with current trends, irrelevant to Western society....' Or, on the other hand: 'interrupting my meditation, always bothering me with worldly problems, not really interested in The Practice....' Taken purely from the personality viewpoint, mendicancy can make one feel either privileged (and unworthy), or powerless (and useless); deference and hierarchy can breed feelings of superiority and inferiority, power and domination. Someone in a senior position could feel: 'Why do we have to support these heedless scatterbrained people?' And someone in a junior position could feel: 'Why do we have to follow this rigid hierarchical power structure?' Or you could get caught up in gender issues; all based on the belief that you actually are senior, junior, male or female, as some true identity. All that and the ensuring aggravation is the world, isn't it? "Grrr, incompetents; grr tyrants; grr, women; grrr, men; grrr, people, work, rules, traditions, responsibilities ... all set up to get in the way and annoy ME!"

So the Dhamma of relationship goes against the grain. More credit to those monks, nuns and lay people who pick up their training conventions in the same spirit as Anuruddha with reference to his fellow bhikkhus:

... 'I think that it is gain and good fortune for me here that I am living with such companions in the Holy Life. I maintain acts and words and thoughts of loving kindness towards these venerable ones, both in public and in private. I think, "Why should I not set aside what I am minded to do and do only what they are minded to do?" and I act accordingly. We are different in body, Lord, but only one in mind, I think.'

Mahavagga X

or Mahapajapati Gotami, with reference to accepting the junior status of bhikkhunis to bhikkhus:

'Lord Ananda, suppose a woman - or a man - young, youthful, fond of ornaments, with head washed, had got a garland of lotuses or jasmines or roses, she would accept it with both hands and place it on her head; so do I accept these eight capital points not to be transgressed as long as life lasts.'

Culavagga X

Or the innumerable lay people who have sustained a commitment to the family or put something of their own aside to support a monk or a nun who they would hardly ever know. To the lay disciple Visakha the results of dana were quite obvious:

'When I remember it, I shall be glad. When I am glad, I shall be happy. When my mind is happy, my body will be tranquil. When my body is tranquil, I shall feel pleasure. When I feel pleasure, my mind will become concentrated. That will maintain the spiritual faculties in being in me and also the spiritual powers and also the enlightenment factors.'

Mahavagga VIII

The effect of allowing oneself to be guided by conventions can be witnessed in the example of the Sangha community. People come to envy the monastics' clarity and composure in a lifestyle that emphasises collectedness but is open to all kinds of choiceless impingement - and consequent frustration. (These are the aspects that people don't envy). There is even a grace and a joy about a samana who has fully trained in the Vinaya and practises it with mindful reflection. It's not a matter of resigned acceptance of a Rule. Someone who has realised the

highest aims of the conventions willingly upholds their training because they see the Dhamma of conduct as conducive to the Dhamma of Deathlessness.

Dhamma practice always opposes the tendency to centre one's life on what is gratifying to the ego-personality; in fact its very goal is towards that transcendence where the blinkered personality is deposed from the mastery of our actions and perceptions. Seen in this way the conventional Dhamma presents wonderful and rare opportunities: to be co-operative, vulnerable, and exist in a relationship with others that is based on responsibility rather than on swings of mood. But the world does see things personally, and that's the difficulty. People can find conventional form intimidating, unfair or absurd - until they learn to approach it from the heart and see what virtues it causes to arise. Only then will the comparisons as to 'who's got the better deal' stop, and with it the irritation that life is not the way we want it to be. That dissatisfaction will be found irrespective of time, place or convention as long as there is self-view. To get past it, so that we can experience compassion, gratitude, and gladness for each other's well-being, seems to be vitally relevant and well worth the apparent sacrifice.

Ajahn Sucitto



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Three Poems

Circle

Still as a circle of stones
We moved into quiet mind
Ferried by quiet wind of breathing.
Solitary observing the inner life
Gives deep experience of present
moment,
Of the wisdom of non-contention, of
Lettings thing be as they are.

Meditation anoints the mind with
clarity.

The word sacred visits the circle,
The circle is so special,
Motionless pilgrims journey,
To unending light, to peace.

George Coombs

The Enlightenment

In a deep calm forest,
The sunrise beats down on
The wise one.

A sweet singing bird lands -
And hunts for food.

All is peaceful and quiet,
The wise one sits in silence,
meditating.

Thinkig of nothing,
Feeling nothing but the truth of life.

All alone he sits on lotus leaves.
Coloured rays of light shine around
his head,
Glowing the forest,
Animals come out of their homes,
Curious to see this great event.

This is my view on the Buddha's
enlightenment.

Sally

Child Gone Away

Now he lay there, a still form,
A person gone into final quietness,
A child now with the realm of nature,
Flowers, gifts, good wishes adorned
him.

In stillness he taught truth, he showed
In a leaf-frail form the ceasing of
What had arisen, the discourse of his
Short life showed in final exhalation
There is peace.

George Coombs

