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## In Doubt We Trust

This title doesn't imply that doubt is divine, but it alludes to - and challenges - our tendency to avoid the state of doubt, even when it has lessons to teach us. This article is taken from a talk given at a retreat at Amaravati.

One of the major hindrances in this practice is doubt, or vicikiccha in Pali. It's a wavering in the face of uncertainty. When uncertainty manifests, instead of just being able to say, 'Oh, this is uncertain', we desperately struggle to try and make it certain. We want to be certain, we want to be sure of the right thing to do.

What is the right solution? 'Where am I at? Can I dare go on to another type of meditation, or should I stay with this type of meditation? Should I concentrate on my nose, or should I concentrate on my heart, or should I concentrate on my belly?' Some monks will tell you to concentrate on the nose, and this is what it tells you to do in the scriptures. Other monks will tell you to concentrate on the heart and say, 'Well, you're so emotionally repressed you need to concentrate on your heart.' Other people will tell you to concentrate on the belly. And you think, 'Well, whom should I believe?'

Now the Buddha didn't praise blindly believing - which I find to be a lovely aspect of his teaching - but that doesn't mean we're meant to disbelieve, either. Disbelief is another form of believing. He said that we should not take a position for or against, based on speculation or even logic; neither should we establish our practices and our life on mere belief or disbelief. He said that only when you've taken something up - when you've investigated it for yourself, tested it and seen it to be true - only then accept it; then, and only then. And this is the Middle Way: that point between belief and disbelief, accepting and rejecting, pushing and pulling.

The place of mindfulness is the place in the middle, being with things as they are. So when it comes to doubt and uncertainty, we have to be mindful of that doubt.

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## conditioned intelligence.

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What is doubt? What actually is doubt like, as a condition in the mind? 'The last retreat I did I had such-and-such an experience, and this retreat I thought I'd have the same experience again. Am I doing something wrong, or am I doing it right? Perhaps it should be this way - perhaps it shouldn't be this way ....' We can get caught in doubt.

Well, the fact is that we can know, if we're mindful of the mind, that there's uncertainty in the mind and the mind is wavering, and that we're afraid of uncertainty. When we're not able just to acknowledge uncertainty, and we're afraid of it, this fear makes the mind wobble and tremble.

This is a rampant disease for many who have received a Western education. Because, if we're trained without any religious perspective, we tend to identify with our conditioned mind, our conditioned intelligence. The more often we say, 'I know, Sir', the more points we score, the more praise we get; we really become accustomed to feeling very secure and very good about saying, 'I know'. I really like to say that: 'I know'. That's me, I'm the one who knows everything about everything; you ask me, and I have an opinion on it. There's a sense of confidence that feels really good. But the fact is - and this becomes more apparent as the practice proceeds actually, I hardly know anything at all, and what I do know is not of any great consequence. This conditioned mind has a very, very relative function.

We give a lot of positive value to intellectual certainty, so when we're faced with uncertainty we're unable to accept it. So we have this terrible tension. We come across uncertainty, we don't know what to do next.

We can't just sit there and say, 'I don't know what to do', and listen to it. It's very difficult for us to do that. Because of what? Because we're desperately trying to get away from the pain of uncertainty. But it's very important in meditation practice that, when you do start to find uncertainty - and this comes very soon in the practice, uncertainty about your ability to do the practice, or about the teaching or the teacher - that when it arises, you don't dismiss it. Remember the Buddha's instructions: 'Don't believe in logic; don't follow disbelief; don't believe in something because everybody else believes in it. Really find out for yourself - be a refuge unto yourself, know for yourself.'

And so what you know at this moment is: 'I'm uncertain, I'm uncertain about the practice.'

In the beginning, when we first start to acknowledge this, we usually find that we've got a whole backlog of fear and uncertainty. This is because we've been dishonest about our fear regarding uncertainty, and so when we do start to open to it, we find it difficult to deal with. 'This is very important. I mean, this isn't just small doubt - this is a very important doubt, a very important doubt!'

'Should I be a Theravadin, or should I practise Zen? This is very important, very important.' I wavered with this one myself for about seven years. I was really infatuated by the aesthetics of Zen Buddhism. I really thought that I should be a Zen monk. Thai Buddhism did not appeal aesthetically at all, but somehow I found myself ordained as a Theravadin bhikkhu. And there was this uncertainty, 'Should I be here, or should I be in Korea?'

Well, if it weren't for my lousy knees, I would have gone to Korea -



I would have followed my doubt. So if you have bad knees, don't discard them. I am really grateful, I can't say how grateful I am for what my knees have taught me! It can take one into a lot of doubt and pain; you can think you've got your practice together until pain comes along, and then you start to doubt. If at that point you can apply mindfulness and do the practice - keep doing the practice when doubt arises - you can make some real progress. You can start to find out where trust and faith lie.

Trust and faith are found inside of doubt. Doubt is like the packaging around faith and trust. If you want to get into something, like a package of cornflakes, you open the box, right? You've got to open the package before you can get inside - no one wants to eat the package! You've got to open the package and get in there!

This is what it is like with doubt. Doubt is obscuring our faith, our confidence, our trust. All of us have some faith and trust - otherwise we never would have started this practice. But sooner or later it becomes obscured by doubt. If we don't have mindfulness at that point, we just never get any further. Our faith, our confidence will never really develop. It will always be dependent on other people telling us, or books, or hopping around trying this practice or that practice, or this technique or that technique.

So, sooner or later in practice, we come to the point where we actually have to open up to doubt and say, 'Come on in, I'm interested in getting to know you. Let's be friends, let's get to know each other.' Talk to it, don't fight it any more, spread loving-kindness. The power of loving-kindness is very important in dealing with something like the fear of uncertainty.

If we have this habitual negative reaction to things when I don't get 'my way' - then if doubt comes along, that definitely doesn't accord with 'my way', because 'I like to be sure, I like to be sure about things. So when doubt and uncertainty come along, if I reject them then I also reject the opportunity to develop and practise - and that's a great shame. So we need some encouragement in this area, to contemplate the phenomenon of doubt: what is actually taking place, why are we so afraid of uncertainty? Why do we always struggle to make things that are uncertain certain?

On of the most valuable teachings Ajahn Chah ever given me was when I went to him once, totally beside myself with doubt and worry. After we talked awhile he looked at me and said, 'If something is uncertain and you want to make it certain, you are going to suffer.' Well that's obvious. But he really knew what he was talking about, he really knew. If it's uncertain, you've got to see it as uncertain - why try and make it certain? It's only because of our attachment to certainty that we can't learn from uncertainty; yet it's only when we're uncertain that we learn. When we're uncertain, we can wake up, and look around and say, 'What's going on, what's happening?' We can be alert and attentive when we're uncertain; when we're sure, we just sit back and get fat and lazy. People who are really certain don't have this sense of openness and vitality and investigation of life, everything's very closed and sure.

So what we develop in practice is not a sense of certainty, but an ever-increasing sense of the uncertainty of everything. We're not trying to find out if we're a sotapanna ['stream-enterer', a stage on the path to enlightenment] yet: If you're a sotapanna, you're a sotapanna, what do you



have to worry about it for? We worry about it because we want to be certain -- we want it 'my way'

But then we're not really going for refuge in the Buddha's way, we're singing, 'I did it my way ...' Even in the Dhamma we like to try and do it my way. 'I'm going to become certain. I am going to be a sotapanna by the end of this retreat. I'm just going to get rid of all my doubts.' Well, you're guaranteed to fail.

So open to doubt, bring mindfulness to bear on the mind. What does the mind do when it's faced with uncertainty? In this way, when we've stopped fighting it - when we've worked through our backlog of resistance to it - the intelligence can function normally. It's like the intelligence that tells you that if you're too hot, it's because you've got too many clothes on. If you're in touch with your body, if you're mindful of your body, then intelligence will tell you to take some clothes off. Nobody else has to come along and tell you, your natural intelligence will tell you. Likewise with fear of uncertainties. If we work through the backlog, we're able to be clear, to be with it in its raw condition as it arises. And then natural intelligence says, 'Hanging on to doubt with fear is not helping you.' You feel that, you know that.

And then letting go happens. You don't have to tell yourself to do it, it happens. This is insight. You understand the nature of doubt, you understand it for what it is. This understanding came because of doubt, and this understanding gives us trust.

This is where faith lies: it's through investigating confusion, and investigating doubt with mindfulness.

Try to keep it simple. Don't let practice become too complicated. So, for this evening, I offer these thoughts for your consideration.

**Doubt may be an uncomfortable condition, but certainty is ridiculous! - Voltaire**



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## On Messiahs and Other Matters

*The following was taped during a community tea break with Ajahn Sumedho at Amaravati. The questions were not recorded, but the answers are worth reading. In response to a question about the human spiritual longing that manifests as hope in a Messiah to come.*

You can contemplate that whole wish for a Messiah. It's very attractive to think of a Messiah coming and saving us, because there's a feeling somehow that that's the only thing that can do it now. One can be quite depressed with so many things going wrong and with so many problems. You know that feeling: 'Please let the Messiah come and straighten up the mess we've made.'

But I realise that I really have to straighten up the mess I've made in myself. Wanting somebody else to come and do it for me seems to me a sign of immaturity. I remember as a child making a mess and then getting myself into trouble, hoping my parents would come along and straighten it out and make everything right; it's that kind of mind, really. It's not that I'm against the idea of it - it would be very nice to have a Messiah come - I'm all for it. But I don't demand it, or even expect it, because I realise that it's more important to learn how to do it yourself - to learn to be your own messiah - rather than to expect some external force to come and save you or the world.

There are different ways of looking at our current situation. There's the 'gloom, doom' way of: 'Everything's hopeless! We've polluted the planet and we've made a mess; there's nothing much we can do, it's too late.' And there's the New Age approach, which is full of hope: 'It's all changing; consciousness is changing - human beings are becoming aware of totality and the oneness of all sentient beings.' There's that kind of thinking - which is very positive and inspiring to the mind. It gives a direction of hope and optimism to one's life - that we aren't just stuck in a cold universal system that we've made a mess of, and it's just pollution and misery until the whole thing collapses!

Certainly being positive and optimistic about things will make life more pleasant for you, but the way out of suffering - which to me is the whole perfection of our existence as individual human beings - is through the realisation of truth. Rather than choosing one approach and rejecting the other, both sides are seen for what they are; one is transcending, no longer identifying with the conditioned realm or expecting anything from it. In the mind that isn't attached is an ineffable understanding of truth, beyond words; something that you can only realise for yourself.

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Since we can't solve the mystery, the only thing to do is either reject the mystery and busy ourselves with trivial and foolish things, or open ourselves to the mystery.

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So there's the view that we've passed the Golden Age when everything was perfect . . . but there is still an aspiration of the human heart - for individuals, communities and nations - to somehow get back to that perfect paradise on planet earth, where everything is fair and just and beautiful and true and perfect for us.

When we reflect on Dhamma, it allows us to see that even the earth itself is impermanent. So while we can point to the mess the humans have made, we recognise that Mother Nature is also good at making messes on this planet. There Are hurricanes, the volcanoes. . . the whole geological history of planet earth is, in human terms, pretty horrendous - just the way things change and move in nature.

There's a mystery to it all: a planetary system existing in a universe. Our curiosity is taking us towards the furthest reaches of the solar system, but all we can say - even with all our cleverness - is that it's very mysterious and wonderful. All we can do as human beings, really, is to wonder and open ourselves to this mystery, because we can't solve it with the puny little minds we have. Since we can't solve the mystery, the only thing to do is either reject the mystery and busy ourselves with trivial and foolish things, or open ourselves to the mystery.

That's what we mean by the ineffable realisation of Truth. It's the opening of an individual's mind to the mystery; there's no demand for any answer. Just opening your mind and surrendering with total openness and receptivity - that's what we can actually realise within this human form. When you're at one with the mystery there's no suffering, but as long as you are frightened by it, or seeking to solve with the puny perceptions of your mind, you'll just end up in doubt and despair, fear and anxiety - terror, even.

But we can contemplate our own existence. We can contemplate the mystery of life and the universe. What is that about, anyway? One can dismiss it as much ado about nothing, or one can actually investigate and open to it. Then there is the realisation of true peacefulness that you can never have when you're trying to find peace in some thing or somebody or some place.

Looking for a peaceful place . . . maybe you've got the idea that once you find Shangri-La, you'll live happily ever after. But then you find Shangri-La, only to find out that the American Air Force has low-flying jet practice over Shangri-La these days! There's always a snake in the garden, or a worm in the apple, or the people in Shangri-La are so high-minded they never clean the toilets! There's always going to be something unpeaceful about the conditioned realm.

It's the same with the idea of finding Prince Charming or Cinderella: 'Once I meet the right person, then I will live happily ever after!' That's an illusion too. So with no place to go, nobody to save you and fulfil you, and nothing you can do about it, you could end up creating a world all of your own - living in a kind of mental state, where they lock you up in a mental hospital.

The way out of suffering isn't through any objective



realm - through either thought or through perception, or through the material realm - but in transcending it. Transcendence doesn't mean escaping or rejecting it, but moving to that still centre of being, where there's perspective and receptivity to the conditioned realm. There's no longer any self identity with the objective conditioned realm.

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**Developing wisdom and balance in an imperfect world.**

I've had to work through great problems with indignation - I've always been indignant by nature! I get really indignant at the injustices and stupidities of the world - and it's righteous indignation. 'They shouldn't do those things! ... He shouldn't say that .....She shouldn't be doing that!'

Look at the newspapers; there's so much to feel indignant about, so many things not right, terribly wrong. They shouldn't be that way, and people shouldn't do such horrible things. One can really get caught up in indignation.

But if you contemplate that experience of righteous indignation, you find great suffering in your heart. Because even though you're right, you're not wise. You're creating suffering about the way things are. You know ... and you're right, they shouldn't be that way - but they are that way!

Or the opposite can happen, where you think, 'It doesn't matter.' And you close your eyes and plug up your ears, and try not to see or hear anything wrong. That's one way of handling the problem, but it tends to be a very inadequate and miserable thing to have to do.

Now there is an expression which Ajahn Buddhadasa [a very well-known Thai monk] uses as a reflection on life, which translates as: 'This is the way it is' or, 'The world is this way'. This isn't dismissal - not caring when there's unfairness or such things - but it's a kind of acceptance. 'The world is like this. It's always been like this.'

If you look at the history of humanity, there have always been greed, hatred and delusion, jealousy, atrocities, horror. Read the Greek legends -- they're full of cannibalism and rape, gods doing dreadful things to innocent goddesses - yet this was immortalised in Greek mythology. The archetypes of humanity are recorded in legends and myths, Asian as well as European.

So we realise that this is the way it is: human beings can be like this. We can be vengeful and jealous. We can be very selfish, and we can get angry and murderous - we can do all these things, or we can be stupid and indifferent, or full of doubt and worries. Or we can transcend it all.

Then I used to contemplate, 'Well, what's the good of asking anyone else to transcend all that if I don't?'

I can see that being righteously indignant about the state of the world is a way of saying: 'I want you to not be that way. I don't want you to be the way you are. You shouldn't be angry, and you shouldn't be jealous, and ... I'd look at myself and see how, really, all these things - 'me' demanding that 'you' not be that way - are kind of childish: 'Please, be something that I want. Don't say things that upset me.'

Then the insight comes: whether anyone does it or not is none of my business, but I can move in that direction in my own life. 'That's the way it is' isn't pessimistic indifference: 'What can you do? So what! That's the way of the world. Put up with it.' Rather, it's a skilful reflection: 'The world is like this, and human beings are like this.' It's not judging humanity as bad, but recognising that human beings do these things - they've always done these things; and I've done these things too.

One can stop doing such things oneself, but to expect it of everyone else is only going to make you miserable, because that's beyond what you can do in this life. But how I practise with that is to see what I do have control over, and what I'm capable of working with and doing with this creature. It's none of my business what you do. I can't follow you around and make sure that you are perfect.

It's being aware and knowing what you can do as an individual being - within the limbs of this form here, with its characteristics and qualities - rather than thinking: 'If I were stronger, or more intelligent, or healthier or better looking, or this or that . . . then I would be able to do something.' Wisdom, in the Buddhist sense, is being able to see how to work and use what you have, the way it is, even if what you have isn't very good.

If you're crippled, or have some disease, or you're old, or you've had a miserable life, or whatever - that isn't the obstacle. That doesn't mean that you can't be enlightened, you can't be awakened no the truth. With wisdom we learn how to use what we have. If you're someone who thinks: 'For me to do it, I have to have the best,' then you'll never get anywhere; while a wise person can use even rather inferior equipment and get a very good result.

So one thinks. 'This is the way it is. The conditioned realm is flawed, its nature is to be flawed.' It's imperfect - which is not a condemnation: it's not that it's bad because it's flawed. But this points to a truth: everything has something wrong with it, something you don't like. A snake in the garden ... a worm in the apple ... a fly in the ointment.

For example, in any community, There's always somebody who's disillusioned, or who isn't doing exactly What they should be doing. You think, 'It shouldn't be like that. In an ideal community, everybody should be working hard and practising hard.' But in saying, 'That's the way it is', the mind accepts and allows things to be the way they are. In that acceptance you can understand and, through understanding, you can guide things in a better way.

With a community like Amaravati, accepting it the way it is, you begin to look and investigate and maybe see ways of improving it, of making it a better place. Or if there's nothing you can do, you just patiently wait until the right rime for improvement comes.

Accepting other people in your life doesn't mean you like everything about them, but you accept the whole of them for what they are. Then you can see that a lot of your irritation is your own problem -- it's not that there's anything particularly wrong with them, but perhaps you're someone who's easily irritated by certain things. Or if they've just got very bad habits you can, through your acceptance and patience, find an opening in which improvements and directions can be given in a suitable way. There's wisdom operating in that openness.



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## Why Did I Become a Nun?

*The following is taken from a talk given by Sister Sundara at the 'Joys of Monastic Life' conference, held at The Spirit Rock Center in Northern California in May 1990.*

I studied the programme of this conference when I arrived in America and looked at the different issues - which is a word I have never heard used so often before as in the last few days! - and I discovered that actually as a Buddhist nun, I probably would cover all of them just by talking about the life that I lead. It is about monasticism, and issues of men and women, and issues about the lay community's relationship with the monastery, and so forth.

One of the first things that led me to the possibility of awakening the mind - and being in a wakeful state rather than a dull one - was the need I had to understand. To see clearly what my life was about - what our lives are about, I suppose - and I wanted to find the tool that could help. So I read and I listened to people, but somehow it never really did much to my understanding. I could memorise what was said, but I never felt any sort of transformation. And at the time I wasn't aware of the process of transformation, but I felt the need for finding some place within, that would help me understand. I think this is the case for all of us.

There are many tools, many paths, many teachers that are available to us, but in my case I felt that my mind was already cluttered with many views and opinions about things and issues and, really, the most urgent thing to do was to empty it all out. I didn't know how to do it, though.

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We didn't even have to be our own authority, we just had to look clearly, and see distinctly, and focus our attention.

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When I heard Ajahn Sumedho for the first time, he talked about simplicity - and this really spoke to my heart. In our society, simplifying our lives isn't an easy thing to do even if we want to. We tend to clutter our minds and our houses with all sorts of things. So, when I went to Chithurst Monastery for the first time, it wasn't to become something; in fact, I was yearning to not be anything at all. It was difficult because, in the world, we all train to become something, usually something very special. To become nobody in a dignified way was very appealing!

I went to Chithurst to see how Ajahn Sumedho and the monks were doing - they had moved out of a flat in London to the countryside, and I was keen to keep in touch with the Sangha. I really didn't know very much about Buddhism; neither had I seen monks before I met them in London. I had little knowledge of the tradition - which I'm grateful for; I really didn't like tradition very much. As an independent character I had very structured ideas about how I should live and didn't want to be told what to do. The only authority I followed was my own, so I was relieved to find that the teaching was pointing to self-realisation through one's own

experience. We didn't even have to be our own authority, we just had to look clearly, and see distinctly, and focus our attention.

The questioning, or the inquiring mind, must be recognised; in Buddhism, this is what the practice is about. Then, through attentiveness and mindfulness, you begin to explore things in a different way. You question things and see they are not always as they appear. Before we argue what is right or wrong, we must question: who is looking, who is thinking, who has these views? Is it my view? Who is this 'my'? This is something I found very important to come to terms with. Inquiring about the human mind seemed a very important thing. We have to discover that we have a mind, a heart, intellect, feeling, within this wonderful tool called a human being. Do we want to find out if it is working properly or not?

One of the first things one becomes aware of by exploring this is; No, the human tool is not working very well. Before entering the monastery, I thought I had trained myself to be a smiling and attractive, socially acceptable personality. I had convinced myself of this. Before entering the monastery, I thought I was a nice person - I had no doubts about it. Then I joined the community ...

In the community, one recognises the strong views one possesses about oneself and others, especially under this sort of restraint, when you cannot do what you would like to do and your habits become frustrated. There is a lot of boredom in a monastery due to the lack of distractions. You see the mind desperately trying to be fed on something. You find the slightest things irritating and annoying, whereas before you were really tolerant and accepting of others. Encountering the same people on a day-to-day basis, you find even the nicest people can become annoying. Why does this happen? Why do you harbour grudges or criticism about someone you previously liked very much? Is it me? It's worth investigating; otherwise, we would believe everything we thought and felt.

Actually, I really like to have fun, so I began to take my fun seriously. I didn't want to go on suffering forever. The mind has its way of following the path it should take - when you really want something, you find it. It became clear that the only way of enjoying life was to live it the way that felt right, and we must all discover this for ourselves. Whatever gives one a sense of fulfilment and joy, and respect for others, as well as a sense of freedom -- that's what most people want to do. However, one doesn't usually think of finding joy and fulfillment in an environment where distraction and entertainment seem absent. So I didn't want to become a nun - I didn't think women did that until they were really old and no-one really wanted them any more.

When I went to Chithurst to live I was asked to take the Eight Precepts and wear white. I didn't mind too much, as long as I could stay with people I respected and who lived a joyous life. Taking precepts was really what I had been looking for all of my life, and there wasn't any sense of being

## Winter Meditation

Listen - the wind has died in the night.  
- Listen again; can you not hear  
Your own quiet breath.

Look - the dawn has not come  
- Perhaps you should look  
From another place.

It is dark; the whole world is asleep.  
- Never again; one Eye is always  
open  
Watching.

**Martin S. Kaufman**

bound by them; it was just an awareness and focus of attention on what I said and did and thought. I couldn't dance or go to the theatre, watch television or indulge in entertainments. The precepts became really good friends to me. I was able to stop acting unskillfully, and then remorse over my behaviour ceased. This is because I was living in a place where the precepts were upheld and I could cultivate trust.

The beginning of my monastic life was very new for everyone, including my teacher. He had just established a new monastery in the West with monks trained in Thailand - and then four women turned up. The women didn't know each other, you couldn't have put together more different characters. We had an interesting time together living in an environment where everything was experimental.

The house itself was falling apart. In lay life I had always lived in comfortable situations, where cooking and cleaning for myself just weren't part of my lifestyle. I had never lived with monks before, either. It was cold and damp; I had to cook every day, and do many things that were new and unusual. A kind of joy began to develop that took away many obstacles.

When we arrived, none of the four of us had any idea about anything, other than being there to practise and live the life as everyone was leading it - not to be anything special or have any particular privileges. I just wanted to be as ordinary as possible. to be a nobody; I had insight into being a nobody, and realised it was the best way to be. It's not something many people can relate to, and at the time I didn't see this with a Buddhist perspective. I didn't know what a nobody was or how to become one. It really came home when I took refuge in mindfulness and clear awareness, whilst looking for the one who knows. You can ask the question, but you can't ever find anyone who is constant through the impermanent mind-states -- there's just a silence, a space.

At the beginning there was no space in my mind at all. It was full of miseries, ups and downs, me, you, the others, the world, life, yesterday, tomorrow, etc. This was the conditioned mind, conditioned by time and memory, thought and feeling. This was the only perspective I had then and I soon began to see that this conditioned mind was not really a satisfactory tool. It seemed to create problems about everything. One can take problems very seriously and believe, 'Yes, this is MY problem!' But you practise, you see that discontentment and dissatisfaction are the nature of the conditioned mind. I used to worry about everything. I could spend an entire lifetime describing my worry. And then I began to understand worry: it is like a boomerang - you throw it, and it comes back to you. If you believe in it, this is what worry does to you.

Living in this situation, you just can't get away from yourself - wherever you are. You can't get rid of yourself. Living in the monastery, you begin to really see very clearly what this means. You have this person, 'yourself' who creates these problems and you are allowed to be with it. The catch is learning the results of the way you think, feel and act. The absolute and the relative world are not separate. The relative world is only your mind, and it seems as though it's 'out there', because that's where you believe your mind to be. This is where the confusion arises.

The absolute and the relative world come together, like confusion and liberation. If you weren't really confused, there would be no need for liberation; there would be no problems, then, would there? How could you let go without knowing that you were attached to something? It's paradoxical. I remember thinking, 'Must I really suffer just to be able to let go of suffering?' it seemed an unbearable process to be free of ignorance by being truly ignorant. It's painful, as many of us don't want to question that.

Do we want to question what ignorance is about? How do we find a solution from a mind that can't even think clearly? For me, this is an important issue. Can we find clear answers from a place that is confused? Feeling unloved and rejected, frustrated with the sense of not getting anywhere made me think I wasn't practising - but something in me knew that I didn't have to believe that. Even if I was confused, I didn't have to believe it, because ultimately I knew it was not really 'me' - my ultimate nature. I could see these problems end, and realise there was no need to try and solve them. They would just go.

Look back at a situation that was based on a very unstructured form (though it was based on the Dhamma and the Vinaya) I can see that most of the things that have since evolved for the Sangha happened when the community was able to let go. Development has come not from creating issues and problems but from purifying the heart and seeing clearly. Looking for personal clarity within the monastic situation, we realise that letting go was the only freedom from the conditioned mind. There is a sense of trust that our limited view of self is not what we are.



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<b>The Golden State:</b> A. Amaro ■	<b>Articles:</b> ■ On Messiahs and Other Matters; Ajahn Sumedho ■ Why Did I Become a Nun?; Sister Sundara	<b>BACK ISSUES</b> ■
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## Pilgrimage in Mother India

*In the synchronistic way things sometimes work, it happened that two members of the monastic communities received invitations to visit holy places in India this past winter. Ajahn Sucitto is still there, in fact, on a six-month walking pilgrimage with Nick Scott; Sister Thanissara returned to Britain at the end of January, after travelling for two months with a laywoman. Here are extracts from their letters, and from Sister Thanissara an essay as well.*

**go** ■ Ajahn Sucitto  
**to** ■ Sister Thanissara

### Ajahn Sucitto

**Vaisali, December 1990**

My respects and greetings to the sangha from Vaisali.

We are staying at a small temple of Nipponzan Myohoji on the side of the ancient coronation tank at Vaisali. It is the only Buddhist establishment in this small, quiet village that was once capital of the Vajjian confederacy, the place of Mahapajapati's Going Forth and the site of the Buddha's last Rains Retreat. Here, he left his alms-bowl and announced his forthcoming Parinibbana before going to Kusinara.

We have travelled in the opposite direction to his. After making our way to the Nepali border, we walked to Lumbini and Kapilavastu, spending a week or so at those places, then turned back into India and in 5 days made it to Kusinagar near Kasia in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Subsequently we ferried across the Gandah river and turned South towards Vaisali.

Much of the journey has the predictable qualities of tudong: the great spirit and freedom of it, and the blistered feet, grime, sweat and fatigue. The route is not particularly strenuous, as from the Himalayas to the hills in the south of Bihar the terrain is flat and level. Paddies and sugar cane everywhere, broken by rivers, canals, clumps of mango and banyan/bodhi tree groves, temples, villages of thatched straw, mud dwellings and the maelstroms of the towns.

There is a profound regularity to it all that reminds me that from this cradle arose the vision of the endlessness of samsara and the cyclical dance of life. That's how it appears. Everything is out in the open - all life stages and conditions enacted like a morality play. And this human comedy moves to the regular passage of season, and harvest. Human rhythms adopt the same regularity - the trucks are all the same, going at the same speed with the same insignia and the same horns. Bicycles are the same, going at the same speed; the oxcart could be the same one brought out time and again.

But the pilgrimage is far from tedious: against this backdrop, the vivid actualities of people and incidents stand out. There are too many encounters to mention - everyone takes an interest and this is a very populous area, diffused to the extent that it resembles a vast city park on a summer

day. In this image, we have the effect of an ice-cream truck!

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To meet Buddha images and revere them brings an immediate bliss and sweetness to the mind.

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Speaking some Hindi has been very helpful - one touches again and again the deep concern that people have to be of some service to us. Often it is to advise us again about catching a bus (but we are walking), often it is an exchange that can be very heartfelt if one responds to it, then there are the many offers of food and tea. Our almsfaring has been adequate - once people understand what is required. We have eaten alms ranging from the meagre to the abundant, mostly in villages, offered by Brahmin farmers or by poor workers. The spirit has been very touching. If Buddhism were to come back, I think it would be through the kind of contact that pindapada establishes.

My Hindi stretches to a few sentences of Dhamma and the response is always one of quiet attention and the request to stay or return. We have regular pujas on the roadside, and chant at the mealtime or on visiting Hindu shrines: I wanted to encourage the dharma that people have, so we have blessed many people and temples en route.

Devotion is quite fundamental. What is needed is the investigation faculty, and in some way the presence of Western pilgrim Buddhists arouses the innate Indian curiosity towards investigation. As devotion is a main theme of my practice at this time, the practices and reflections I have undertaken make the holy places shine. To meet Buddha images and revere them brings an immediate bliss and sweetness to the mind. I have sprinkled some of Sister Rocana's ashes, Luang Por Chah's hair and made offerings on behalf the Sangha members. In fact, I feel I am bearing much of the Sangha's aspiration, as well as its blessings with me and celebrate these in my acts of offering.

The monk and devotee here (at the Japanese temple) have just started a week of food and water fasting with 13 hours mantra and drum every day: a practice I respectfully declined.

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Greetings to the sangha from Nalanda, ancient Buddhist university town from 3rd-12th century AD. We entered Nalanda yesterday morning, after a night under a tree, along a dirt road that a local farmer had indicated as a short cut (and one that avoided the honk and clatter of the asphalt road). We have had some success at cross-country routes, using the old detailed maps - from the time of the Raj - that Nick brought. Such routes take you into the benevolent simple heart of village India: water buffaloes and oxen munching straw from the rice harvest, goats capering through the huts, women carting huge bales of straw on their heads, people squatting to dry the rice, talk, weave baskets, cook, urinate; the earthy smells of buffalo dung, burning straw, soil being turned for the new crop to be sewn, whiffs of cooking.

Our entry to Nalanda, as to other holy places, is signaled by an ironic change of mood: from being interesting strangers who are responded to with hospitality, or Dhamma pilgrims who are seen with respect, we become tourists, sources of revenue. Everyone is out to sell - tea, food, trinkets, guidance. Someone rubs some ash from a Kali temple on our foreheads and demands 10 rupees. However, a burly monk in maroon Tibetan robes and blue laceless sneakers - a member of a contingent from Zanskar and Ladakh - indicates that the Thai temple is down that road.

...Most of the time we are on the road, in the huge plain of paddies and sugar cane and mango groves where the many villages of this region are situated. Unlike tudong in England, there are few remote or quiet places. It is like walking across an enormous farm in which everyone is working in the fields. There are a few groves.

Buddhist Indian people are very interested in us. It must be rather like having two Eskimos, one dressed as a vicar, turning up in the middle of the Fens. As their own routine is so unvarying, the seasons and the landscape totally predictable, the social and religious order established over centuries, we are a kind of challenge to normality and must be fitted in. 'Where is your house? Where are you going? Where have you come from?' are the continual questions.

Sometimes if we sit down - DOING NOTHING! - people will gather and just stare, trying to figure out 'What . . . ?' It must also be said that they are an immediately caring and hospitable people. Much attention comes from a kind of anxiety that we must be lost, and a common wish to be of help. So alms-food, tea and company have not been a problem. And when you think of it, it is only Westerners with their buzzing psyches who yearn to be alone. Indians look horrified or unbelieving when you mention sleeping under a tree rather than surrounded by people in a village. They are constantly fearful of our safety when walking at night, and one has encounter after encounter with saviours trying to get you to stay in some howling chaos of a town.

They are very bandit-conscious, too. Nick met some bandits - 10 of them, with rifles, bands of bullets across their well-dressed chests, fine waxed moustaches, and on push bikes. But they were very Indian bandits - rather nonplussed by this red-bearded smiling giant, fascinated by his binoculars, which they all took turns at looking through; and when he said they couldn't look in his money belt, accepted that politely and rode off.

With so many people and encounters, many delightful and touching (or humbling in their respect and immediate offers of service), practice of Dhamma has to be very expansive, a constant metta-bhavana and opening beyond one's own perspectives. So I am very grateful for all of this and for the Dhamma-faring that has brought me to this blessed place.

In due course we plan to be in Bodh-Gaya, and from there go on a long walk in the southern Bihar hills before turning to Sarnath, where the Buddha gave his First Sermon...

### **Burmese Vihara, Bodh-Gaya, December 28**

After Vaisali, we strode very purposefully towards Patna. Our entry there was via the Gandhi bridge over the Ganges. It's very impressive and extends for about 3 km before it actually reaches the river. Over it trundles every kind of vehicle, and there is a pavement for



pedestrians and ox-carts. We had a morning puja where the bridge began to soar over the river itself: in India it is OK to do a puja anywhere, though you may find an ox-cart ploughing through the middle of your devotions.

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Throughout the pilgrimage the Buddhist teaching on emptiness has been very useful for responding to the ambiguities of the holy places. At these sites, one's mind perceives both the inspiration and the devotional savour of walking in the land of the Sutras and the Vinaya, and the less gladdening news on contemporary Sangha-practice and the commercial exploitation of these venues. More swift and insightful than reflecting on the cultural, pragmatic and sociological forces at play, is to contemplate and abandon one's own insistence that the inner metaphors of the spiritual world be enacted before one's eyes. After all, the Buddha lived, was enlightened and remained joyous and compassionate amidst a scenario of false accusations, corrupt monks, and attempts on his life. And what finer teaching can there be to not linger in expectation, bliss or despair than the ever-changing carnival of Indian life?

Wat Thai at Nalanda was an excellent place for recuperation, thanks to the ministrations of Maichee Ahlee. Maichee was ordained at age 13, studied Abhidhamma and Pali to doctorate level for 14 years, and then put that aside to manage the temple. She has been a resident for 17 years and is on the go all day; she admits that it is very hard, but no one else will do it, and she has no more interest in learning. Monks come and go as is Thai custom; she caters for them and for all the Thai travel groups, turning up at whatever time, with a high standard of service and good humour. Quite an exemplary being.

The monastery is a good place to rest after the effort and hardship of the walk; my feet have some minor infection from the abrasions of the tudong, and it's good to get clean. Rich food restores the energies and the tissues that get depleted on a long journey and the humble diets of village alms-food. It is also a chance to repair my ancient sanghati, though it is rather like trying to sew up the splits in an overripe tomato. I don't think it is going to survive the trip. I feel more optimistic about my feet.

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From Nalanda it is only a morning's walk to Rajagir. When the haze is minimal, you can see the hills rising out of the plain. They are the first hills we have seen in 500 km, since we left the view of the snow-capped Himalayas in Northern Uttar Pradesh. The eye rejoices at having a finite horizon that doesn't keep moving away at walking speed; it explores the dimension of height, and the mind speculates on views, aloofness, and being above the teeming plains.

How the Buddha must have loved Rajagir! This was the place where royal patronage of the Buddha began when king Bimbisara gave him the Bamboo Grove, and where the Elders recited the Surtas and Vinaya after the Parinibbana.

I couldn't help recalling that it was also a place of treachery - Devadatta rolling down a boulder that shattered and drew the Tathagata's blood; and Ajatasattu beginning a family tradition of patricide by murdering that pious old king, his father, Bimbisara.

Rajagir had some fine moments, but never felt quite right. It is also a resort for Jain pilgrims with numerous temples on the hills; and, on account of its hot springs, a popular place for Indian holiday-makers. After a few days at the Burmese Vihara in the modern town, we decided to weave within the circle of hills and take up residence on Vulture's Peak.

We had a very fine evening by the Buddha's kuti on the Peak itself. As in the other holy places, whatever the commercial accretions that have accumulated around it, the kernel of the

holy place always fills the mind with a sense serenity and poignant reverence, love and encouragement from the Buddha. The hills of Rajagir are truly lovely and have also been preserved (as much as is possible) as a Nature Reserve.

A dirt road runs through the forest that clothes the hills, so it was quite idyllic, but, with one of these illuminating changes of mood that tells you that all moods are mind-made - it was also the place where we were attacked by six men with staves and axes and robbed of everything we had.

Well, at the end of the whole crazy episode I had my sabong [lower robe] and angsa [upper robe/shirt] being used as a belt to tie it up - the bandage around my foot, an empty pouch and my sandals. Nick had his footwear, trousers (in tatters), underwear and a rosary along with a mass of cuts and a few bruises. But were very grateful and relieved to have each other alive, relative health and well-being, and a vihara to go to.

A strange elation sets in after one has been overwhelmed with violence, and even the loss of the bags was compensated by the lightness of having nothing to carry.

It is interesting to reflect on what kamma arises at such highly-charged times. I have had a strong inclination towards 'atonement', to accept what happens on the pilgrimage as a way of paying off karmic debts; it has had some helpful results. In this case, when the bandits threatened to kill me, I found myself offering them my head - one should repay willingly, it seems. That and some Refuge chanting seemed to calm them down, and they left me alone. Nick tried to fight his way out of it, escaped, realised that he couldn't abandon me, returned, got thrashed and pursued through the forest, eventually saving himself by jumping over the edge of a ravine and tumbling through the thorns and scree. Hence he was pretty cut up. As he ruefully reflected, if he had died, it would have been with the mind of an animal.

The mind reruns such incidents many times with 'If only. .' and of course the principal regret on my part is that all the lovely things that people asked me to keep have gone, and to no good end. Nick has lost some 15 rolls of film with memorable scenes of the pilgrimage, plus the list of people who have helped us so far and to whom we wished to write.

It seemed that the best thing to do was nothing. We returned to Nalanda to a quiet place for meditation. Maichee gave me a robe and some toiletries, and 2000 rupees (GBP58) for our use, enough for our immediate needs.

After that, everything has turned around. We filled in our reports for the police, and walked off to Bodh Gaya, travelling very light and meeting many good people on the way. We plan to go to Calcutta, where we should be able to get new passports and visas, and where Nick will probably renew his travellers cheques.

Meanwhile, the days unfold. I borrowed an almsbowl from the vihara to go on almsround in the morning. This is my offering to the holy places - to be a monk who goes for alms, just because the Buddha did, and established that as the norm. Any other motive apart from to offer an opportunity for generosity, any concern about getting anything, or self-consciousness as one stands by a fruit stall or snackbar with an open bowl; any time that I fall away from offering myself is suffering. How perfect, and how precious an opportunity this Dhamma-faring is!

Well, letters, unlike reality, come to an end and need conclusions; I don't know what to make of it all. We may very well meet Sister Thanissara and Nada [her companion] in a day or two, if their plans have come to fruition.

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Greetings to the sangha from Calcutta, where we have gone to get new passports, travellers cheques, visas and airline tickets.

By and large, we are having a fortunate time and the pilgrimage is showering us with benevolence, compassion and insight. Even the robbery helped us to remember that nothing belongs to us. Everything was given, and yet gradually over time the illusion grows: this stuff is 'mine'! Then it all goes, and - well, here we are, and all the essential things - the sleeping bag, almsbowl, malaria tab- lets, water filtration kit, clocks, clothes, etc., etc., that we couldn't do without and had been carting around on our backs - we could do without. At a pinch.

Walking to Bodh-Gaya was easy, travelling light for 2 1/2 days. There at the Burmese Temple, Kate Mitchell and friends gave us sleeping bags, a Swiss Army knife, a water container and mugs. A stainless steel bowl comes from the 'Root Institute for Wisdom Culture', another robe from Wat Thai and financial contributions from many directions. So the forces of destruction and nourishment have worked together to keep us humble, open and seeing things as they are.

We arrived at Bodh-Gaya, having walked from Lumbini in 7 weeks, living mostly on almsfood and sleeping under trees en route. The bodies were a bit worn, but the holy places generally provide good facilities for rest, food and a clean-up. The walking has been a good practice; often we used a mantra to firm up energy and guard against the 'diffusion effect' of the high-contact degree of sensory impingement in India.

We walked generally from about 4-10.30 a.m., with morning puja and sitting at dawn; tea/snack at around 8; 10 a.m.-12.30 p.m. almsround, meal and chat with villagers. Then lumber off and find a place for a brief nap before being discovered by curious locals. Afternoon walk until about 4 - time for tea; 5.30, evening puja; at 6, it is dark. Then an hour or so, depending on energy, in the darkness; set up for the night. Meditate at will until excessive slumping signals beddy-byes.

People have been a major aspect of the pilgrimage - there are about 100 million in the area we travel through. It has been very wonderful opening to it all, and remembering Master Hua's advice to the Amaravati community: When you go to practise in the place of the Buddha, you must not find fault with anyone. As long as you find fault with anyone else, you have not found peace in your own heart.' It was a 'general' remark, but you can imagine how I pricked my ears up at that. And it has been a good theme.

India does not obey mind-wrought laws. It is under the sway of a female goddess who allures, nourishes, and destroys, in order to liberate the mind from having any views about samsara. (Once one has no views, there is no samsara!) Life obeys the same secret rhythms as rivers and moons: you have to follow. And all you can do is to keep cause-and-effect clear in the mind and come from purity. So I put my hands together in homage to the Triple Gem in all places and forget about holiness.

After this, our intention is to walk south through forest and then west to Sarnath. I think of you all with metta;

Yours in the Dhamma,  
***Sucitto Bhikkhu***

**go** ■ Ajahn Sucitto  
**to** ■ Sister Thanissara

## Sister Thanissara

Driving through the streets - amazement. I'd forgotten how mind- blowing India is. We pass a large dead cow, on its back, legs extended, mouth wide open as if the spirit had been knocked from its throat. It was in the middle of the main dual carriageway into Delhi. No one seemed bothered about it. Dusty sidewalks, rubbish strewn everywhere, people milling amongst cows, dogs, even pigs. Erratic driving with horns tooting: motor rickshaws, taxis, colourful but tatty buses and lorries crammed with people. Brown eyes staring at us with curiosity, need and sometimes bewilderment, sometimes friendliness and interest. Chai shops and whallas squatting, selling anything that's saleable, dusty grey-looking beings, thin and wrapped in rags, sometimes carrying bundles on their heads. Motor scooters with whole families perched precariously on top...

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I feel a happiness well up inside and a smile transform my face. I'm just happy to be back in India, I really don't know why I love it, it's a total affront to my Western conditioning - our slightly uptight, neurotic, pre-packaged, tidy and neat and usually subliminally negative approach to life. It's hard for me to fathom why I feel so much at home here, but I recognise the feeling after a few hours. I realise how, on some imperceptible level, I find it a strain to live within the Western psyche, where somehow we've forgotten to be what we are.

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The chai shop whalla sits at our table we're outside, two cows are sitting very peace fully next to us a man's chopping sugar cane and is surrounded by a group who can't help staring at us, a tiny puppy places himself at my feet. The chai whalla starts telling us about his guru and gives us some reflections on Dhamma (as we'd put it!).

It was extraordinary having this very pure-hearted man share his thoughts on spiritual life. We felt enriched and refreshed listening to him. I realised I should let go a little more of any ideas of how Dhamma arrives at one's doorstep, and also what I'm doing in India, and just be more open. I ask him if he has any children. He's married, but says it's not given to him to have children: it's God's way of teaching him to see all children as his own. He follows by talking very beautifully on unconditional love. He really seems to be trying to live it as he serves people in his humble little chai shop. We leave, saying he's made us feel at home on our first day in India. His 'don't worry, the world is ours!' certainly makes one feel less paranoid.

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There are about 120 monks and a large group of nuns that live in Mcleod Ganj. Except for the market, the whole place is like one huge monastery. The maroon coloured robe is seen everywhere and from our room it's possible to hear the drums, trumpets and bells of the monks while they do their pujas. Also one can witness them debating in the courtyard of the temple, a very vigorous way of testing each other's insight. Almost all the lay people, whatever age, seem to carry mala beads and walk round saying mantras to themselves. It's good to see many of the old Tibetans wearing the traditional dress. Their faces are bright and friendly. There's no doubt they're a special people, they live and breathe Buddhism, it's very refreshing; one feels quite at home here up in the mountains in a Tibetan atmosphere.

Just going to town (a short distance), one passes a couple of lepers always calling 'anila' or 'sister' as we pass, a sweet-looking but rather gnarled man who has set up business with a bathroom weighing scale on the side of

the road (have your weight told for a rupee or two). A family which seems to live on a slab of muddy concrete 3'x6' - the man's blind, a young baby and mother with a bundle of wretched looking clothes, a samosa whalla, a few groups of building workers shoveling mounds of mud with very primitive utensils.

Although it's taking a while to adjust, I value the experience immensely. Witnessing the terrible poverty makes one appreciate how much we do have in the West. Just to have a warm jumper and a roof over one's head . . . can't imagine what that small family does when it's cold at night.

Today we're invited to have our meal with a neighbouring Tibetan lady. We sit in her small room: there are three beds (made into seats during the daytime) for herself and her two children. The most obvious part of her room is the shrine, which extends across the length of one wall. As all Tibetan shrines, it's ornate and colourful, with pictures of the Buddha, and the inevitable picture of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, statues of Tara or Manjushri, offering-bowls, candles, incense, food offerings (a little of our meal is offered) and various thankas.



It's nice to see the shrine as the most obvious thing in the room. Nada and I are amazed how neat, tidy and simple the room is, considering there are three people living in it. It was explained to us that as it's the moon day today, she'll fast after noon; she does this every week on the observance days. Her two sons are monks and her third young son also aspires to be a monk. She's obviously quite happy about this. She also shows us her handicrafts, very beautifully woven carpets and bead work.

Almost any time of day or night one can see the Tibetans, monks, nuns and laity alike, doing prostrations. There's a strong sense of integration between Sangha and laity here (probably similar to Thailand). The refinement of Vinaya is not so much observed, however; one has to appreciate that different schools emphasise different aspects of Buddha-Dhamma.

One aspect that is strongly emphasised is the approach of bodhicitta: everything should be undertaken with the view of benefiting all sentient beings. This notice hangs over the entrance of the gompa, the main temple:

'All dharmas (existences) are like a reflection, clear and pure without turbulence, unsizeable and indescribable, purely derived from cause and action, without self nature, without location. You, by understanding the dhammas that way, work for the welfare of sentient beings without compare, and you shall be born as the son of the protectors (Buddhas).'

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Haridwar is one of the Hindus' 7 holy cities. It's on the Ganges, and driving in on the bus, we pass over the river. Every third Kumbal Mela (a Hindu religious festival which happens every 12 years) takes place here; millions of Hindu people attend. The high point is the ritual bathing in the Holy Ganges at an auspicious time. Quite often many people lose their lives in the crowd. As it's nearer its source here, the Ganges has a purity to it, the colour is bluey turquoise and it flows surprisingly rapidly; also it's very wide. There are quite a few temples and Ghats on the river bank.



Arriving at the ashram at Jarharikal [recommended for a visit by an English Christian nun], a notice at the entrance says: 'Please leave your shoes and your ego here!' A good reminder to relax and trust. A sister shows us a simple room each and brings us tea and water for washing.

We attend the communion service, given by an elderly Austrian Father. The service is familiar to Nada and me with our Catholic backgrounds, though its mixed with prayers from the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita. It's a very nice service, the Father and sisters make us feel welcome. We talk and they ask questions about my life in the monastery. One of the sisters also talks to us about her life as a missionary school teacher in Uganda.

That night alone in my cell, the presence of the Himalayas becomes all-pervading. The silence is most profound, overwhelming my little thoughts, concerns and anxieties. The silence rings and has a peace that I've rarely felt. Surely, the highest expression of transcendent reality is this silence and peace. It's clear to me at this moment that the Dhamma belongs to no religion. How can it? - it's everywhere, within and around, in all beings. It's immense and all-pervading, the pure, the immortal, beyond knowledge, beyond concept, the source of all, the ending of all:

Holy and Blessed Himalayas,  
you are immovable  
In your lap dwells the eternal Shiva  
Through your peaks roams  
the breath of Ram  
From your heart gushes  
the Holy mother Ganges  
Descending to the valleys below,  
she brings purity  
Faith and hope to the suffering humanity.  
You, holy mountain, are beyond grasp,  
removed  
Inaccessible, you listen  
to the sounds of the world  
You see all things with an equal eye  
All sounds are absorbed  
into your immortal silence  
By your divine grace, timelessness  
Pervades my being, my mind  
is rendered useless  
Only can it look in devotion. . . how  
could I forget . . . how could I doubt  
Your everlasting Grace.

We have been offered these different spiritual paths so that we may know and not doubt the ever-present beneficent Dhamma. Don't get too caught in the distinctions it's a real pity to do so. All beings, all life is sacred, only our egos blind us and bind us to mortality. We should have no fear: haven't we been looked after so far? Why not put our total heart and trust in Dhamma, the source of purity? - it cannot fail us. Even at death, it cannot fail us. For my death is only a dying into true life.



Rishikesh is a special place. The river is not so wide here and it flows even more rapidly. In

the evening we return to our lodging, walking amongst chai shops, lit, up bazaars, little fires cooking up this and that, occasionally treading round bundles of rags that hide a sleeping person.

We do a short puja and sit quietly. Images of the Ganges flow through my mind; the mind and the Ganges feel inseparable. I understand why this river is venerated, there's a power to it, as there's a power to the Himalayas. As it's flowing through my mind, I feel the consciousness expanding, leaving behind the narrow confines of who I think I am; flowing, loosening attachments and fears, the river courses its way to the sea as the individual consciousness must merge with the universal. Who am I when there's no identity with friends, family, nationality, sex, religion, status? Allowing ourselves to let go of each other is the holiest thing we can do. Because it means only then can we trust Dhamma. Faith is all important, with faith we can offer ourselves up. She flows on and on, this Holy Ganges, purifying all indiscriminately. I feel I know this river, these mountains.. . . .

### **Full Moon of December at Bodh-Gaya**

By the time we arrived, it was the morning of the 31st, a full-moon day. Nada and I had been travelling in India for about six weeks. As the bus pulled into Bodh-Gaya, we saw the obvious signs of a temple town: crowded streets with rickshaw wallahs touting for custom; market stalls selling mala beads, Buddha statues and religious artifacts; a colourful array of Tibetan pilgrims; Indians going about their daily business; a variety of shops, chai stalls and roadside vendors; a row of shoe wallahs squatting on the side of the road, plying their trade; beggars, lepers and a long line of widows beseeching a pittance outside of the temple compound.

In England, we'd made a tentative agreement to meet up with Ajahn Sucitto and Nick here on the full moon of December. That night we found them in the grounds of the temple to observe the Uposatha night, meditating at this tremendously holy and auspicious site.

The main Maha Bodhi Stupa is quite extraordinary; it reaches up to the sky, its flat sides housing images of the Buddha. In the soft light of the full moon I could hardly remove my gaze from its splendour. Backing onto the west side of the stupa is the renowned Bodhi tree, which sheltered the Lord Buddha on that significant night long ago. It is said that, out of gratitude for this remarkable tree, he stood staring at it for one week with eyes unmoving. Between the tree and the side of the great stupa is the Vajra diamond seat, the place of Enlightenment - a most holy, and perhaps the most powerful spot on this earth. For me it is a symbol for the transcendent mind, where all time, all dualities and all concepts cease - totally leaving that unfathomable peace which is expressed so beautifully by the serene smile of the Buddha.

Surrounding the main stupa is a myriad of small stupas, and three walkways for the continual circumambulation of pilgrims around the central point. The whole site is saturated with an aura of devotion the result of faith and pure-heartedness, brought there over the ages by countless beings who come to pay their respects to the Tathagata. I felt such a power of attraction there, as an iron filing to a magnet.

That night the entire area was lit up by thousands of oil lamps - the work of that unique people, the Tibetans - giving the effect of a fairy land. We started our all-night vigil with a puja in the small shrine area inside the Maha Bodhi Stupa. Miraculously, all other pilgrims vanished, and the four of us were left alone to absorb the power of that spot. My thoughts evaporated. I sensed time had stopped. An extraordinary quality of devotion towards the Buddha, and awe at his accomplishment welled up in my heart. I felt him seated at the centre of the universe - the point where all time, all birth and death cease - with an infinite mind, unlimited compassion and surrounded yet unmoved by the forces of samsara.

After leaving the inner temple, we sat outside in the grounds. At about 11 p.m. it started to pour with rain - the first rain we had seen in the six weeks we had been in India. I thought of it as a blessing on this fortunate night. We found shelter under some archways at the edge of the temple compound, looking out over a lotus pond, in the centre of which is a large Buddha-rupa canopied by Mucalinda, the serpent king. It marks the spot where the Buddha was protected by Mucalinda during a violent storm, after his Enlightenment.

As the night proceeded, we watched the rain lash down. Occasionally a streak of lightening would light up the pond, enabling us to catch a glimpse of the magnificent Buddha. Sitting, wrapped up in blankets, under the shelter, I felt a sense of other-worldliness: the misty pond, a mysterious atmosphere and, in the distance, the occasional call of night watchmen and the bark of a few stray dogs. From time to time, I'd circumambulate the stupa - feet splashing through the puddles, the mind drinking in the atmosphere, and eyes gazing at the beauty of the stupas - contemplating the dedication and determination that is needed to be free from ignorance. How can we ever express our gratitude to our teacher, the Buddha, for showing the Way so clearly? I saw that the Dhamma/Vinaya is like a map left for us; we may not always understand why the map is as it is, but I find that it's important to trust it until, through insight, one finds the truth of it for oneself.

We left the temple before dawn, feeling both inspired and fairly exhausted: we had spent the previous 36 hours just travelling to make it to our rendezvous with Ajahn Sucitto and Nick. As the temple was now locked, we climbed over the gates, feeling very reluctant to go. I was so tired that I was beginning to hallucinate, but walking back to our lodge I felt glad at heart to have spent the New Year and our first 24 hours in Bodh-Gaya in such an auspicious way.



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## Another Part of the World

*Ajahn Anando writes from New Zealand*

To my surprise, people were waiting for me at Auckland airport. I only had two hours before my connecting flight to Wellington, so the thought never entered my mind that people would be waiting to offer me some food. 'But Bhante, everything is arranged. My friend will let us use one of the offices here in the airport. He is the airport manager.' Once again, the world is a kind, generous, if somewhat mysterious place.

There is something special about old friends. There is a lack of demand in their greeting that allows us to be just as we are. The sense of acceptance we feel in their presence can be a tangible experience, which can dispel anxiety and open the way for true communication. Ajahn Viradhammo and I were (somewhat mischievous) novices together in Thailand almost twenty years ago. Over the years we have watched with some amazement the developments of the Buddhist Sangha in the West. I remember at Chithurst many years ago, V. telling me, in an almost ex cathedra manner, that we had reached the crest of the wave of interest and (the eternal optimist) it would then be all downhill from then on. Little did we know that this cosmic dance we call life would unfold in such a manner.

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Wearing robes is a fairly strong statement about one's commitment to a spiritual discipline which has often been supported by the tacit 'Good on ya' from the people I have met.

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The invitation to go to New Zealand for three months came as a surprise. But the thought of helping an old friend was very pleasing to me although I was concerned that I would have to take some responsibility for a major building project that was well under way. However, Ajahn V. assured me that would not be the case. I would simply have to take care of the monastery while he was away.

The Sala is an aesthetically pleasing building. The ambience created by the careful attention to detail invites the mind to pause and reflect and is a wonderful sign of the determination, dedication and generosity of the community in New Zealand, both lay and monastic.

This life as a monastic is a privileged existence. The people I have had the fortune to meet here have impressed me with their open friendliness and good humour. There seems to be something of a pioneering spirit in this country which manifests in a refreshing willingness to accept the novel. 'Good on ya!' is a Kiwi-

ism which expresses encouragement for someone doing something that that person feels is important and fulfilling. Wearing robes is a fairly strong statement about one's commitment to a spiritual discipline which has often been supported by the tacit 'Good on ya' from the people I have met.

I have had an opportunity to teach at most of the Buddhist groups around the country that support the monastery. It is inspiring to encounter such interest, sincerity and gratitude towards the teachings of the Buddha. I feel confident that, with the wise and compassionate guidance of Ajahn Viradhammo, the Dhamma will continue to flourish in this exquisitely beautiful country.



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## The Golden State

*Ajahn Amaro concludes his reflections on a Sangha visit last summer to the West Coast of the U.S., and on his own time alone there, staying on for a few months after the others in the party returned to Britain. Part I of the article appeared in the last newsletter, January 1991.*

### Part II: A Still Life

It is an oft-recognised fact that, once a religion is established in a society, over the centuries its original values tend to be obscured. Cultural overlay, empty intellectualism, assumed importance and conceit all contribute to a process of corruption.

When a religion enters a new country, however, there is an opportunity for a reclarification of values - particularly if it has not arrived through missionary zeal but through the interest of the local population. Against the background of new culture, whatever does not relate to the basic spiritual paradigm becomes illuminated - and can be questioned.

Most religious traditions employ similar 'tools' - self-discipline, kindness, devotion, contentment with little, contemplation, meditation - which historically have often been formulated into monastic institutions. As Buddhism enters Western (and particularly American) culture, however, these basic spiritual qualities are being cultivated via variety of approaches. Some are conservative, traditional and origin-based; others are novel, unorthodox and based more in the effort to fit with present cultural values.

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During our teaching tour on the West Coast of America, Ajahn Sumedho, Sister Sundara, Sister Jotaka and myself moved amongst groups of both sorts. On the 'traditionalist' side, we spent time at The Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, near Ukiah, northern California, and at the Buddha-Dharma Meditation Center in Hinsdale, Chicago. We also visited the New Camaldoli Hermitage, a Catholic monastery on California's Big Sur coast, and Taung Pulu Kaba Aye, a forest meditation monastery in the hills south of San Francisco, established by a Burmese Buddhist master of the dhutanga or 'austere' tradition.

On the 'modernist' side - if that is the right word - we visited Spirit Rock, the centre being established by Insight Meditation West (IMW) and the Vipassana meditation students of the West Coast; Green Gulch Farm, a community associated with the San Francisco Zen Center, and Cloud Mountain Retreat Center in northern Oregon, also mainly used by Vipassana students. We also conducted an inaugural blessing ceremony for the Bell Springs Hermitage, a retreat centre particularly for those with life-threatening illnesses.

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Their approach has been - right from the start - not to

dilute the monastic form to make it more palatable to Americans, but instead to make clear what the teaching and discipline offers, and to give people the opportunity to rise up to it.

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Perhaps these two attitudes are extensions of the psychological tendencies of primacy and recency: either trusting what was first experienced as most important, or trusting what has been experienced most recently. Both approaches are, naturally, blessed with benefits and problems.

Traditionalism (primacy) derives from a respect for one's origins. On the spiritual level, for Buddhists this manifests as respect for the fundamental, unconditioned Truth (Sacca-Dhamma) as the Source. On the conditioned plane, it means a respect for Gotama the Buddha, the whole dispensation which arose from his accomplishments, and the lineage of all who have lived according to the teachings over the centuries - keeping them alive and vibrant to the present day.

Such devotion to the roots of one's faith has a tremendous supportive quality: one is participating in a form which has existed for millennia, with the power to buoy one up and carry one along, like the flow of a great river. One has the right to enjoy the inheritance of one's ancestors, living in the way extolled by them.

Traditional monastic institutions automatically inherit the faith and devotion of the people of their country, and can rely on a stable Sangha to back up any efforts in a new land -- which often receive financial support from the laity. Adherence to the trusted standards of the 'old country' draws in those who already have confidence in that form.

The principal difficulty is that, inevitably, these well-established forms of Buddhism carry a cultural overlay. This can make their transplantation to another social milieu a very delicate operation. If those bringing it over have little conversancy with the new environment, the precious seeds of wisdom can remain trapped within a capsule of Asian custom and language. Or - like a rare and fragile orchid - it might take root as something exquisite and exotic but basically infertile, unable to withstand for long the rigours of its new location.

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The Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas is, as its name suggests, more than just a monastery. Alongside the facilities for the hundred or more resident monks, nuns and novices, there are also elementary and secondary schools and the 'Dhamma Realm Buddhist University'. It is the main centre for a group of orthodox monasteries spread along the West Coast of America and Canada. The spiritual guide and founder of these monasteries is the Venerable Tripitaka Master Hsuan Hua, a bhikshu (monk) of Chinese origin who began teaching in San Francisco in the early Sixties.

Although the main interest and support has so far come from the Chinese community, there is a strong emphasis on making the teachings available to the English-speaking Americans. Indeed, many American men and women have gone forth as bhikshus and bhikshunis under the Venerable Master's guidance, and are now in the forefront of administrative and teaching duties at the monasteries. Their approach has been - right from the start - not to dilute the monastic form to make it more palatable to Americans, but instead to make clear what the teaching and discipline offers, and to give people the opportunity to rise up to it.

The monasteries still have a strong Chinese flavour - all the religious objects, rituals, etc. retain the form developed in

China over the centuries - but Master Hua has consistently pointed out the original forms established by the Lord Buddha. Thus his monasteries adhere more closely to the Vinaya and observe a number of Sangha procedures more strictly than is done in present-day Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China. Along with translating all scriptures and rituals into English, this approach makes it possible for those attending retreats, ceremonies and Dharma talks to tie in the practice directly to the Lord Buddha's own Way, rather than just to the obvious Chinese tradition.

Despite attempts to make the teaching more accessible, Sangha members commented that the average interested American still finds perhaps understandably their form of practice somewhat impenetrable. However, things are constantly in a state of adaptation. In being faithful to a tradition, one starts out by sticking with the known and well-established - and makes changes later, to fit the time and place. It is a dodgy business to design ideal reforms from scratch; one does better to see what changes will be suitable - often by seeming to blunder at first!

Americans, however, are used the opposite approach: the ideal is laid out on paper and approved beforehand - rather like the U.S. Constitution. This may be fine in principle but, to be ruthlessly practical, one has to start from where one actually is. So, getting back to the problem of importing a monastic form, although there might be all kinds of great adaptations that could be made, it is only by using what is there already that one finds out what really needs to be changed. In making changes in this usually painstaking manner, the trust and confidence of Buddhists in the country of origin is happily retained. Pioneer monasteries are much in the public eye back home, so if too much is altered too quickly, disaffection can set in on a dramatic scale. Once a community is well-established, however, important adaptations can often be made without such negative repercussions.

It was very encouraging, therefore, to see that these monasteries have recently instituted some Pali chanting with English translations in their morning and evening recitations, and have made it optional for the monks and nuns to wear 'Theravada' robes if they choose. This is in order to further the recognition of unity between the different branches of the Sangha and to stress connectedness with the Buddha rather than with China.

At the Buddha-Dharma Meditation Center on the outskirts of Chicago, the experience is similar. Established much more recently (1988) by Phra Ajahn Sunthorn Plamintr, the centre has aimed to be a resource as much for local Americans as for the immigrant Thai population. In June of 1990 I was invited there to attend the demarcation of an ordination precinct (sima), and the ordination of several men as novices and bhikkhus. Despite being quite a junior monk I was accorded a place of honour amongst the many Maha-theras, and was asked to give one of the Dhamma-talks to the whole assembly.

The efforts and sincerity of the resident Sangha, and also the lay supporters, were immediately

## Waving the hands like clouds (Spring Equinox)

Bright sharp light  
go now don't stop  
Wind is young, just born  
Emptiness can SNAP  
into creation  
you've no time for regret,  
winter waster  
This is touch and go  
Touch, deeper deeper

*Nyanaviro Bhikkhu*

striking; so also was their concern to be more of use to English-speaking Americans. So much was this on their minds that, from the drive from the airport right up until my departure time, I was repeatedly asked for advice on this. The barriers of language and culture, I was told, meant that more than 99% of the people coming were Asians.

They had been trying very hard. On this week-end, for example, they had ensured that most of the Dhamma-talks would be in English. At the Center, they held regular meditation classes; they had formed links with other local Buddhist groups in the Mid-West Dharma Association and had invited well-known teachers of other Buddhist traditions to speak on their festival days. However, many felt that there was an inexorable inclination of the centre towards becoming little more than a Thai cultural centre, with all the trappings of Thai 'city' monastery.

The future is, of course uncertain but my feeling was that this outcome is quite unlikely. These are the early days when, as mentioned above, one tends to stay close to the mould from which one has recently emerged. Gentle transmutations will come withtime. Since the determination of the abbot and his closest lay supporters is to establish a monastery for all people, and a place where meditation is taught and practised, that east be the dire; ion it will take.



Our contact with Brother David Steindl-Rast at the 'Joys of Monastic Life' conference led to a visit to the monastery at which he now stays. Although professed in a different order, he has been at the hermitage of New Camaldoli for the past eight years. When the Camaldolese Order was set up in the 11 century by St. Romuald they were even then something of a reform movement. Eschewing leadership by abbots (who already had an aura of power and worldliness), they established a unique pattern in Christian monasticism. Their life is divided into three basic styles: that of the Hermit; that of communal life in the monastery; and that of a house in the city. Each monastic spends varying periods of time in each situation according to their disposition.

it was this unique blend that moved Father Thomas Merton to urge the Camaldolese to establish a monastery in the USA. In his eyes, his own Trappist order was too isolationist and rigid to fully serve the American people as he felt a monastic community could. Unfortunately, by the time the New Camaldoli monastery was founded, he was too valuable to be allowed to leave his own community. Thus he never got the chance to live with them in the stunningly beautiful place they found, nestled on the hillsides overlooking the Pacific. However, that the monastery exists today and is one of great vitality and ecumenicism, would probably please Father Thomas more than his own getting to live there.

On their 800 acres they have a number of hermit monks living in the woods, and a main community of about 25 monks, novices and lay people, most of whom are a lot younger than the average resident of today's Christian monasteries. They have a small house in Berkeley as well, where a couple of monks reside whilst engaging in studies at the University of California.

They still retain their traditional monastic habits and follow the Liturgy of the Hours, but they have also made a number of adaptive changes - particularly in providing ample facilities for men and women to come on solitary retreat, and in the ecumenicism of their services and literature. Their emphasis is strongly towards contemplative and mystical aspects of religion, and towards religious unification. The Prior, Father Richard, was instrumental in bringing about the recent meetings between the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury. And Tibetan Buddhist prayer-flags could be seen flying in the little garden behind his cell!



As contrasted with traditionalism, the modernist way takes its cue more from the current attitudes and understanding of those interested in the teachings, than from the way the teaching has been presented and lived out in the past. The present environment is of primary importance. This derives from the quality of ultimate Truth as 'apparent here and now, timeless', just as traditionalism derives from its quality of being the source and foundation of all things.

Here one finds, in the main, middle-class raised, educated white Americans. The teachings are presented in their own language, by teachers from their own kind of background, and in a familiar cultural context. The advantage of this way is that it is easily adopted and used by people who have grown up in the West. It slips into their value system and is absorbed comparatively painlessly. It is naturally more understandable to many people, being of Western appearance and less alien than forms with an Asian veneer and decidedly conventional 'flavour'. Also, the vocabulary used to describe the world of the mind accords much more with contemporary psychological ideas than classical Buddhist expressions do.

A big disadvantage is the disconnectedness from the historical Buddha that naturally arises. Through claiming Buddha-nature as one's reference more than Gotama Buddha and his whole dispensation, social links with the rest of the Buddhist world are weakened. Moreover, skilful means, teachings and traditions that the Buddha established - which serve the whole spectrum of human life - tend not to get used to the full. On the practical level, the separation from Asian forms also means that devoted Asian people, who might be delighted to support the efforts of others in their cultivation of the Path, often do not recognise these groups as 'real Buddhists'. The spirit of generosity, so much to the fore in Buddhist countries, is thus disabled from helping to nourish these efforts.

Another, and perhaps the most important, disadvantage is that in adapting to the surrounding culture, some moral aspects of the teaching which are crucial to wholesomeness and liberation get passed over. Without the reflection of the larger Buddhist community, and without the standards established by the Buddha being given prominence, these groups are vulnerable to incidents which can have grave consequences.



For a long time the Zen Center has been the most prominent Buddhist institution in the San Francisco Bay Area. Originally established by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi - whose collection of transcribed talks in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* graces many a Buddhist bookshelf- the centre was guided, after his death in the early Seventies, by Richard Baker Roshi, his Dharma heir. The centre went from strength to strength, establishing both Tassajara - a retreat centre for more rigorous training - and Green Gulch Farm - a more informal community of Zen students, based around a market garden as a means of livelihood. In a Sixties-Seventies spiritual environment characterised by distrust of most traditions in favour of a 'direct-experience spirituality', this Soto Zen group had managed to strike a remarkable balance that allowed for tradition-based and disciplined practice to be integrated with the idealistic lifestyles of the time. For many, it seemed the perfect blend, which gave birth to much confidence in Buddhism as a spiritual path.

In 1984, however, the Zen community, and all Buddhists in the U.S., were stunned by the news that Baker Roshi had been relieved of his post as abbot, because of a number of serious transgressions against community standards of proper behaviour.

When I visited Green Gulch, the main interest expressed to me was in Vinaya and community

discipline. Zen's customary approach to the Precepts has been - in contrast to the rest of the Buddhist world - more as 'themes for contemplation', which you bear in mind whilst going about doing what you do, rather than clear guidelines to be followed wherever possible. This overly liberal approach was clearly one of the causes of Baker Roshi's downfall, and for the distress and confusion of their community resulting from it.

Norman Fischer, the head of Green Gulch, spent as much time as he could with me, discussing the establishment of a more solid basis of moral conduct for his community. He pointed out that they now better appreciated that they were not monks at all, but should look upon themselves as lay-priests. It was quite a relief, he said, to recognise their proper role, and to establish their values accordingly as a lay community. It was his hope - even though some other leaders of the Zen Center group were at variance - that they would at least establish the Eight Precepts as the standard for practice at Tassajara. This came not from a disaffection with his own tradition but from the obvious need, within the spiritual life, for a basis of restraint and trustworthiness.



IMW and Spirit Rock have had no such catastrophic incidents. The plans for their Marin County site focus around a retreat centre, but also include a teaching area where people can come to learn meditation and to hear Dharma talks, and an area set aside to be a monastery or hermitage. This group's style is based around lay practice, and is guided by teachers such as Jack Kornfield, Sylvia Borstein and James Baraz. It is a group that has served thousands of people, organising silent retreats and leading local Vipassana meditation groups on the West Coast. Because of its simple approach and absence of 'religious' trappings, it has been an inroad into the training of the heart for many whose interest was, initially, in a more effective kind of therapy.

Its form of meditation practice is, however, akin to the methods of mind-training contained within classical Theravada monasticism. Because of this, and of Jack Kornfield's time spent as a bhikkhu with Venerable Ajahn Chah, it was no surprise that IMW should convene the Monastics' Conference, and that Jack was the Moderator of the event. His affinities with both approaches described here, together with the growing interest in morality and traditionalism aroused by the debacles of Baker Roshi and Osel Tenzin [Chogyam Trungpa's successor, who recently died due to AIDS], made the conference both pertinent and timely. The event was not so much for monastics to meet and discuss with each other, but more for Bay Area students of Buddhism to have an opportunity to contemplate such questions as: What is monasticism for? How does it work? What are its results? Is it still a valid approach? What should be changed? - and to hear from the mouths of monks and nuns themselves the accounts of their vocation.



Those invited to speak and lead discussions were quite carefully chosen - not for their eloquence or attainment, but rather for their years of commitment to a communal, contemplative, orthodox monastic life. There were Buddhists and Christians; all of us were Westerners.

Approximately 150 people attended, most having had little if any contact with traditional monasticism. Although largely of Vipassana and Zen Center background, there were also a fair number of Christians. Of the main talks, even though all were fine expositions, probably those of Sister Sundara and Sister Columba were most memorable.

At the beginning of the second day, Jack Kornfield invited everyone to suggest issues that they would like to see covered. The list began: celibacy, equality for women in Theravada Buddhism, adaptability of rules, vegetarianism, differences between Buddhism and

Christianity . . . and on and on it went. It seemed that everyone had a pet issue. After about half an hour, Ajahn Sumedho and I looked at each other - it would take months to deal with that lot!

Just then one of the audience announced that she had just had an insight. Silence fell and we waited.... 'We want it all! We don't want to give up anything. This is real American Buddhism!' Everybody laughed and, for that moment, could see the tendency to search for a perfect Buddhism that matched one's own particular biases. Ajahn Sumedho turned towards her and applauded.

Nevertheless, the suggestions kept on coming, and with the question of equality for women well to the fore.

It was Sister Sundara's turn to speak next and Ajahn Sumedho leaned over to me with a concerned look: 'I would not like to be in her position right now.' After a short break, she gave the talk reprinted elsewhere in this newsletter. In many respects, she had taken the most tricky of issues and clearly pointed out the way to work with such things: there are no simple answers, only ways to practise wisely.

Sister Columba was deeply impressive, and probably less for the wonderful words she spoke than for the purity and light that imbued all she did and said. She described her entry into her convent, and the life that she and her sisters led. She fielded questions with directness, humour and honesty. Here was the result of a lifetime given up to pure conduct, simplicity and Truth a being radiant, clear and sublimely happy. For many people at the conference this said more than all the words for, despite belonging to the most orthodox and austere of traditions, she had arrived at a state of being that freewheeling Californians have combed hills and beaches endlessly to find.



At the close of the conference, Jack Kornfield asked the assembly how many would now consider entering a monastery, say, for at least a year. It was a testimony to the insight in convening such a conference, and to the capacity of the speakers to put their lives into words, that 70-80% of the people raised their hands.

A monastery's purpose is to provide opportunities for such interest to bear fruit. Even though, as some suggest, the future of Buddhism in the U.S. might lie with lay groups, the monastery remains a unique and invaluable environment for the development of the spiritual life - not only for those within the enclosure, as it were, but also for those for whom it is a reminding and encouraging presence in the world.

So how will things develop? Who knows? What can be seen for definite, however, is that there is already a tremendous fellowship among Buddhist people in the West. During this visit I experienced only warmth, hospitality and respect from those I met. What we are experiencing here is a cooperative effort towards a common goal, rather than a contest to see who is right and best. Traditional forms and the spirit of the present can work together like an old, well-used tool in a skilful hand. The tool and the hand on their own cannot achieve very much, but in concord we can bring great beauty into the world.



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## EDITORIAL

### Doing What We Can

The words and images in this newsletter are offered as reflections on the Way beyond suffering. This Way is not some kind of bypass, but a challenge to acknowledge and face up to suffering - one's own and that of all beings in existence.

There was a perfect opportunity for us to take up this challenge during our two-month winter retreat, which began during the last agonising weeks of negotiations attempting to avert a war in the Gulf, and which ended on the full moon of Magha Puja, the day that the cease-fire was formally announced.

Day by day during the retreat, Luang Por Sumedho presented us with the latest developments. 'Right now they're bombing Baghdad', one evening at the end of puja, brought a sickening, leaden feeling to the pit of the stomach.

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Are our lives so filled up with alluring and beguiling  
'refuges', towards which our habitual responses catapult  
us?

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The many hours of meditation - and minimal opportunities for distraction meant that the mind was particularly receptive. One observed fear, anger, despair and an overwhelming sense of helplessness - and compassion for all those whose lives would be shattered by the events of those weeks.

But the reflection, 'This is the way it is', brought the mind to a standstill - and we were reminded constantly of what we, as human beings, can do to ameliorate conditions in the world, to make a contribution towards peace. Being at peace within ourselves . . . although it's not especially grand - in fact it's incredibly simple - for most of us, most of the time, it turns out to be incredibly difficult!

The theme of Refuge offers some valuable help. Buddhist teachings provide us with three perfect Refuges, which are there to be turned to at any time; day time, night time, wherever, whoever you are ... Do we really turn to them? Or are our lives so filled up with alluring and beguiling 'refuges', towards which our habitual responses catapult us, that before we know it we are flailing about in yet another quicksand?

So we listened to the violence and confusion going on in the Gulf, and turned in, too, to the violence and confusion in our own minds ... not that much difference, when we really look. Can we make peace with it? Can we really take refuge in knowing: 'This is the way it is'? Can we refrain - just even for one instant - from responding to it all with denial, or further hatred and violence? That's all we have to do - but we need all the help we can get to do it!

May what is contained in the pages of this newsletter provide a measure of encouragement and

inspiration towards the realisation of that Way beyond suffering.

*Sister Candasiri*

