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Suffering and the Way to Cessation

Venerable Ajahn Sumedho, in an extract from the forthcoming publication 'The Four Noble Truths', emphasises the use of reflection as a means to abandoning suffering.

The whole aim of the Buddhist teaching is to develop the reflective mind in order to let go of delusions. The Four Noble Truths is a teaching about letting go by investigating or looking into - contemplating: 'Why is it like this? Why is it this way?' It is good to ponder over things like why monks shave their heads or why Buddha-rupas look the way they do. We contemplate ... the mind is not forming an opinion about whether these are good, bad, useful or useless. The mind is actually opening and considering, 'What does this mean? What do the monks represent? Why do they carry alms bowls? Why can't they have money? Why can't they grow their own food?' We contemplate how this way of living has sustained the tradition and allowed it to be handed down from its original founder, Gotama the Buddha, to the present time.

We reflect as we see suffering; as we see the nature of desire; as we recognise that attachment to desire is suffering. Then we have the insight of allowing desire to go and the realisation of non-suffering, the cessation of suffering. These insights can only come through reflection; they cannot come through belief. Instead, the mind should be willing to be receptive, pondering and considering.

People rarely realise non-suffering because it takes a special kind of willingness in order to ponder and investigate and get beyond the gross and the obvious. It takes a willingness to actually look at your own reactions, to be able to see the attachments and to contemplate: 'What does attachment feel like?' For example, do you feel happy or liberated by being attached to desire? These questions are for you to investigate. If you find out that being attached to your desires is liberating, then do that. Attach to all your desires and see what the result is.

If you want to suffer and waste your life, go around seeking things that arise. They will all take you to the end, to cessation, and you will not be any the wiser for it.

In my practice, I have seen that attachment to my desires is suffering. There is no doubt about that. I can see how much suffering in my life has been caused by attachments to material things, ideas, attitudes or fears. I can see all kinds of unnecessary misery that I have caused myself through attachment because I did not know any better. I was brought up in America - the land of freedom. It promises the right to be happy, but what it really offers is the right to be attached to everything. America encourages you to try to be as happy as you can by getting things. However, if you are working with the Four Noble Truths, attachment is to be understood and contemplated; then the insight into non-attachment arises. This is not an intellectual stand or a command from your brain saying that you should not be attached; it is just a natural insight into non-attachment or non-suffering.

When the Buddha gave this sermon on the Four Noble Truths, only one of the five disciples who listened to it really understood it; only one had the profound insight. The other four rather liked it, thinking 'Very nice teaching indeed,' but only one of them, Kondanna, really had the perfect understanding of what the Buddha was saying.

What did Kondanna know? What was his insight? It was: 'All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.' Now this may not sound like any great knowledge but what it really implies is a universal pattern: whatever is subject to arising is subject to ceasing; it is impermanent and not self ... So don't attach, don't be deluded by what arises and ceases. Don't look for your refuges, that which you want to abide in and trust, in anything that arises - because those things will cease.

If you want to suffer and waste your life, go around seeking things that arise. They will all take you to the end, to cessation, and you will not be any the wiser for it. You will just go around repeating the same old dreary habits and when you die, you will not have learned anything important from your life. Rather than just thinking about it, really contemplate: 'All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.' Apply it to life in general, to your own experience. Then you will understand. Just note: beginning ... ending. Contemplate how things are. This sensory realm is all about arising and ceasing, beginning and ending; there can be perfect understanding, samma ditthi, in this lifetime.

I would like to emphasise how important it is to develop this way of reflecting. Rather than just developing a method of tranquillising your mind, which certainly is one part of the practice, really see that proper meditation is a commitment to wise investigation. It involves a courageous effort to look deeply into things, not analysing yourself and making judgments about why you suffer on a personal level, but resolving to follow the path until you have profound understanding. Such perfect understanding is based upon the pattern of arising and ceasing. Once this law is understood, everything is seen as fitting into that pattern.

This is not a metaphysical teaching: 'All that is

subject to arising is subject to ceasing.' It is not about the ultimate reality - the deathless reality; but if you profoundly understand and know that all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing, then you will realise the ultimate reality, the deathless, immortal truths. This is a skilful means to that ultimate realisation.

Before you can let things go, you have to admit them into full consciousness. In meditation, our aim is to skilfully allow the subconscious to arise into consciousness. All the despair, fears, anguish, suppression and anger is allowed to become conscious. There is a tendency in people to hold to very high-minded ideals. We can become very disappointed in ourselves because sometimes we feel we are not as good as we should be or we should not feel angry - all the shoulds and shouldn'ts. Then we create desire to get rid of the bad things - and this desire has a righteous quality. It seems right to get rid of bad thoughts, anger and jealousy because a good person 'should not be like that'. Thus, we create guilt. In reflecting on this, we bring into consciousness the desire to get rid of these bad things. And by doing that, we can let go - so that rather than becoming the perfect person, you let go of that desire. What is left is the pure mind. There is no need to become the perfect person because the pure mind is where perfect people arise and cease.



Cessation is easy to understand on an intellectual level, but to realise it may be quite difficult because this entails abiding with what we think we cannot bear. For example, when I first started meditating, I had the idea that meditation would make me kinder and happier and I was expecting to experience blissful mind states. But during the first two months, I never felt so much hatred and anger in my life. I thought, 'This is terrible; meditation has made me worse.' But then I contemplated why was there so much hatred and aversion coming up, and I realised that much of my life had been an attempt to run away from all that. I used to be a compulsive reader. I would have to take books with me wherever I went. Anytime fear or aversion started creeping in, I would whip out my book and read; or I would smoke or munch on snacks. I had an image of myself as being a kind person that did not hate people, so any hint of aversion or hatred was repressed.

This is why during the first few months as a monk, I was so desperate for things to do. I was trying to seek something to distract myself with because I had started to remember in meditation all the things I deliberately tried to forget. Memories from childhood and adolescence kept coming up in my mind; then this anger and hatred became so conscious it just seemed to overwhelm me. But something in me began to recognise that I had to bear with this, so I did stick it out. All the hatred and anger that had been suppressed in thirty years of living rose to its peak at this time, and it burned itself out and ceased through meditation. It was a process of purification.

To allow this process of cessation to work, we must be willing to suffer. This is why I stress

the importance of patience. We have to open our minds to suffering because it is in embracing suffering that suffering ceases. When we find that we are suffering, physically or mentally, then we go to the actual suffering that is present. We open completely to it, welcome it, concentrate on it, allowing it to be what it is. That means we must be patient and bear with the unpleasantness of a particular condition. We have to endure boredom, despair, doubt and fear in order to understand that they cease rather than running away from them. It is very important here to differentiate between cessation and annihilation - the desire that comes into the mind to get rid of something. Cessation is the natural ending of any condition that has arisen. So it is not desire! It is not something that we create in the mind but it is the end of that which began, the death of that which is born. Therefore, cessation is not a self - it does not come about from a sense of 'I have to get rid of things,' but when we allow that which has arisen to cease. To do that, one has to abandon craving - let it go. It does not mean rejecting or throwing away: 'abandoning' means letting go of it.

Then, when it has ceased, you experience nirodha - cessation, emptiness, non-attachment. Nirodha is another word for Nibbana. When you have let something go and allowed it to cease, then what is left is peace.



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Flowing with the Pain

Jody Higgs describes her own experience of severe arthritis and its blessings.

As a teacher of Yoga I was proud of my strong and flexible body. The danger with yoga, Ven. Tiradhammo had warned, was the tendency towards attachment to a healthy body and identification with it. 'How unkind', I remember thinking. And I put his comment to one side in the mind, treating it with the kind of silent contempt appropriate for one who picks his nose in public. I couldn't hear this teaching; however, I was about to experience its truth. In the next couple of years the outer hip pain I felt was to evolve into the wide array of feeling sensations, experiences labelled medically as bilateral osteoarthritis of the hips.

Now walking was easier with a stick. Many yoga asanas, previously vehicles for awareness of pleasurable sensations, now became vehicles for awareness of pain and limitation: attachment was replaced by aversion.

However, this adversity had its uses. The physical disability persuaded my employers to allow me time off, an escape from the Scottish winter, an opportunity to spend a month at Suan Mokh, the Thai monastery pervaded by the great presence of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa. His forest hermitage had recently built an international retreat centre nearby, where during the first ten days of every month, his Sangha teach the Buddha's Dhamma in English to all who will listen. Our esteemed teacher himself, despite being over eighty, frequently taught Dhamma to the hundred or so on my ten-day retreat, an experience for which I shall always be grateful.

Each day, breathing, I watched joy - her joy in helping,
my joy in accepting and receiving.

Several days into this retreat as I queued for a meal, I observed that all the chairs were already occupied, leaving the rest of us on straw mats to sit on. 'Beginners' backs unused to sitting meditation practice', I mused, noticing a hint of smugness in the mind. As I passed by with full dish and mug in hand, a fellow retreatant arose and silently offered me her chair. I quickly gestured my refusal and perceived a momentary flash of hurt in her face. As a result I felt pain arise. I felt like I had slapped the face of a child offering a flower.

The energy behind my silent rejection surprised me. Where did it come from? What was behind it? Fortunately the retreat situation allowed further investigation. As I gave that energy voice, what would it say? - 'No, don't want your silly old chair. Whatever made you think that

I might? I am perfectly normal, perfectly ordinary; quite capable of standing on my own two feet! Or was it three feet? So that energy was pride. Egotistical pride had slapped the face of the child offering a flower. With that insight the mind wanted to cry and laugh at the same time!

Eating my food I contemplated further. It hurt to realise that my mindless response had discouraged a spontaneous act of generosity. Now generosity was a quality of mind which I had studied. By observing my own experience - offering dana to the Sangha for example, I had how the act of giving in itself created receiving, the receiving of happiness, of joy of well-being. That realisation had done irreparable damage to my 'tally card' concept of giving and receiving whereby if I entertain you to dinner, then you owe me something in return. If giving and receiving could be contained in the same single act, then the 'tally card' model with which I had grown up was simply inadequate and inappropriate.

It wasn't long before I was offered another flower. Each day after the last morning sitting all the meditation cushions had to be cleared to the sides of the meditation hall in preparation for sweeping and cleaning. It took longer to unfold my body and stand upright than it took others. One morning as I opened my eyes and began this process, bowing to the Triple Gem, I was aware of the eager face and willing hands offering to take my meditation bench and cushion to the side. Happiness was already there. Gratefully I bowed my acceptance, aware of joy arising. Was it the joy of gratitude or the joy of generosity?

Happily this interaction was to be repeated each morning for the remainder of the retreat. Each day, breathing, I watched joy - her joy in helping, my joy in accepting and receiving.

The dukkha of pride was not quenched, however. The ten-day retreat over, those of us who stayed on moved back to the main monastery. After the evening sitting the walk from the meditation hall to the women's quarters through the dark forest included a steep and slippery slope which I could negotiate with mindfulness. The first time that a strong arm was there to steady my cautious ascent, I watched a tightness arise in the body; 'resentment' was the appropriate label. But as I watched, it vanished! What a relief that darkness hid this reaction! Now consciously I could open to generosity, to gratitude, nurturing feelings of metta towards this child with her flower offering as together we silently moved through the forest.

I began to observe a pattern to the mind's reactions. The ego-pride reaction was more likely to arise when the help being offered was with something which the mind perceived 'I can do for myself, thank you!' When, on the other hand, the assistance being offered was a task the mind perceived as difficult, awkward or painful for the body (dishwashing, for example, which involved bending over a basin on the ground), then acceptance and real gratitude came instantly.



'How really stupid and childish!' I thought. 'Wouldn't it be nice if I could be open to every act of generosity, graciously accepting every flower that is offered me regardless of my own wants or needs?'

'Judging again; attaching to goodness, wanting things to be other than as they are' ... a habit of mind, but now a noticed habit, and once again I observed how the noticing itself created a softening, a space, a sort of release.

Frequently Ven. Tiradhammo's remarks came to mind - the danger of attaching to the healthy body and identifying with it. Duhkka, Anicca, Anatta ... The unsatisfactoriness of this physical body with its variety of painful sensations was now obvious. Anicca, its impermanence, too, was clear. Anatta, not-self: whereas identification with the physical body as 'mine' seemed natural while it was healthy, I observed with amusement and horror that now that the body was ageing, unhealthy and disabled, the mind could more readily contemplate anatta. I had 'too much dust in my eyes' to learn from Ven. Tiradhammo. But arthritis, it seemed, was a more persuasive teacher of Dhamma.



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Towards Simplicity

Sister Thanasanti, who has been experiencing the draining effects of ill health for the past couple of years, reflects on the use of monastic form as a support for waning energy.

Often we are encouraged to make use of whatever conditions are present and not to seek out special situations within which to cultivate mindfulness and awareness. While I appreciate this teaching, I also value the opportunity to renew and deepen insight that sustained meditation practice offers. I have noticed for myself that life becomes difficult when the present moment is no longer good enough, when satisfaction and contentment become some fantasies that are projected into the future. So as the time for the monastic retreat approached, I felt cautious about looking forward to it too much. I was a bit weary from the turmoil of the autumn and felt the need to emphasise awareness itself rather than the objects of mind. And still, I was reluctant to invest too much hope or expectation in the retreat.

During the retreat, the nuns' community was separated into two groups to look after the two elderly women who live here. One month was designated as a month of 'active care': cleaning their rooms, making daily visits, and assisting them in walking wherever they needed to go. The other month allowed for more uninterrupted times of formal practice. Initially, I didn't have much energy to collect and focus my mind but was happy to share a cup of tea and a bit of a chat with one of our elderly. I was quite willing to be a part of the first group involved in active caring.

So that is the way things started. At the beginning of the retreat, I knew intuitively that cultivating awareness of body and form would be helpful and so determined to keep things simple: to come as often as possible to the group meetings, listen to the teachings, do the walking meditations, and bow. I discovered that the beauty of bowing was that no matter what state of mind or how little energy I had, I could almost always bow. Even when my mind was rather dispersed, when thoughts and feelings seemed to merge into an amorphous blur and there was little energy for anything, I could still gather all of it under my wings, so to speak, and bow.

When the mind is more collected and aware, it becomes
easier to contemplate Dhamma.

The schedule required that we come to meetings throughout the day. To respond to this form, I had to stop and change direction. A bell would ring, and I would have to stop whatever I was

doing and go. A meeting would finish, and once again I had to disengage and go. It was an opportunity to put things down again and again and move on. The routine was a way of strengthening both the power of discrimination and the ability to let go.

The details of looking after our requisites also helped me to keep sharpening and focusing my mind. As a junior member of the community, I have a clay alms-bowl which I have to hold carefully when I wash it and move it about so that it doesn't drop and break. I also have to be very careful where I leave it to prevent someone else from accidentally knocking it over. Paying attention is a constant and necessary practice.

Once could compare the monastic form as it is embodied in the discipline of these daily routines and duties to the physical body. Both can be used as anchors around which awareness can gather and collect. The emphasis on physical experience grounds the attention and attunes it. When the mind is more collected and aware, it becomes easier to contemplate Dhamma. Soon enough, the simplicity of walking, sitting, looking after my robes, bowl and cup, and not talking so much was, for me, its own medicine. My system began to feel rejuvenated, more balanced, centred and energised.

With a bit more energy, I was better able to focus on the objects arising in my mind. One of my frequent objects of contemplation was an inner inferno of heat and pressure that had a tangible physical base and general location. This inferno was connected to a lot of thoughts and feelings, to the inner boss, the tyrant, the machine that manufactures views, the judgement generator. Attending to the physical experience of the inferno diffused the heat, the attachment in my mind, and the power of the associated thoughts and feelings. Contemplating in this way, the question would often arise: Where are the defilements? Where is the problem?

I also felt strengthened by Ajahn Sucitto's teachings. They were rich and insightful, filled with light and lightheartedness; it was a privilege to receive them. I noticed that the brilliance of the teaching was separate from my ability to open to and understand it. And I discovered that when I didn't understand what was being said during the *desanas*, relying on my intellect left me feeling disassociated from my heart. I found focusing on the experience of confusion much more helpful.

Throughout the year, all of the nuns look after the elderly women who live here. However, spending more concentrated time with them during the retreat taught me a great deal. Simply due to their age, they don't remember things so easily. Often, during the course of a morning, they would ask the same questions again and again. And yet each time I answered the question, it didn't matter that I had just said the same thing two minutes ago. The contact and the communication that was really transpiring had little to do with what was actually being said. Similarly, with the rooms: ultimately I wasn't there to clean and tidy. My practice was more to let the talking and cleaning be a way of communicating love and acceptance.

This way of communicating helped me to understand the issue of personal trust which I had



been contemplating for some time. Usually, when I experience genuine personal trust, I am at ease and uninhibited to say what needs to be said. And this requires a certain spontaneity. Yet within the monastic form, we follow very clear guidelines about when it is suitable to speak with each other. We often refrain from casual conversation in order to enhance one-pointedness of mind and coolness of heart.

But when one is not feeling centred or self-confident, this silence can contribute to a sense of loneliness, alienation and even misunderstanding. Then the natural response can be a strong desire to talk to and connect with others. In fact, in the normal way of doing things, it is that engaging in casual conversation which oils the wheels of the communication machine.

Establishing personal trust doesn't seem to be a priority within the monastic form. But this is where the sustained contact with the elderly living here helped me see things differently. With them, the ability to communicate verbally is limited. And yet there is another type of communion that comes from accepting them just as they are, a trust that is born from letting go of expectations. This type of trust, stemming from a more unconditioned love, is of a different order. The monastic form rubs against more conventional ways of communicating, but encourages and allows for this ultimately more fulfilling contact.

One morning, I went out to the field just as the sun was first making its appearance. The night had been very foggy, and during the pre-dawn hours, the temperature had dipped below freezing. Drops from the fog had formed and then frozen. The sun illuminated a wondrous, jewelled landscape. Previously unseen spider webs suddenly became a kaleidoscope of colours and shapes. The ice crystals created prisms, and miniature rainbows could be seen in each drop. Then, as the sun got warmer, the ice began to melt. The very same ingredients that gave rise to the experience were the cause for its transformation. This theme was reflected throughout retreat, both in the formal teachings and in what my heart revealed to me.

Perhaps the greatest reinforcement came after hearing of Luang Por Chah's death. We held a special memorial and meditation vigil for him, which was an occasion rich with opportunity to reflect on the significance of his life and teaching. Difficulties and turmoil may come, and yet the Dhamma and discipline continue. We are constantly guided and encouraged to deepen our understanding during difficult times and to use the monastic form skilfully - using it to understand the nature of form, its limitations and the way to transcend form in order to realise

true freedom. What greater living memorial to Luang Por Chah's life can there be?

Now the winter retreat is over. It seems to have receded into the far-distant past as activity at Amaravati resumes its usual pace. I ask myself; what is left now? As I think of all the responsibilities we have to carry through the day and the number of people we interact with, my appreciation is for the simple things, the ability to use physical experience to stay centred, for instance. As much as possible, I try to walk when walking and sit when sitting, to look after my cup, bowl and robes and, at times, enjoy a cup of tea and chat with an elderly one.

And, oh yes, bowing. When I remember to really stop, drop everything and bow, then I tuck everything under my wings, so to speak, and just bow.



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Washing Away the Blood

Elizabeth Bernstein, co-founder of the Coalition for Peace and Reconciliation, and Yeshua Moser, SE Asia staff for Nonviolence International, both recently took part in the Dhamma Walk to Phnom Penh. This walk from the Thai border to the Cambodian capital was led by one hundred bhikkhus. Bodhi trees were planted at regular intervals along the way to signify the return of Buddhism to a shattered land.

An old woman cries in relief and gratitude and a child squeals in delight as I throw a pan of murky water over a family crouched on the side of the road. 'Songkriem jop howie' I say as I cast the water: 'The war is over.'

This family is one of thousands who have lined the road to see the largest group of people to traverse Cambodia on foot since the forced exodus of people during the Khmer Rouge time. Yet this group is travelling by its own choice. The walkers were refugees from camps just over the border in Thailand and people from villages inside Cambodia who united to walk together through the country for peace and reconciliation.

Dhamma Yietra, as this walk was known, took thirty days to travel from the Thai border town of Aranyaprathet to the Cambodian capital city Phnom Penh, and numbered hundreds of Cambodians and a handful of international supporters. A key figure in the walk was Maha Ghosananda, a Cambodia Buddhist monk well-known for his teachings on meditation practice and peace. He has made great efforts to reconcile people in Cambodia and abroad. In his recent book 'Step by Step' (1992 Parallax Press) his words capture the tone of the walk. He says: 'I do not question that loving one's oppressors - Cambodians loving the Khmer Rouge - may be the most difficult attitude to achieve. But it is a law of the universe that retaliation, hatred, and revenge only continue the cycle and never stop it. Reconciliation does not mean that we surrender rights and conditions, but rather that we use love ... Wisdom and compassion must walk together. Having one without the other is like walking with one foot. You may hop a few times, but eventually you will fall. Balancing wisdom with compassion, you will walk very well - slowly and elegantly, step by step.'

Walking as an act of reconciliation is desperately needed in this small war-torn country. For the past dozen years Cambodia has served as a battleground where the United States, China and the former USSR played ugly diplomacy. During the war, after the Vietnamese had invaded Cambodia to steadily force out the Khmer Rouge, the populations held hostage in refugee camps along the Thai border were indoctrinated with racist ideas of being the only true Khmer left, and inside the country the propaganda maintained that the border camps were only Khmer

Rouge.

Seeing all these people walking for peace and the re-birth of Buddhism in our country overwhelms me with happiness.

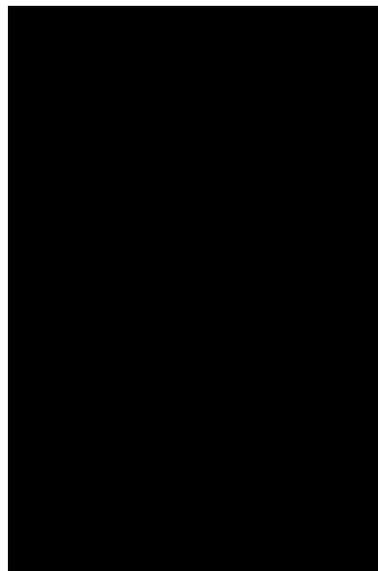
Deep reconciliation and reconnection of the walkers on the personal level became such a regular occurrence that many walkers began calling the walk 'Dhamma Teak Tong', or 'Dhamma Contact'. Almost every walker from the border refugee camps was re-united with family members from whom they had been separated for thirteen, fifteen, twenty years. Walkers would disappear into a house off the side of the road, or set out once we arrived in town, only to reappear hours later, beaming. An older woman grabbed my arm one morning and exclaimed amid tears, 'I found my daughter! After twenty years. Now SHE has a daughter. And she told me my other daughter is alive. She lives near Phnom Penh, and I can see her too, when we get there.' The following day another walker ran up and excitedly said, 'I just went to visit my uncle who lives in this village and there in his house was my father! I haven't seen him in twelve years. What luck!' On another evening while we were sitting under a bodhi tree chatting with some locals, a man brought two young boys over. 'Please meet my sons. They are twins. Thirteen years old! I last saw them when they were only twenty days old. Babies. They're grown up now, and study in boarding school. They don't know me.' Another man, who has paid dearly for the war with his leg and who rode a cycle along with the Dhamma Yietra, related, 'In Battambang I met my sister! She didn't recognize me at first, she didn't know I was still alive. She didn't know I'd survived the Khmer Rouge. She didn't know I'd lost my leg. She didn't know I'd married and had children. She just cried and cried.'

Cambodia is another state where the interest of Cold War patrons to provide arms and pay for a war has declined. So the conflict has moved to a different arena. In October of 1991 the four factions agreed to a United Nations overseen transitional government, reunification of the population, and disarmament for political struggle in elections set for 1993.

Although disarmament of combatants and transporting of refugees back into Cambodia are important, none of the UN program directly addresses the emotional needs of the population that has been traumatized by so many years of war and violence. Without reconciliation efforts aimed at addressing the fear, anxiety, pain and suspicion between the Cambodian people living under the control of the different factions, war could easily begin again. This parched emotional ground Dhamma Yietra hoped to water.

The spirit of the walk was spread by the Tuk Mon water blessing. In describing the symbolic significance of Tuk Mon, Maha Ghosananda says, 'Mine are a simple people. To them water means cleansing.' So we washed away the pain of war of the people in many ways. After receiving water over her one elderly woman who couldn't join the walk offered me a stick of incense. 'I can't make it. But take this, it will be my spirit walking with you.'

Walking was not easy during the height of the hot season, and we usually began walking at 2 or 3 am to take advantage of cooler morning temperatures. One pre-dawn morning I noticed a woman holding tightly onto her husband's wrist. As we approached a bridge and someone shined a flashlight on a gaping hole in it, I heard her say, 'Careful, stay to the right, take



small steps.' Her husband was blind. They were both in their sixties. I asked her where they lived. 'Far away,' she said (which turned out to be twenty kilometres from this road). 'We heard about the Dhamma Yietra yesterday morning and walked here in the evening. I've never seen anything like this in my life. We had to come. It's our one chance.'

Before the walk had begun many people said that this event could never happen, that there were too many land mines literally and figuratively. We were told that we could never get the agreement or cooperation of the factions. Then there was the UN. Permission was also needed from the Thais who were involved in their own political turmoil and governmental change. It was also known that many former soldiers had turned to banditry and were prowling the countryside. By the time we felt we could proceed politically, it was the height of the hot season when temperatures average 45°C and water shortages plague the country.

The walk was, however, an idea whose time had come. Many ways that seemed crooked were made straight, or at least passable, over temporary bridges. Aid unsought came at the most needed times. Permissions always came at the eleventh hour: even two days before over one hundred refugees crossed the border from Thailand into Cambodia to set the walk in motion, neither Thailand nor Cambodia had issued border crossing permission. Walkers learned to live in the moment through such situations.

But the miracle of the walk was not that it happened but what happened on it and what happened between people along the walk route. As we walked out of Battambang in the early hours of the morning, one woman confided a dream to me: 'Last night I dreamt of my mother. I haven't seen her in a dream since she died during the Khmer Rouge period. She was making offerings to many monks. She looked happy. Then this morning I came upon the Dhamma Yietra and saw all of the monks walking. What an incredibly good sign. I knew I must join you, all the way to Phnom Penh. Immediately I ran home to get some clothes to take. I feel so relieved that my mother's spirit is now in peace.'

Others also spontaneously joined the Walk. Some joined for a day, accompanying us from their village on to the next, often carrying offerings of rice or mangoes. Indeed it was the offerings of these local, poor communities which sustained the walk, feeding and housing us along the way in temples - many only partially rebuilt from destruction during the wars - even when our numbers reached into the hundreds.

The effect the walk had on people in the communities we passed was often profound. One old man told me, 'All of my children have died. I'm all alone. Now there's only religion which can help. Now seeing all these people walking for peace and the re-birth of Buddhism in our country overwhelms me with happiness. We forgot our religion and wandered so far, killing one another, waging war, spilling blood ... We just have to go back to our religion.' Another woman added, 'We Khmer haven't seen peace for so long. We've never known it. Now seeing



the monks and all these people walking makes me think they've come to teach us to love one another, to unite. When I see them I feel speechless. Maybe we will have true peace after all.'

On May 13th, Dhamma Yietra arrived in Phnom Penh for the celebration of Wesak, Buddhism's highest holy day, with over one thousand people walking. It was an awe-inspiring sight to see a hundred monks followed by hundreds of lay people in white walking in quiet dignity down the main boulevard of the capital in a line that stretched for one-and-a-half kilometres. After the walk ended in the capital the feelings of many of us were expressed by one old grandmother sitting rubbing her feet when she said, 'My feet are sore, but my spirit is at rest.'



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Back Out in the Outback: A Letter from Australia

Venerable Kovido left Amaravati last summer to live in Bodhinyana Monastery in Western Australia. Here are some of his comments on the change of scene.

I guess one of the most recurrent experiences has been seeing my perceptions - of what the monastery, the people, the country would be like - fall and collapse. It started the day I arrived, which happened to be the day before Vassa. I expected that we would be going into a strict regime - but much to my surprise, we had two weeks to settle in, recover and take it easy. In fact, the whole retreat was quite relaxed with a lot of time to oneself. And, for the first and last month, some teaching engagements and a few funerals still occurred.

Another perception to go was the weather. 'Western Australia,' I thought, 'land of sunshine, boiling in the summer and warm in the winter.' I'm glad Venerable Abhinyano encouraged me to bring some warm clothes because it gets quite cold here. I mean relatively - not that cold by European standards, 5-6°C. But except for in the eating hall and the boiler room, there isn't any heating. Well there is in the Dhamma Hall, but that isn't used because it makes the room damp and gives people headaches. So until I learned that, I would sit in the Hall battling the cold and my aversion to it and staring at the heaters. And to make it worse, everybody would say 'Oh, give it 4-6 weeks and it will be beautiful.' Some days it has been quite cold with rain and clouds for several days at a time. However, now it does go up to 30°C in the daytime.

But then, just as it gets pleasant to sit outside, out come the flies, and during the month of November more and more of them. Not that they bite, but they like to land on your face and crawl up into your mouth, your nose, or into your eyes. A little too friendly for me I'm afraid, and I resort to fly repellent or the 'Australian salute'!

They seem to be relaxed and happy most of the time,
whereas some of the more serious meditators seem
uptight and unhappy a lot of the time.

I was thinking the other day that this is the first time that the reflection on the use of the lodgings* has been complete in one day. 'To ward off cold' (at night), 'to ward off heat' (at midday), 'to ward off the touch of flies' (yes), 'mosquitoes' (yes), 'wind' (very strong in the evening), 'burning and creeping things' (there are some fairly vicious ants plus the odd deadly

snake).

** (One of the frequently recited chants in Theravada monasteries.)*

During the retreat we had about 15-20 people staying here: 6 monks, 5 anagarika / laymen, 5 anagarika / lay women, and regular weekend visitors. Amongst this group were 4 Thai maichee [8 precept nuns]; this was the first time I had experienced Thai maichees. One would see them during the day pottering about - sweeping a few leaves, doing a bit of weeding, arranging some flowers, etc. - generally just pottering about. And they also helped in the kitchen - often sitting on the floor preparing food, cooking, speaking Thai or washing up.

To begin with, I thought, 'These people spend their days pottering about but they don't really practise like us - they're chattering away all the time.' And during walking meditation, one would see them saying devotional prayers to the Buddha, obviously rites and rituals. But then after a while, I noticed when I went to the morning meditation they were there; and in the evening; and during the day; and during the all-night sits, or at least as much as I was. And also, they sit through all the talks, which can be 1 - 1 1/2 hours long and are nearly always in English, without a grumble. And also this pottering about that they do: I see them after the meal when I'm on my way to have a nap, or working during their free time. They seem to be relaxed and happy most of the time, whereas some of the more serious meditators seem uptight and unhappy a lot of the time. Maybe there was something in the Thai attitude of pottering about. At the end of the Vassa, when they all went their separate ways I was a bit sad to see them go. But they did leave one thing behind - their example. So from time to time when I feel a bit down or uptight I'll mosey down to the shower block and see if there's a bit of cleaning I can do. Not too much - 'just pottering about', you might think, but it does wonders for my mind.



It was the Uposatha day, the last day of Ajahn Jagaro's solitary retreat and a Sunday. About 60 people had gathered together - Thai, Sri Lankan, Burmese, Chinese/Malay, Australian - to offer dana. It had been raining, not the weedy sort of drizzle of England but a real downpour, inches per hour sort of stuff. So people had parked their cars really close to the dining hall rather than up the hill in the car park. The meal had been offered and everybody was crowded into the dining hall to receive the blessing. We were just about to start chanting when it really started to pour down (and you can hear it on a tin roof). Suddenly there was a very loud cracking noise. A big Kanri tree (a type of Eucalyptus) probably the biggest tree in the monastery, which had been relatively untouched by the fire earlier in the year, had fallen over. But everything seemed all right so Ajahn Brahm continued with the chanting.

After the meal we went out to look at the damage. Two things stood out. First of all, two well-built Australian men were already right in there attacking the branches with an axe and a chain-saw. So often the husbands of Thai women feel out of place when they come to the monastery but here was something they could relate to. They were in their element. In fact, so much so that they came back the next Saturday afternoon too to clear it up. When you realise that Saturday afternoon is sport-on-tele afternoon you realise how significant that was.

The other thing was that a couple of cars were completely covered under the branches of the tree. We were worried about how badly they were damaged, but as the branches were cut away and the cars retrieved, we saw that the branches had fallen in such a way that they were resting on and over the cars, so little damage occurred. As one owner came to look at his car, we wondered if he would sue for the dented roof and broken light. 'Oh no, I take this as an auspicious sign. Five minutes before the tree fell, my children were all playing right here near the car; then they all came in for the blessing. This is very fortunate, they could have been badly hurt. In fact, when I get back I will buy a ticket for the lottery, and if I win, I will give half to the monastery!'

In the morning at Bodhinyana, we have meditation from 4.30-5.30, chanting 5.30-6.00, and then more meditation 6.00-7.00. The first session is usually OK but for some reason, in the second session after the chanting, it is very difficult to keep awake and most people nod gently. For a few days, I battled away against the drowsiness using all the skilful means that I knew, but to no avail. Then I noticed that one or two people would go out and do walking meditation instead. So that's what I did, and I am so glad that I did because at that time of day either dawn was just about to occur or, later on in the year, the sun would be just rising above the trees. What a beautiful time of day with the first birds, usually the kookaburras, breaking the silence of the night. And the rays of light shining on the tree tops, the coloured branches or, of late, the green translucent leaves, emerging out of the monotone darkness.

Also, when it was a bit darker, the kangaroos would be nibbling at the grass a few yards from where I did my walking meditation. Not the big males - they are usually a bit further away and quite edgy - but the females and the young joeys. To begin with, you wouldn't see the joeys, but then as Mum bent down to eat some grass, you would see a little head appear out of the pouch and sometimes eat the grass too. I saw this happen for several weeks and then one day I saw the little chap come out. What a surprise! His head might be quite small but his body was large, comparable to a seven-year-old child in relation to its mother. He was a bit nervous too: if I got too close it would climb back into the safety of Mum's pouch.

Now I don't know whether it's lighter or the plants have changed (they grow very fast out here) but they only come so close. Also the joey can't get in the pouch any more. He tries but more gets left out than gets in, legs and tail sticking out on either side of his head. You can feel that Mum is not really that pleased to accommodate him any more.

It seems to be a bit like that as a human being growing up or as a majjhima monk (such as Ven. Kovido) - having been a monk for between five and ten years. You'd like to be able to go back to Mum or the teacher, hide in the pouch for a while, have a cuddle and some comforting words - but somehow it doesn't seem to be possible any more. It's not that Mum or the teacher is unkind or unreceptive but the relationship has changed and one can no longer get the same hit.

Also, being a majjhima monk is very instructive because you have a chance to see and experience two different roles in succession, that of being in charge and that of being in support. From being in the role of the senior monk, one notices what things people do are helpful or otherwise, and so, you hope, can be more supportive when in the junior role. I guess it would be like being a teacher for a while and then going back to school. You'd probably be a much better pupil!

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Life of Forest Monk (Pt IV)

The continuing recollections of Luang Por Jun, one of Ven. Ajahn Chah's most senior disciples.

Question: Luang Por, could you tell us about the practice and training for the Sangha and the laity once your monastery was firmly established?

Answer: The monastery became established following the same routine as Luang Por Chah's. Much emphasis was placed on the form and the sila and the Vinaya.

Q: Luang Por, do you mean different levels of sila for the monks, the nuns, and the laity?

A: That's right. According to their level of practice. I stressed being genuine in keeping the sila and had to teach the laity to change their ways. Repeating the precepts after the Ajahn like a parrot isn't keeping the sila. Take, for example, the first precept, panatipata, not killing. Don't just say it, make it a part of life and relinquish the desire to swat even a mosquito. Don't regard the precepts as a custom, make them a practice. The same with the sila observed by the monks and nuns. When we acknowledge our faults, we have to make a firm resolution not to continue to transgress the precepts again. Saying you will do it without intending to is just blindly following another custom.

Q: Luang Por, could you tell us more about the Observance Days and the practice in everyday life at your monastery?

A: It was just like the practice at Wat Pah Pong. We would sound the rising bell at 3.00am. I'd allow 15, maybe 20 minutes at the most for the community to gather together in the sala. I'd have to yell at the latecomers to come in gently without making much noise. We would do the chanting and meditate, and at 4.00am I'd give a desana for about 30 minutes and spend another 30 minutes explaining it. The sun rose about 5.00am, and we would have closing homage and leave the monastery for almsround to receive the offerings of the laity with restraint and gratitude, taking care to observe the training rules*. The lay people and the novices would prepare things for the meal and pass the almsfood around to the monks. In this way, we used the form and the established tradition to cultivate our practice. Sometimes we would receive a joint invitation with the village monks to go somewhere. This could be a bit tricky as relations were still strained. I wouldn't allow any new monks to go along as I wanted to ensure that no upsets occurred.

* (e.g. to walk with downcast gaze, to walk in silence, to wear one's robes neatly, to accept alms-food with attention on the bowl.)

Later on, we had a nun from Wat Pah Pong ask permission to come and stay. We built a separate place for nuns to live, and I began to train men and women to live the holy life. At certain times of the year, all of us would go to Wat Pah Pong to pay respects to Luang Por Chah. Sometimes he would come to visit us.

Some monks would determine silence, others not to sleep, or only eating what one collected on alms round.

Q: Would you go to visit Ajahn Chah often?

A: Yes. In those early years, I would still go to Wat Pah Pong at least once a month as I still had duties to perform there, such as training the young monks. As things became busier at my monastery, I had few opportunities to visit Wat Pah Pong and so became less involved with the activities there.

Q: When you would go, would you stay for very long, Luang Por?

A: Maybe I would spend one night or go for the day. I was the next senior monk after Ajahn Chah when I would visit. I would present a good example for the others to follow so that they could see the correct manner of showing respect and observing the traditions at the monastery. Eventually, Ajahn Maha Amon came to stay with Ajahn Chah and helped to lighten Ajahn Chah's responsibilities. Ajahn Maha Sompong and Ajahn See came to stay and, as time went on, they branched out to their respective monasteries.

Once when I returned to Wat Pah Pong, I was surprised to see that some of the new monks there couldn't learn their chanting correctly - their pronunciation was a bit off. Luang Por Chah didn't make this a problem. He said the mistakes in pronunciation and wording can be overlooked as long as we kept the essence of the chanting in our practice, meaning we weren't scholar-monks, we were there to practise. Sometimes scholar-monks would come to visit and would transgress the rules of the Vinaya, only because they didn't realise what they were doing. I remember going on alms round with one of these monks who had completed his eighth or ninth level of study. As we went through the forest, he was curious to know the names of the different plants and trees. He would casually break off branches and leaves to look at them.** Ajahn Chah didn't say anything - he just smiled. The lay people following behind knew about these things, but nobody said anything. This exemplified what Ajahn Chah used to say in his desanas about studying the scriptures and memorising the words without knowing the practice.

*** (These actions - entailing the damage of plant life
- are transgressions against the bhikkhus' training rules.)*

As time progressed Luang Por Chah was invited to open many branch monasteries. He would visit them in turn and offer his support.

Q: Luang Por, could I ask about the Observance Days and the entering of the Vassa?

A: We would always begin the Vassa with the traditional ceremony of pledging to stay within the monastery and setting the boundaries for the rains. We would set special dhutanga [austere] practices for ourselves and these would be proclaimed before the Sangha as we publicly made a determination to keep them. We would write the details of each monk's dhutanga determination down on a blackboard in the sala.

Some monks would determine silence, others not to sleep, or only eating what one collected on alms round, or eating just plain white rice with salt. Emphasis was placed on speaking very little, and noble silence was broken only when necessary. Sometimes Ajahn Chah would decline the special dishes offered him by the laity and say: 'Give it to the third monk in the line; he's vowed only to eat what is offered into his alms bowl.' In this way, he showed lots of metta for those making a determination in their practice. But he would forbid the laity from seeking out the monks who ate only what was placed in their alms bowl to ensure they had enough food. 'Don't worry about him,' he'd say, 'he won't die. Even if he doesn't receive any food on pindabaht, there's plenty of rice, and if there's no rice, there's always water! All you're doing is feeding the defilements.' At the end of the Vassa, we would formally ask forgiveness from Luang Por Chah.

Q: So you've talked about the least strict and the Middle Way; what is the strictest practice regarding eating only what is put into the alms-bowl?

A: The most refined of these practices is to only receive what falls into the bowl coincidentally on alms round. If the monk realises that people are aware of what he is doing and strive to seek him out especially, then he would not accept the food they offer.

Q: Luang Por, would Ajahn Chah have any special practices of sitting in samadhi for long periods of time - the 'sitters' practice', for example?

A: On the Observance Days, Ajahn Chah would sit in the Dhamma seat after the chanting and give a desana. I would present a reading from the scriptures about the Triple Gem and the Vinaya and Ajahn Chah would expound it further in his talk. The book I used - called Pubbasikkha Vannana - taught about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and then the Vinaya. Usually we'd get through the entire book during the Vassa, and sometimes we'd get through the book twice. After the talk, he would lead us in meditation, sitting with us, sometimes giving instruction, sometimes just sitting for hours. Ajahn Chah would see monks and novices getting sleepy and dozing off, and he would order them to stand or go out and do walking meditation and then return to the sala for more sitting, instruction, or a desana. In those days, the laity were quite keen and interested in Dhamma. Many of them had a deep understanding of the practice. After his talk they would ask Ajahn Chah questions about the Dhamma while the monks sat and listened. But since those days, there hasn't really been any laity with the same vision. Often these discussions would last until dawn.

Q: Regarding the 'sitters' practice', Luang Por, Ajahn Chah wouldn't allow you to get up and leave when you wanted, would he?

A: That's right. Ajahn Chah had us do everything together. If we would stand, we would all stand together; if we sat, we sat together. Some monks found sitting so difficult that they



would continue to stand, which was all right. We practised together in this way until dawn. Everyone did this together. No one would be given permission to go back to his kuti and go to sleep. In later years after I left Wat Pah Pong, some monks would ask to be excused at midnight and would be given permission. I would allow this at my monastery as well. But although I have lessened the severity, it isn't taken for granted that anyone would be allowed to stop at midnight. I usually stay up until midnight and then ask permission from the Sangha to go and rest; I encourage the monks and laity to keep the Wan Phra sittings for as long as they can. If they need to go and rest, they can do so, but they should return for the morning chanting at 3.00am. In the past, we didn't have laity from the city coming as we do now. Our practice was more inspiring before they came because they all fall asleep before midnight; now the old diligent villagers have been affected by this and are drawn into this practice of laziness and don't manage to stay awake much longer.

Q: Do you still have this practice at your monastery in Bung Kao Luang, Luang Por?

A: Yes, this practice is still kept on every Wan Phra, and there are no exceptions for not keeping it.

Q: So, Luang Por, you make them sit all night or do you give them permission to alternate between postures?

A: Yes, they can change their postures, maybe sit for an hour or two, then stand for a bit, then walking for a while. If the monks seem to be getting sleepy and tired, I sometimes put on a tape for them to listen to and change the atmosphere. Sometimes I may have to threaten them, too.

Q: Then you always do things together, is that right?

A: Yes, always together at the same time. Some of the monks find sleepiness a real hindrance. I go over to them and correct their posture if they're slumping forward and show them the proper way to sit, or how to hold their arms out in ways to overcome drowsiness.

to be continued....



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Highland Retreat

Venerable Suriyo comments on a recent retreat in Scotland by the Harnham Sangha.

Reflecting upon the region's numerous and often turbulent changes, we approached Garth Castle upon invitation for dana. Here was the 14th century residence of Alexander Stewart, known as 'The Wolf of Badenoch', who from all accounts would throw his opponents 110 feet into the burn below. Once again we bore in mind the theme of our 9-day retreat: Uncertainty. Gratefully we received a much friendlier welcome. One could even imagine a Scottish monastery in such a place.

...trusting in the benefits to all of living simply,
honestly and with awareness.

As an interval to our normal routine, the community accepted in May the invitation by Jody Higgs to make use of her 'wee thatched cottage' in Perthshire. Situated at the mouth of Glen Lyon - a long, lush and secluded valley near Loch Tay - the setting is very conducive to quiet and contemplation. Ajahn Munindo encouraged us to go walking as much as possible, alone or in pairs. The monks took ample opportunity for this, returning after many hours hiking, sitting beneath the trees and the occasional dip in the chilly streams. Several monks also stayed out overnight in a 'bothy' - a stone shelter high in the hills with only the wind and bleating of sheep for company. Jody and her assistant Brian offered daily meals, sustaining us for such excursions. Along with the group morning and evening meditations there was also opportunity to sit near the wood stove and share our experiences or listen to 'Teachings of Ajahn Chah'.

The quiet location is enhanced by a rich history, full with stories and legends. The land bears its marks with stone circles, Roman forts, castles, old houses and churches. (The local church of Fortingall contains the famous yew tree that David Bellamy has estimated to be over 9000 years old.) Although the land's present appearance is very tranquil, with sheep and lambs dotting the pastures, the legends tell of many passionate and violent times. Clan raids, wars, plagues and land evictions took place, moulding the landscape and the communities dwelling here. As a counterbalance there are stories of saints, seers and many noble deeds of the ordinary folk.



Hearing such tales diminishes the apparent anachronism of Buddhist monks in such a setting. Whereas at first glance some may wonder if we have any common ground with the inhabitants here, upon further investigation we see links binding us together: the aspiration to rise above self-views and concerns, to something greater and more universal; the wish to live in harmony with one's natural surroundings; and of course, the link of suffering and the attempt to welcome it into consciousness, thus allowing for transformation. Seeing such links reduces the feeling of compulsion to prove our worth, trusting in the benefits to all of living simply, honestly and with awareness.

As we return to the monastery the reflections on uncertainty maintain their importance. For although we come back to the familiar, are these conditions stable and secure? Finally, we can only rest with faith that prompts the 'Going Forth' from home to homelessness. Allowing the path to unfold as it will.



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Aspects of Training: A Universal Order

In this extract from the Vinaya instructions to the bhikkhus at Amaravati in 1988, Ajahn Sucitto points out the developments in attitude that the Buddha brought about among the sect of "Wanderers" of India to transform it into the Bhikkhu-Sangha.

There has been a tradition in India for millennia, certainly from before the time of the Buddha, of paribbajakas, spiritual seekers who were homeless ones, wanderers. Some of these Wanderers became the Buddha's first disciples, and fundamental features of their attitude towards spirituality form the basis of the Sangha's training. There were also the Brahmins, those in the priestly caste, who followed the Vedas and performed the Vedic rituals to ensure prosperity, fecundity, etc. But the paribbajakas were those who renounced caste and worldly aims and values. This renunciation was called the pabbajja, the going forth, and it was a complete renunciation of any status or role in the caste system. And this, in the Indian culture, was a very significant step since most people belonged completely to one particular niche in the caste structure. To renounce that was a considerable renunciation.

This is important to consider because in our life here we can begin to develop ideas of status or role or position. Nowadays in Buddhist countries, there is an ecclesiastical hierarchy in the Sangha, but this is purely an administrative structure, often brought about through secular powers. In the Holy Life itself, there is no status. Such roles and responsibilities as are allocated by the Sangha to individual members of the Order are not considered to be very important, nor regarded as a measure of one's spiritual development.

The paribbajakas had thrown away a lot of the outward regulations of the religious life and it seems that the Buddha found this helpful because it meant that the regulations became much more internalised. A pure one was thought to have purity of heart rather than just being one who could perform rituals. Paribbajakas adopted a common standard of harmlessness, renunciation and celibacy. The sincere ones were not interested in acquiring things, not fascinated by the sensory world, not looking for winning power or gain or support. It is from this the attitude of going-forth, which defined the fundamental 'status' of the homeless one, that the bhikkhu training conventions evolved.

In that way of life, a paribbajaka would seek the going forth under a teacher, a sattha. When Wanderers met each other, they would ask, 'Whose Dhamma and discipline are you following, friend?' There were teachers like Sanjaya, the original teacher of Venerables Sariputta and Maha-Mogallana, and each had their own Dhamma and discipline. The training disciplines of other paribbajakas consisted mainly of ascetic practices like eating out of the hands, going

naked, not lying down, or drinking water out of puddles rather than out of vessels. This was their training for renunciation. However, the Buddha's emphasis was upon a more refined wisdom training, and his whole teaching was of a reflective nature. So, though he lived a wanderer's life, the Lord Buddha felt that his disciples should try to open up beyond the limitations of both the paribbajaka ethic and that of the Brahmins. His approach was more universal than that of his contemporaries.

In his last years, the Buddha made the point over and over again that the Dhamma-Vinaya was the teacher, not him.

Lord Buddha offered a Dhamma and discipline that weren't just a set of rules to be kept by a particular sect or a group for the purpose of ritual or asceticism or out of blind obedience to a teacher's whim, but were that which led to universal truth, to universal standards of wisdom and morality, and to skilful conduct for all human beings. As the Buddhist Sangha evolved out of this amorphous band of wanderers, the definition of what the bhikkhu was became more and more narrow. And yet the increasing degree of this regulation was never considered to be an obstacle to liberation. The disciples undertook these further restrictions upon what they could do and what was suitable and so forth because they considered them to be not limitations on the Holy Life but rules which strengthened it and gave it a broader significance.

So one should look at the particular training rules that the Buddha established for his bhikkhu disciples in this way. They were intended to develop a life that led to harmlessness, renunciation, contentment with little, and freedom from passion in ways that were not mortifying or extreme. And they led to behaviour which exemplifies and illustrates those goals in order to establish and sustain faith in lay people.

Becoming a bhikkhu, an ordained disciple of the Buddha, was, at first, very much as it would have been for any other paribbajaka: one would have faith in the sattha, the Lord Buddha, and ask for the going forth in his Dhamma and discipline. And the Buddha would say, 'Come, bhikkhu, live the Holy Life.' At first, that was all that ordination, as we now call it, meant - just an affirmation of faith in that particular teacher and a reciprocal acceptance.

Throughout his life the Buddha continually distinguished between faith and belief. He said that one would realise truth through one's own knowledge rather than just through belief. He insisted on many occasions that disciples not just blindly believe but follow him out of faith. This attitude, which is in line with the sentiments expressed in the Kalama Sutta, emphasises personally experienced realisation, which was a goal fundamental to the Wanderers. And in his last years, the Buddha made the point over and over again that the Dhamma-Vinaya was the teacher, not him - he was the Awakened One, the one who pointed out the Way. He was adopting the role of teacher not in the old sense of someone who expected belief but rather as someone who demonstrated a universal law. However, a disciple should certainly follow his teacher in faith, backed up by his reflective reasoning.

How does this kind of faith differ from belief? It's a matter of humility, of being prepared to test out the teacher's advice in the spirit of free inquiry. There is an example in the Kitagiri Sutta, sutta 70 of the Majjhima Nikaya, where the Lord Buddha says to a group of monks: 'I, monks, enjoy good health, vitality and freedom from physical discomfort by eating one meal a day, so you too should do this, monks.' And they said, 'Yes, Lord', and they tried it and they kept that rule. Then they went to two of the monks of the notorious 'group of six'.

These two, Assaji and Punabbasuka, were monks renowned for their shamelessness. The good monks said to them, 'We eat one meal a day and we enjoy good health.' And Assaji and Punabbasuka said, 'Well, we eat three meals a day - we eat in the mornings, we eat in the evenings, we eat whenever we feel like it - and we enjoy good health and feel good too. So we're going to do it this way.' The good monks then told this to the Lord Buddha and he summoned these two monks and said: 'There is a difference between doing that which is pleasant and skilful and doing that which is pleasant and unskilful. It's not that your actions produce physical displeasure, but they go no further - and there are ways in my training which lead towards the goal of the Holy Life, towards renunciation, contentment with little, and so forth.'



He was, in fact, pointing to the very ethos of the parabbajaka, the mendicant, the one content with little and not particularly interested in the sensory world. And he was asking them to reasonably investigate their actions in terms of the tenets of the 'going-forth', the act of faith. He also reminded them that the fundamental step in the graduated course of training was having faith in the teacher. You may not always agree with what he says or have experienced what he's talking about, but you have faith in the teacher. And from that faith you become interested in Dhamma, you draw near, you listen to Dhamma, you practise it, you struggle with the conflict that your defilements bring up, and then you penetrate to truth and experience the results. But the first step is to have faith. If there's no faith, then you don't begin or continue. And what these monks had done wrong, where their foolishness lay, was in acting out of a lack of faith. There was no willingness to commit themselves to following the teacher; and without that the course of training does not even get off the ground.

Moreover, the Buddha said that, as far as he was concerned, it was of no importance at all whether people kept the rules or not. Rather than concerning himself with that, he wanted to compassionately point out that if they wished to progress, then this was the correct course of action.

Since the Buddha's Parinibbana, it's up to the Sangha to be that source of faith and to practise in faith. Many times, we take on training rules that we may not feel are especially relevant or that don't agree with our personalities. Even as a community we may think, 'I don't see the point in that.' These particular views often arise in the mind. One has to tackle them skilfully, to see that it's more important to sustain practice that brings up faith in one's own mind - a kind of going forth and a willingness to try - and that creates a situation that supports the faith of others. Many of our minor rules and conventions are arbitrary, but they have been decided upon, and if we keep them, then there is a sense of unity and concord, a composed and well-ordered sense in the community that is inspiring and gives rise to a fruitful field for the practice of other people.

There are many rules on harmonious conduct in community life: rules about sustaining and proclaiming gross wrong views; rules that deal with showing respect towards the Vinaya (the discipline), the Dhamma, the Order, the Buddha, the elders, and so forth. These attempt not to create orthodoxy but to create standards of orthopraxy. The Buddha's emphasis was on

unanimity of practice so that the good field of the Dhamma-Vinaya and the field of the Sangha were kept in good order for the welfare of others and for future generations.

The other universal aspect of the Lord Buddha's approach was the attempt to keep Dhamma-Vinaya available to the lay people. There was encouragement for bhikkhus to teach. There was a time when the bhikkhus just used to sit and meditate and be quiet and the lay people complained the monks just sat there all night long, 'dumb like hogs'. And the Buddha said, 'Bhikkhus, I allow you to talk on the Dhamma.' So they started talking on Dhamma. In other words, the concept of social responsibility was introduced - which wasn't a concept in the Wanderers' vocabulary. Note: the bhikkhus were to act out of a sense of responsibility rather than a desire to win favour or support.

Many training rules that sustain a life of mendicancy grew out of a need to develop a relationship with lay people, to keep Dhamma-Vinaya accessible to them and in their minds. A bhikkhu's life is one of having little personal storage of items. Even when we have established monasteries, we use communal stores; we renounce personal ownership and go to a storeman to ask for permission for this or for that. This is a good training because one doesn't start taking requisites for granted. Lay people can 'make invitation' (pavarana - the invitation to ask them for any requisites the monk or nun may need), but there are rules to make sure that one does not take advantage of such offers by asking or constantly badgering people for things.

Also, there are observances that conform to the social customs of that time, designed to present an appearance that was polite, graceful, and pleasing to the lay people. Many of the sekhiya rules work on this level. When we understand this principle, we see the need to investigate what is suitable and what is offensive to the social customs of the age. If we do what's appropriate, we can feel that we are working in harmony with what the Lord Buddha taught and what the Dhamma is about.

So you see how this non-sectarian and universalist approach of the Buddha makes it very important for the Bhikkhu-Sangha to try to sustain an appearance that is inspiring, to live in harmony and concord, to avoid activities that give rise to bad reputation or to people's not being inspired by the Holy Life, and to agree to abide within rules and regulations. So it was that, from the basis of the Wanderers' rejection of conventions and spirit of independent inquiry, there arose a very distinctive order, whose conventions are for its own welfare and for the welfare of the many.



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SIGNS OF CHANGE

A Sangha in Germany

When we returned two years ago from our first visit to Amaravati Buddhist Centre and to the Devon Vihara, we told our friends what we had experienced in those places. Right from the beginning, we felt the desire to have such a community in our neighbourhood. Last year, when a close friend returned from a visit to Dhammapala Monastery in Switzerland, he felt the same as we had. We talked a bit more, met other friends who supported our ideas, and founded the German Sangha Society (Deutscher Sangha e.V.). We are active members of the Buddhist Society of Hamburg, which is keen on the idea of a resident Sangha, and live in the house which it uses as its centre.

More recently, the house next door to the centre came up for sale. The time was right, and the Buddhist Society bought it. Now the German Sangha Society rents the ground floor and the basements, and the president of the Society has moved in. After a busy winter during which the house was restored and redecorated, we are now able to invite and give shelter to monks and nuns.

The recent visit of Ven. Nimalo and Ven. Dhammiko showed the lively and encouraging interest among our German and Thai friends. (We have good connections with the Thai community in Hamburg.) The daily evening puja was well attended by Thais and Germans, and the Thais were pleased to be able to offer alms food on the traditional pindapada. The bhikkhus returned from their alms round with full bowls every day. During the week's visit, there were no special retreats or seminars or lectures - the spirit of ordinary monastic life inspired us.

The first half year of the project to establish a Theravada Sangha in Germany was encouraging, because everything was in the right place at the right moment, everything worked out so well and there were so many helping hands. We feel very hopeful, and even confident, that some time in the future, we will be blessed with a local Sangha like the one that exists in England.

Birte Plutat and Bernd Bullwinkel,
 Deutscher Sangha e.V.
 Beisserst. 25D-2000 Hamburg 63, Germany.

Uncertainty at Harnham

Several weeks ago many of Harnham's supporters received a startling letter in the post. It was an explanation by our trustees of an impending court case concerning the future of Harnham hill. The letter described how a High Court writ has been issued against the original trustees - Richard Hopkins, Virginia Deaper and Nick Scott - making accusations of obtaining property through 'undue influence'. It called for an order to 'deliver up ... vacant possession of all the land and buildings currently occupied by the Defendants and/or the Buddhist monks at the

Harnham Hall Estate'.

The trouble that now exists seems to stem from an attempt made about two years ago by the solicitors of both groups to conduct formal negotiations about further rights on the hill. Just exactly how the present misunderstandings arose is not clear. What is clear though is that we are now dependent on skilled professional advice.

So the letter from the Magga Bhavaka Trust was also an appeal. As everyone understands solicitors fees can be high. To deal with this predicament the Trustees have been obliged to seek out and instruct an expert in the field of equity law. Accordingly a suitably qualified person who is sensitive to the case is presently doing all she can to bring it to a quick and agreeable end. At the time of preparing this report we await a preliminary court hearing to be held in Newcastle on 23rd June.

By the time you read this report, if the Trust's solicitors are successful, all will be well again on the hill. If they are not successful, things will be as they are right now - well, but with more than usual to contemplate.

Anybody interested in finding out how we are proceeding or how they might help, please feel welcome to contact either the Chairman of The Magga Bhavaka Trust or myself c/o the monastery.

SABBE SANKHARA ANICCA

All conditions are uncertain

Munindo Bhikkhu

Ajahn Anando Disrobes

On June 7th, the Sangha at Amaravati received a letter from Ajahn Anando announcing that he had disrobed and given up the bhikkhu training. He had gone on a long distance walk across France with two other bhikkhus and an anagarika, and disrobed shortly after arriving at the Swiss Vihara. In his letter he expressed a long and profound dying away of faith in his life as a bhikkhu.

The Sangha and the many lay people he helped wish to express their gratitude for his service over the years and send their best wishes for the years ahead.

Tributes to Ajahn Chah

In monasteries throughout the world, the life of this great Buddhist Master was honoured on or around April 25th, the 100th day since his passing away. At Amaravati, a Maha Sangha of more than seventy bhikkhus and siladharas, and a few hundred lay people gathered for a day of talks and meditation. Chief among the guests was Tan Chao Khun Pannananda. Other guest bhikkhus included U Nanika, Ven. Dr. Rewata Dhamma, Ven. Maha Somboon, Phra Kru Silananda, Phra Maha Derm, Phra Kru Pannagorn, Ven. Pannasekhara, and Ven. Ajahn Khemadhammo.

Meanwhile in Ajahn Chah's own monastery, Wat Pah Pong, the ceremonies were held on a grander scale. Despite the most severe hot season for many a year, which entailed having to truck water in for the three-day ceremony, an assembly of around 400 bhikkhus and several thousand lay disciples attended the chanting, meditation and Dhamma talks. Amongst the speakers were Somdet Buddajahn, Tan Chao Khun Rachmedi, Ajahn Jun, Ajahn Maha Amon, Ajahn Gi, Ajahn Chu, Ajahn Reuangrit, Ajahn See, Ajahn Pytoon, Ajahn Damrong and Ajahn Puriso.

After the ceremony arrangements were made for the funeral pyre, which will be used to cremate Luang Por Chah's body on January 16th, 1993. This pyre will be built in the shape of a Chedi, which will remain as a permanent memorial after the cremation.

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EDITORIAL

On Bandits and Bowls

One of the occasional irritations to life at Amaravati is the unwanted attention of disaffected youths who come into the monastery, generally at night, break into the letter box, try to force their way into the office, or get up to some other mischief. One year, the very night before Wesak, a group drove in and pushed over the statue of the standing Buddha in the courtyard, causing it some damage. I remember registering my indignation to Ajahn Sumedho, who simply replied: 'Wanting the world to be other than it is, is suffering.'

That's the response in terms of attitude: in mundane terms it means more attention, and people staying up at night to patrol the grounds. And it's true - once you've let go of the notion that it shouldn't be this way, it's not suffering and there are some good results that come out of that. For instance, on a night patrol one has the opportunity to be quiet and practise on one's own with very few disturbances. And you are caused to reflect on aspects of the human realm - the bored nonsensical violence of it - that you forget about in a monastery. You wonder why people behave in such ways: perhaps it's through having no prospects for employment, or living according to repetitive routines, feeling personally insignificant, having nothing to look forward to ... short of cash ... in fact, just those conditions that define the status of monks and nuns in worldly terms.

When the sensory perks run out, or the social reassurances of position or relationships fail to come through or the possibilities of advancement dry up, people glimpse the black hole at the centre of the personality's realm. Everyone half realises it's there, but the responses differ - some, through effort and fortune, stave off the eventual dissolution of the self with occupation and preoccupation, many dip in and out of moods of boredom and pointlessness, some become violent or nihilistic to the point of suicide ... and a few learn to let go into that void.

For a mendicant, the bowl entails renunciation. It is not a begging bowl for the simple reason that one is not allowed to beg. It is a receiving bowl...

A samana's lifestyle is ideal for those who wish to try the last option: it places them at the edge of that black hole with a teaching and a training in letting go. Letting go, of course, is more than a matter of lifestyle, and the insightful teaching of the Buddha presents a way of selflessness that can be practised by householders. Yet, as a symbol, the Buddha walks in the human realm with an alms bowl because the bowl presents the occasion for all of us to abandon self-interest.

For a mendicant, the bowl entails renunciation. It is not a begging bowl for the simple reason that one is not allowed to beg. It is a receiving bowl in which one may, and in fact is obliged to, receive what people wish to give. Having no food is one thing, being passive about that state entails a further letting go, and the practice of publicly demonstrating one's helplessness takes the humility a step further. We don't like to feel helpless; we don't want to hand over the power of our survival to persons unknown and to the will of fortune. So the renunciation in living from an alms bowl is more than not having money and possessions - it is a giving up of much of the power and control that establishes our personality.

For those who offer, the bowl is a symbol of generosity not based on personal affection, but on respect for the spiritual path. A donor can give one spoonful of rice and have the happiness of wholesome action through something quite humble and ordinary; the uplift of generosity is that something from ourselves is received with respect. It's worth considering with what little attention and respect most of what we bring forth in terms of body, speech and mind is received - even by ourselves. A lot of life is dismissed or attended to in a grudging perfunctory way; or tremendous expectations are made about what life should be giving us. But to give from oneself in a situation which doesn't demand that one's offerings be fantastic is a very precious possibility. In that, we can let go of our desire to have things for ourself or to impress others with what we offer.

In the giving and in the receiving there can be a selfless communion which is intimate and yet does not entail personal attachment. When giving and receiving are experienced as the same, the separative existence stops. A soaring of the spirit replaces the normal gravity that connects consciousness to birth and death; instead of evoking violent spasms of despair and denial, that self-emptiness can fill us more wonderfully and boundlessly than any happiness.

So to receive it all graciously, even the disappointment and pointlessness as you stump around the monastery on a cold night; to take what comes and make use of that; to be prepared to relate to life on its own terms rather than from the personal view of how things should be - there's the lesson of the alms bowl! It is the way out of suffering in the ambivalent human realm where, although we aspire for the best, we still have to witness the frustration of our attempts to make things go well.

Ajahn Sucitto

Dana Meal

The alms bowl,
the Buddha's skull,
sometimes full
but vegetables and rice
will suffice.

The offering today
is generous and kind.
It is the Buddha's way
to receive and give
with gratitude.

All are blessed
who share the meal,

and feel renewed
in this mutual giving,
living a life
of kindness.

Catherine Hewitt

Upasampada (Bhikkhu Ordination)

July 5th, Chithurst

Six men were accepted into the Bhikkhu Sangha on July 5th at Chithurst Monastery (Cittaviveka).

They comprised one Canadian, one Thai, one Indian, one Ulsterman, one German and an Englishman - quite an inspiring sign of transcendence of culture.

Asalha Puja - July 14th

The day prior to entering the Vassa is Asalha Puja, the last full moon of the Asian hot season. On this day long ago the Buddha began 'turning the wheel of the Dhamma' by preaching his first sermon, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. At this time special festivities, including an all-night meditation vigil, will be held at each of the monasteries. Friends, supporters or those with casual interest are welcome to join us for part of all of our evening of practice.

Bhikkhus in California.

Ajahn Amaro and Venerable Subhato are spending 3 months on the West Coast of the United States this summer. They will be offering Dhamma teachings, leading Meditation Retreats and meeting with Dhamma friends and supporters.

They are staying at: 971 Duncan St, San Francisco until July 14th. From there they will travel to Seattle for the final month of their visit.

Vassa - The 'Rains Retreat'

July 15th-October 11th

Originally, Vassa coincided with the monsoon season in India when heavy rains made travelling difficult. Since the days of the Buddha, this 3-month period has been a time of retreat. The Sangha at Amaravati and the other monasteries follow the traditional observance of residing at one place and undertaking intensive training in the Vinaya, the monastic discipline. It is also a time when the members of the Sangha make resolutions to strengthen their practice (as mentioned in Ajahn Jun's article). At the end of the Vassa, again as is a traditional aspect of the training, each member of the ordained community requests that fellow-samanas point out to them any blind spots that they may have with regard to their conduct. All these factors make for a very conducive atmosphere of one-pointedness on the Path. Accordingly it is a very supportive time for lay people also to make resolutions - such as regular meditation, visits to the monastery or determining the 5 or 8 Precepts on the Uposatha Days - and seek out instruction from the teachers. And in Britain, there are no monsoons to hold you back!

The Sangha practises alms mendicancy, so that the offerings of Buddhist groups or families to provide the meal for the day are always appreciated and a good way to enter into the 'give and take' spirit of the spiritual life. In such cases, it is advisable to contact the monastery in advance to find a suitable date. Smaller offerings of food, flowers or incense are always welcome at any time and are the standard way of entering a place that supports the practice of Dhamma.

Kathina

Alms-Giving Ceremonies

The Kathina season follows the three-month Vassa. A Kathina ceremony is held at each of the

monasteries to commemorate the harmony of the Sangha and the co-operative relationship between householders and monastics. It is a time when lay people bring offerings of requisites to the monasteries in order to keep these precious Dhamma refuges alive and functioning and to express their gratitude to the Sangha for the teachings offered throughout the year.

At this time, the Sangha also nominates one bhikkhu as a representative of the practice of Dhamma-Vinaya to receive a robe and the requisites on their behalf. If you wish to make offerings or help to coordinate the ceremonies, please contact the monastery concerned.

