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Who We Really Are

In the following talk Ajahn Sumedho explains how, with an understanding of the conditioning process, through meditation practice and the skilful application of spiritual discipline we are able to discover the true nature of the enlightened mind for ourselves.

When we are contemplating the Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha, it is very skilful to question what a personality really is: the sense of our own separateness, individuality, the perception of ourselves as a person that's separate from the rest. Nowadays people are beginning to understand more and more about the nature of consciousness, but although it is an experience that we all have, it is probably the least understood. Scientists are studying consciousness, trying to find a physical base for it. Is it in the brain? What is it?... but it's like trying to find our real self. The more we try to find out who we really are, the more we seem to be going in circles or chasing after shadows; we can't really get hold of anything for very long and it vanishes.

However, it is not the self - who or what we are - that is the problem. Rather, it's our delusions around the perceptions of what we are, the conditioning of the mind that we acquire after birth. When we are born, the new baby child is conscious but it has no sense of being a person, a personality; this is something that is instilled into us as we grow up. All kinds of impressions and assumptions are given to us through our parents, our peers, and the society that we live in. We are continually fed with information about what we are and what we should be. So the thrust of meditation is to begin to realise the true nature of the mind that isn't conditioned by perception, cultural conditioning, thought or memory.

If we try to think about meditation practice as this or that, we're creating an image that we're trying to realise, rather than just trusting in the attentiveness of the mind, in mindfulness; letting go of the desire to find or grasp anything. As soon as we think about ourselves, we become a person - somebody - but when we are not thinking, the mind is quite empty and there is no sense of person. There is still consciousness, sensitivity, but it's not seen in terms of being a person, of being a man or a woman; there is just awareness of what is happening -

what the feeling is, the mood, the atmosphere that one is experiencing in this moment. We can call this intuitive awareness. It is not programmed and conditioned by thought or memory or perception.

The thrust of meditation is to begin to realise the true nature of the mind that isn't conditioned by perception, cultural conditioning, thought or memory.

Now one of the big problems in meditation is that we can take ourselves too seriously. We can see ourselves as religious people dedicated towards serious things, such as realising truth. We feel important; we are not just frivolous or ordinary people, going about our lives, just going shopping in the supermarket and watching television. Of course this seriousness has advantages; it might encourage us to give up foolish activities for more serious ones. But the process can lead to arrogance and conceit: a sense of being someone who has special moral precepts or some altruistic goal, or of being exceptional in some way, having come onto the planet as some kind of messiah... we get people like that sometimes visiting us at Amaravati; strange characters who come in and announce themselves as the Maitreya Buddha! This conceit, this arrogance of our human state is a problem that has been going on since Adam and Eve, or since Lucifer was thrown out of heaven. It's a kind of pride that can make human beings lose all perspective; so we need humour to point to the absurdity of our self-obsession. In the monastic life we can become incredibly serious about our moral purity, our discipline, our dedication and so on. To a worldly person, it can seem that monks and nuns are making life unnecessarily difficult or complicated for themselves or for others. But one way of looking at religious conventions, such as the Theravada School, where the emphasis is on the Vinaya discipline, practising meditation, the purity of the tradition, is as concepts that are true but not right, right but not true.

At one time I went to see a teacher who said that we don't need the discipline or the Vinaya rules: "All you have to do is be mindful. Mindfulness is enough." So I went back and told Ajahn Chah, and he said: "True but not right, right but not true!" Because, ultimately, we don't need rules, just being mindful is the Way. But most of us don't start from the enlightened experience, we more or less have to use expedient means to contemplate and to develop mindfulness. So the meditation techniques, disciplinary rules and so on are tools for reflection and mindfulness.

The religious life is a life of renunciation. We are renouncing, abandoning, letting go of things. To the worldly mind, it might sound as though we're getting rid of something, or condemning the sense world, the pleasures and the beauty that we can all experience as human beings; rejecting it, because we see it as evil or wrong. But renunciation isn't a moral judgement against anything. Rather, it's a moving away from that which complicates and makes life difficult, towards the ultimate simplicity of pure mindfulness in the present moment; because enlightenment is here and now, the Truth is now. There is not anyone who can become anything, there is not anyone who is born or who will die - there is only this eternal now. This awareness is what we can tune into, as we let go of the appearances and the habitual tendencies, and incline towards this simple reflection on the present.

Now we say this and we can understand it and it sounds quite simple. But the tendency of the mind is to make it into a problem. We don't have the faith or the trust or the willingness to just totally let go in the moment. So the statement: "Enlightenment is now" can bring a feeling of uncertainty or bewilderment.



There are different ideas about enlightenment: instant or gradual. Some may say: "Enlightenment is now", while others say that it has to be done gradually, stage by stage, lifetime by lifetime. Both these are true - but not right, right but not true. They are just different ways of contemplating and reflecting on the experience of the moment. The idea of instant enlightenment is very appealing to the modern mind: one LSD tablet and we're there - without having to go through a monastic training or give up anything at all; instant enlightenment!

But we have to recognise the limitation of the thinking mind. These concepts - instant and gradual - are just ways of reflecting, they're not positions that we take. Take the word, 'enlightenment', itself: maybe we see it as some kind of absolutely fantastic experience in which we are completely taken over by the light and totally transformed from a selfish, deluded being into a completely wise one - seeing it as something very great and grand. Most of us feel that we cannot reach such a high state, because the personality view is very negative. We tend to emphasise what is wrong, our faults, weaknesses, our bad habits; these are seen as obstructions to this experience of enlightenment. But such thoughts cannot be trusted. So I often say to people: "Whatever you think you are, that's not what you are!"

The aim of Buddhist meditation is to let go of these conditions of the mind, which doesn't mean denying, or getting rid of, or judging them. It means not believing them or following them; instead we listen to them as Dhamma, as conditions of the mind that arise and cease. With an attitude of awakened, attentive awareness, we learn to trust in just being the listener, the watcher, rather than being somebody trying to meditate to get some kind of result.

When we emphasise our personality we create problems, because the personal qualities are different for each one of us. We have our common human problems: old age, sickness and death; all men have certain things in common; all women have certain conditions in common. But then there are certain attitudes, cultural expectations and assumptions, which are conditioned into the mind, instilled into us after we are born. Through mindfulness, we are able to get beyond this conditioning of the mind to the pure consciousness that isn't conditioned, but which is like the background, the emptiness, the blank sheet on which words are written. Our perceptions arise and cease on that blank sheet, that emptiness.

So contemplate this. As we begin to listen and watch more, rather than just trying to get some samadhi or concentrated states that we read about in books; as we relax, and watch and listen then we have a much greater possibility of experiencing that emptiness. We use words like relinquishment and abandonment which can sound very heavy to the worldly mind, but it's not a heavy act of annihilation or destruction. Rather, it's a willingness to let things go, to allow things to be what they are, to let them cease - not holding on or identifying with anything, but just trusting in that pure state of aware attentiveness in the present moment.



One of the big delusions that we have in regard to meditation is that it is something I am doing, something I have got to do. We follow the guidelines with the idea of attaining and achieving different levels of realisation, like getting a university degree. It is interesting to see how some of the Westerners who become monks or nuns within the Theravadan tradition can be very intelligent and well educated, but because of the way that their minds have been conditioned they tend always to interpret the Holy life in terms of personal attainment - of becoming somebody special.

There is a rule within our monastic tradition that prohibits us from going around announcing our attainments. But in Thailand, everyone said that Ajahn Chah was an arahant - though he never said so. Then people would see him smoking a cigarette, and they'd think, "Arahants wouldn't smoke cigarettes, he couldn't be an arahant!" The conditioned mind tends to hold on to a fixed idea of an arahant as an absolutely, totally refined, goody-good person who'd never do anything coarse, but is always perfect in what they say and how they live. We want them to be perfect, according to our idea, so when we see any kind of flaw we become critical, disappointed, disillusioned and doubtful about them.

But this is a function of our mind. We are creating our own arahants, and therefore whatever we create in our own mind can easily become the opposite. What we can do is to observe this whole process of projection; of our creation of an ideal person, the ideal teacher. We begin to see how it is just an ideal. The perfect ideal is always the same, like a marble image. If, say, a teacher does something which is totally opposite to what we think should be done, to what we imagine is perfect, we can feel quite upset or disappointed. So we may feel that somehow we have to deal with it, to justify it: "He can behave like that because he is an enlightened being." We are willing to overlook crude or bad manners, or worse than that; we won't allow doubt to arise in our mind with regard to that person. Or, at the other extreme, we think: "That person is a bad person, they couldn't be enlightened." We dismiss them. But if we keep to this practice of mindfulness, we see that it's not really up to us to make a categorical moral judgement about other people or about our teachers. It's not our business to judge them as good or bad. And that's a relief. But what we can always do is to listen and be aware of our own conditioned reactions to anything that we are experiencing.

Now the five precepts provide a moral standard for the establishment of mindfulness. We can use them as standards or guidelines for actions and speech. They will help us to be mindful. Whereas, the idea of being free and doing whatever we want so long as we are mindful is just an ideal, isn't it? A 'right but not true' problem: it's right, but not necessarily true all the time. If we grasp such an idea, we can condone anything. For example, we might think that one can be very mindful while robbing a bank or performing the perfect murder! But, without a moral standard to reflect upon, it is simply the attentiveness of an animal in danger of being caught. The situation itself demands mindfulness, alertness and awareness.

This is also true in situations where we are right on the edge of death - like mountain climbing. We forget about ourselves and our problems, we are automatically right with the moment. There is a kind of exhilaration in that state of mind because we are far from the dreariness and greyness of daily life. Our perception becomes very concentrated and one-pointed. But we can't always live life on the edge. Most of our life is not particularly exciting. It just is what it is. We do ordinary things. We eat food, we take baths, we get dressed, undressed, we have to cook, wash the dishes, Hoover the carpets, wash the car, feed the cat, go to work, and get along with our spouse, our children, our fellow workers. Then, on a special day like a holiday, we may do something exciting like rock climbing.

Meditation is not an extreme experience, not something really dangerous, that forces us to be mindful. We usually meditate in places that are safe. We sit, stand, walk or lie down, and we

contemplate the breathing of the body. The aim is simply to observe our habitual tendencies as conditions that arise and cease. In this state, the repressed fears and emotional states can rise up, reach the surface; but rather than going off and doing some distracting thing to avoid them, we begin to allow them into consciousness. We're more and more willing to allow what we do not like or want into consciousness and, through that willingness to see it, we let go of it. We abandon it, relinquishing that state - not suppressing it, but leaving it alone.

The personality, the self-consciousness, the fears and the desires of the mind are what they are; we are not trying to dismiss them or add to them, or make any problems or difficulties around them. We are willing to let them be what they are. They feel this way, they have this quality; they arise and cease. In that cessation there's the realisation of the peace, the bliss or the serenity of being, and there's no self in it. Everyone has that potential, that ability to realise this. We describe it as seeing the Dhamma, the way it is - it's not a matter of becoming anything at all.

Sometimes in meditation we experience a moment, or several moments, of complete calm and peacefulness in the mind, and we think, "I want this" but of course it goes! Then the next day when we go to meditate, we try to get it back - but we can't, because we're trying to get something we remember, rather than trusting and letting things fall away according to their true nature. It's not that we've got to do something, or become anything at all. So then, without that pressure, without that compulsiveness of the mind, we can learn from life itself; the Truth is revealed to us.



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Sutta Class No.38: Punna & Papa

Venerable Asabho, Nakhon Pathom, July 2539

At a time when the West has begun to shed both its old rationalist and more recent romantic distortions of the East, and Western values are spreading rapidly to the East, the stereotypes of Asian & Western Buddhists are less & less true.

Western Buddhists, when asked what attracted them to the Buddha's Teaching, don't differ much in their answers: for some it was the encounter with a teacher, for others meditation practice; but most often it was inspiration for a teaching that emphasises enquiring wisdom, hands-on compassion and active responsibility for our destinies.

Today, travel and global migration make it more likely than at any time before that we meet Asian Buddhists. It is fascinating, and deeply revealing about our own Western background, to learn from Asian Buddhists how they see and practise a religion which until very recently they have seen exclusively as their own.

Asian Buddhists who have grown up in their religion tend to see meritorious action punna as the most important of their religious commitments: generosity in supporting Dhamma literature for free distribution, the support of a monastery or the Sangha in general are seen as the practical expression of this attitude. They are quite often surprised to find out that the concepts of punna and papa (meritorious and demeritorious action), which they see as self-evident, seem to play a considerably less important role in the lives of Western Buddhists. The Western Buddhists in turn are impressed by the spontaneous generosity they witness, but are occasionally surprised by the spiritual significance attached to material offerings. (What have a can of baked beans and half a dozen bars of soap to do with Nibbana?) They themselves see their spiritual commitment more in the practice of meditation and the study of the Buddhist Teachings. Moreover, a casual first explanation of punna and papa may remind the Western practitioner uncomfortably of a kind of spiritual ledger with debit and credit columns. The prospect that an excess of black ink will earn the aspirant rebirth in one of the privileged realms of the Buddhist cosmology rarely ranks high among the motivations for the spiritual path as the psychologically 'enlightened' Westerner likes to imagine it. We have learnt to mistrust incentives based on notions of any hereafter and are unwilling to put up with delays in receiving the fruit of our virtues. However, at a time when the West has begun to shed both its old rationalist and more recent romantic distortions of the East, and Western values are spreading rapidly to the East, the stereotypes of Asian and Western Buddhists are less and less true. Instead of here rehearsing them yet again, it may be useful to take a close look at the concept of punna in the Buddha's discourses.

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Punna is used as a noun as well as an adjective. It roughly means 'virtue, merit', sometimes 'virtuous action, meritorious deed', i.e. it can refer to the performance as well as to the result of wholesome actions. As an adjective it means 'good, wholesome, meritorious'. The term punna is the popular expression of its close relative, the more technical and more comprehensive kusala- kamma (rendered usually as 'wholesome action'), and it occurs repeatedly in the Suttas. It is generally used with two distinct meanings. One is in the description of an arahant, whose actions are described as being beyond punna and apunna (the latter is a synonym for papa. The second meaning, which we shall be concerned with here, signifies almost everywhere in the texts a promise of future happiness. This happiness is often depicted as a rebirth in the heavenly realms (A viii 361) and such a paradisiacal existence in one of the deva-worlds has for millennia spurred the fantasies and the longing of the earthbound. Yet punna and its promise of future happiness do not simply mean a fortunate rebirth after our physical death - though such a prospect by itself is, given the range of grim alternatives, not to be sneezed at. That it unequivocally means happiness for this life as well as for future existences, can be seen from the following Dhammapada verse:

Here one is glad and hereafter one is glad:
 having done good deeds brings gladness in both worlds;
 one is glad at one's goodness
 and even more so after having gone to a blissful realm.'

Dhammapada 18

While the popular notion of meritorious action generally remains limited to acts of generosity (to the extent that 'to make punna' tends to become synonymous with 'to give something'), the Suttas reveal a considerably broader scope for the term. Included as 'grounds for meritorious actions' the texts speak (at D iii 2183), not only of dana-maya but also of sila-maya and bhavana- maya-punna-kiriya-vatthu - 'generosity', 'ethical conduct' and 'meditation' are seen as equal bases for meritorious action. It is clear from the Buddha's Teaching that the creation of punna is by no means limited to donations and material support dana but can be achieved through individual ethics sila and the cultivation of insight and tranquillity bhavana .

If the Western meditator (with more than a hint of conceit) occasionally looks down on non- meditating fellow Buddhists and fancies himself in his attempts to meditate as the truer disciple of the Buddha, then such an attitude finds little justification in the scriptures. It is true that according to the Buddha's Teaching elsewhere, the ultimate happiness of Nibbana can only be found through introspection. In many of his discourses the Accomplished One leaves no doubt as to how highly he holds the practice of meditation. But human motivations are mysterious stuff and our motivations for Dhamma-practice are no exception. The moral philosopher Spinoza once remarked that although all human beings wish for freedom, only few wish for what actually leads to freedom. For a religion in which freedom and the highest happiness coincide, this may be read with a small twist: that although all human beings wish for happiness, only few wish for what leads to true happiness. Who really just wants what leads to 'the highest happiness' of Nibbana? Is it not the small and often slow steps of 'disendarkenment' which in truth motivate us, equally if not more than the final, by definition unfathomable, goal of enlightenment? If so, then the distinction between 'meditation for liberation' and 'generosity for future happiness' doesn't hold any longer: whoever practises meditation and expects of insight and



tranquillity, not just the realisation of Nibbana, but also some elucidation of his or her existence now, is doing - in the light of the teaching on the three grounds for meritorious action - nothing different from the person who practises generosity and hopes for future happiness by virtue of his or her meritorious deeds. The scriptures explain that both acquire punna - one in the field of giving, the other in that of mind-cultivation - and both can be certain of the good fruits of their actions. It is not for the mountain to belittle the valley; both belong as obviously together as they are different. The one great Path beneath our feet can appear misleadingly diverse.

According to the commentarial tradition, the three bases of wholesome action, generosity, ethical conduct, and meditation, are joined by seven others that occur scattered in the older texts: reverence *apaciti*; service *veyyavaca*; sharing of merit *pattanuppadana*; rejoicing in the merit of others *abbhanumodana*; explaining the Teaching *dhammadesana*; listening to the Teaching *dhammasavana*; and rectifying one's views *ditthujukamma*. All ten are grounds for wholesome action and, if cultivated, reduce our susceptibility for future suffering.

How, practically, does such meritorious action affect our lives? For an answer to this question we have to look at the broader context of *kamma* (action) and *vipaka* (fruit) to bring the function of *punna* into a clearer focus. A short passage in the *Samyutta Nikaya* (S ii 822) describes in plain terms how meritorious and demeritorious activity impregnate our consciousness. On the one hand, all *punna* acquired in the ten spheres of wholesome action is directly conducive to our well-being and can be looked at as a source of future happiness. On the other hand, *punna* is the wholesome result of good action and purifies the mind. The commentator *Dhammapala* interprets the term (in a more edifying than strictly etymological passage) as coming from the root of the verb 'to clean': 'it cleanses the continuation of life'. *Punna* may be thus understood as something that cleanses the mind of unwholesome *akusala* habits and their results. It mitigates and 'dilutes' the effect of previous unwholesome actions and ameliorates their *vipaka* or, at best, neutralises it entirely. In one *Sutta* of the *Gradual Sayings* (A i 2491), where the Buddha explains that the same action for different people can bring about *kammic* results of differing intensity, he uses the following simile: A person of little virtue and understanding who commits an unwholesome action resembles a small vessel of water to which a lump of salt is added. The water in the small vessel instantaneously turns salty and becomes undrinkable. The person of many virtues who performs the same unwholesome action resembles the Ganges: even a sizeable lump of salt will fail to turn the great river salty or render it undrinkable. The effect of *punna* remains the same whether the 'salt' of our unwholesome actions is diluted afterwards or whether the 'waters' of accumulated virtue are abundant enough to neutralise the salt to begin with. The simile throws some light on the relationship between the performance of good actions and the morality of our general conduct. It is obvious that such *punna* improves our well-being much more dramatically if it is not constantly bound up with neutralising the *kammic* fallout of unskillful living.



It is important to recognise that punna brightens the plane of our existence here and now as well as in the long run - yet it cannot liberate us from the wheel of samsara. Its main function is to create here (and hereafter if need be) favourable conditions for us to engender our liberation through wisdom and insight. The welcome fruits of punna along the path are, in view of the last deliverance, only beneficial if we take them as the confirmation of effective practice, allow them to nourish us - and go on.

The term punna, thus restored from the popular to its fuller meaning, can be seen as the common ground for Buddhist practitioners East and West - to whatever extent they may differ in their emphasis on generosity or on meditation. As the Buddha has praised both virtues throughout his Teaching, there is no basis to consider one superior to the other. Their relationship is indicated in the Suttas when generosity is praised as a virtue essential to diminish attachment and to lead us to the Path, while meditation is singled out as indispensable to deepen true understanding and to follow it through to the precious goal.



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Right Effort: Making It Work

From a talk given by Ajahn Siripanna at the Insight Meditation Centre, Barre, Massachusetts, in April 1996.

If we want good results from our practice we need to make an effort. A central aspect is the effort to develop wholesome mind states - qualities which bring benefit to ourselves and others and which support the movement towards peacefulness, towards ease, towards liberation.

The idea of making the effort to develop needs to be very cautiously handled because this sense of self-improvement is at the root of an enormous amount of suffering in 'spiritual practice'. We can understandably want to become a better person, someone who cares, who is helpful, wise and compassionate. The trouble is that if we attach to that way of thinking, there is an implicit judgment that the way we are now is not good enough. Do you think that way yourself? "I'm just not good enough the way I am and I have to change. You know I'm rotten to the core. Everyone says so, even my best friends. And if I don't make the effort to change, how is anything going to get any better? Don't tell me I shouldn't develop myself."

Of course, there is a logic to this; but if you do think in this way - will you ever be good enough? Is that possible? Our minds have this infinite capacity to conceive, to create images and ideals. I can conceive of myself as absolutely perfect, a combination of the Dalai Lama, the Buddha and Mother Theresa all rolled into one - and a bit of the Zen master in there somewhere. Infinitely wise, infinitely compassionate. People would cry, their hearts would just rip open when they saw me. It's easy to think like that. But am I ever going to be that way? Does this mean that the way I am now is just hopelessly inadequate? Obviously I'm exaggerating a little bit to make a point. But I think many of us can recognize this tendency to be so lacking in compassion, so merciless; unable to open to the way we are now.

Alternatively, perhaps we don't feel the need to improve ourselves - we're pretty nice already. But, even so, attaching to niceness or goodness is still creating a sense of 'me' in here, relating to the world out there. It creates a sense of pressure, something that we've got to uphold and defend; an image which we have to keep polished and not let any cracks appear in it, or if they do, quickly get out the epoxy resin - fill them in! Being a good person can be a very stressful experience too.

In developing wholesome mind states we are simply
cultivating the Eightfold Path.

Fortunately, nothing we can conceive of becoming is actually worth being, it's not the Truth. It's not worth being anybody, good, bad or indifferent. Now what does this mean? "First of all she's saying we've got to develop ourselves, and now she's saying we shouldn't bother." I'm not saying that, but I am saying that the effort to develop skilful, wholesome qualities needs to be held within the light of awareness so that the desire to change is transformed into

aspiration. Effort driven by desire creates a sense of me-ness with the constriction and stress that that involves; whereas aspiration is the deepest desire of the heart to move beyond self-need, beyond the need to be someone - even someone really wonderful.

When we look deeply at experience, we can clearly see that all states of mind are conditions that are due to accumulated causes; they have a time of existence and then end; they're not me, not mine. Understanding this, we can let go of making something personal out of either wholesomeness or unwholesomeness. We have to understand the ultimate emptiness of it all, if we are to be able to freely move through this suffering world.

So, we do need to make the effort to develop the mind through skilful use of precepts, religious forms, meditation practices, restraint - but at the same time recognising their limitations. The Buddha gave a very clear teaching on this. He said, "Monks, I do not say you can attain purity by views, traditions, insight, morality or conventions. Nor will you attain purity without these. But by using them for abandonment, rather than as positions to hold onto, you will come to be at peace without the need to be anything."

Bearing these points in mind, I'd like to reflect on how we can incline the mind in a wholesome direction; and on some of the factors that support this endeavour.

In developing wholesome mind states we are simply cultivating the Eightfold Path. Right View has to come first because if we don't understand the cause of suffering, our intentions or thoughts are going to be wrong, or at best muddled; whereas in any moment of clear-sighted awareness Right Intention can arise. Its first aspect is the intention of renunciation: letting go of grasping at the sense realm in an attempt to extract a security it can't offer. Renunciation really encompasses all aspects of Right Intention, but specifically highlights the aspiration which arises naturally when we understand the Four Noble Truths in the context of ourselves. When we understand the Four Noble Truths in relation to how we relate to others, then the other aspects of Right Intention naturally evolve: - the intention to cultivate thoughts of non-ill will and non-cruelty, non-aggression. Notice it's not saying "thoughts of goodwill", it's saying, "non-ill will". This is significant, because it's pointing to the heart of cultivation of Right Intention, which is to let go of unwholesome intention.

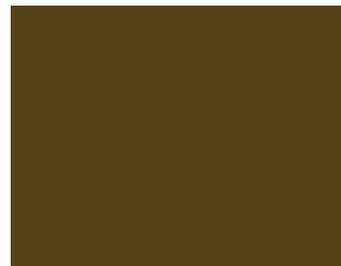
In a sense, the distinction between abandoning and developing is artificial, because we can develop wholesome qualities through letting go of what is unwholesome. Then we start to rest in the natural state of the mind which is undeluded. It's not tainted by negativity or self-concern, so it's just naturally wholesome.

There is a very simple logic to the development of Right Intention which the Buddha explained with startling clarity: "Whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of the mind. So if one frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of renunciation, one has abandoned thoughts of sensual desire and the mind inclines towards renunciation... towards non-ill... towards non-cruelty." That's the mechanics of it.

The Buddha also said that even the thought of wishing to develop



renunciation, non-ill will or non-aggression is of great benefit - even if we don't act upon it - because of the tremendous power of thought. We can verify if it's true or not in our own experience. For myself, just to have a thought of well-wishing makes me feel good, even though I don't usually have a clue whether it's helping anyone. I'd rather be sitting there thinking, "May you abide in well-being" than, "You make me feel sick!" Which one feels better?



We need to support our efforts to cultivate Right Intention through reflection. We can feel that practice is just a matter of being aware, or noting: "Lifting, lifting, lifting." Of course, that's the beginning - knowing what we're experiencing - but in itself that isn't enough. Life doesn't just automatically fall into place through watching ourselves overeat again and again and again... and noting that we are getting fatter. Or noticing ourselves arguing again and again with a friend who pushes our buttons, and hating ourselves for it afterwards. There also needs to be wise reflection, yoniso manasikara. I love this word because it so vividly points us towards what reflection is really aiming at.

The meaning of the word 'yoni' is womb, or origin. Yoniso manasikara can literally be translated as tracing things back to the origin; going to the heart of the matter. To do that we have to move back from experience so that we can see the whole situation, looking in a fresh way; waking up out of the mind's habitual ruts. We use intelligent consideration to question: "Why did I say that? What will the results of this action be? What really matters in life?"

As we become more aware of the motivating forces in the mind and we are clearer about what we really want, there's a natural sense of not wanting to get caught any more in unwholesome, harmful thoughts and intentions, and of wanting to make much of those which are wholesome. This is possible. We always have the choice... but we need to make the effort.

If we're not actually aware, awake, attentive to what's happening, then there's no possibility of understanding it or being free in relationship to it. So mindfulness - this open and all-embracing state of receptivity to experience - is obviously central to every aspect of the Path, and to Right Effort.

Sati, or mindfulness, literally means 'remembering'; remembering to be awake to the way things are. And the way things are is changing constantly, flowing, unstable. So it's primarily a quality that we associate with knowing change - which doesn't fit in with the idea we might have about it as something that arises in a mind which is totally concentrated and stuck in some delightful state. Mindfulness doesn't need a lot of particular things to support it. It doesn't need a great deal of tranquillity. I don't know if you believe that, but it's true. The very transformative power of mindfulness comes from its ability to see change; to shatter, through close attention, the illusory solidity of experience.

In the scriptures, mindfulness is seldom mentioned without its companion, sampajanna, or clear comprehension. Mindfulness in itself has no wisdom, it is just an attentive receptivity; it needs to have the support of its active partner, sampajanna, which connects our awareness with the natural wisdom of the awakened mind. We can think we're being very mindful and yet sometimes, what we're thinking or doing is not really taking everything into account, there is not this clear comprehension. For instance, you might go to your Grandma's for dinner the night you leave this retreat, and you think "I felt so good on retreat I'll try and hold on to that sense of stillness I had here." And you keep your eyes downcast and eat your soup v-e-r-y mindfully. Your poor Granny's going to freak out: "What's happened to my boy? What have they done to him?" So you can be totally aware of what you're doing, but it's not suitable, is it? Poor Granny! Clear comprehension is something very practical, and we can laugh, but really, holding on to an idea of being mindful can make us complete twits. But when

mindfulness is supported by clear comprehension, we know what's appropriate.

The practice of mindfulness leads naturally to the development of Right Concentration. Now concentration needs to be balanced with mindfulness and reflection, if it is to support the insight which allows Right Intention to arise. If there's too much willful one-pointedness on a calming object, such as the breath, the mind may become very still and calm but it's quite a fixed state with a very narrow focus and little flexibility. It's not a state where there's a lot of mindfulness, and it's not a state where insight tends to arise.

However, with a slightly different emphasis, the mind can also come to one-pointedness through relaxing, resting with the flow of the breath and the mind states. In this approach, it's the knowing that is the place of stillness. The absolute point is that still place of knowing continuous change, rather than feeling that the mind itself has to be still. It's a relaxed state of receptivity, and it can accommodate everything. One starts to realise that all these ghastly moods and feelings and unskilful thoughts and restlessness, which are coming along to hinder my practice, are the field of practice. Everything can be accommodated within this understanding of Right Concentration; and on the way we develop insight too. I'm really pandering to your greed here - this is the way you can get everything! Seeing all thoughts and moods and obsessions clearly for what they are - ceaselessly changing, painful if taken personally and ultimately ownerless - we can develop all the qualities of mind which support insight, letting go, abandonment, complete relinquishment, complete peace.

The Seven Factors of Enlightenment are one way of summarising these qualities. Where the scriptures give examples to define Right Effort, these are actually what is chosen to represent the development of the wholesome qualities of mind. The term 'Factors of Enlightenment' can sound a bit daunting: "Not me, I haven't got any Factors of Enlightenment. That's for my next lifetime." But I'd like to de-mystify them a bit. You do have these qualities within you, and they're something you can continue to develop; don't imagine they're so far from you. The seven factors are: sati, mindfulness; dhamma-vicaya, investigation of dhamma; viriya, energy; piti, delight; passadhi, tranquillity; samadhi, concentration; and upekkha, equanimity. These are the factors of mind which support liberation.

My understanding is that these are qualities which one can quite clearly see and develop first of all in formal meditation, and then extending into our whole life. Using the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, we see that any time we simply know body as body, feeling as feeling, mind states as mind states, mind objects as mind objects, then we are developing the enlightenment factor of mindfulness, bringing it to full fruition. With mindfulness, a natural interest arises in investigating the objects of mindfulness. This is dhamma-vicaya - investigation of dhamma, investigation of objects. (Dhamma with a small 'd' has the meaning of objects, things; Dhamma as Truth has a capital 'D'.) That investigation brings energy to the practice - viriya, energy, arises. So that is developing the enlightenment factor of energy. When we see things clearly: for example, we experience a feeling clearly, there's a natural relaxation because there's no struggle going on. This releases a great deal of energy. One is fully with experience, not reacting to it. The result of that is a sense of increasing ease of body and mind. Once the body and mind relax, a natural fullness and energy develop; it literally manifests as a sense of brightness, energy - filling the body, filling the mind. That in turn brings with it a sense of delight, piti. As one lets go of that sense of delight it turns into a cooler sense of well-being, serenity, tranquillity, passadhi. When there is that well-being the mind naturally comes to a state of concentration, samadhi. It's like having a pet. If you want it to sleep in a particular place you think, "Well, what would it like?" A cosy blanket, a few biscuits, a bowl of water, a human being nearby to meet its every need. If your pet's got any sense, it will go and lie down in that place. You've created somewhere comfortable so it's going to go there. Well, it's the same with the mind. When the body and mind feel comfortable then the concentration is just natural. The mind doesn't need to go anywhere.

Within the sense of collectedness of mind, experience can be viewed with a sense of balance, with equanimity, upekkha. So the Factors of Enlightenment aren't something extraordinarily mysterious or far away. We can develop them right now. I've talked for long enough, so I'll just stop - making the effort to develop stopping!



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Going Forth - From The Inside

The Upasampada (the ceremony of acceptance into the Bhikkhu Sangha) is one of the highlights of the Chithurst calendar. What is it like to be in their sandals? These Dhamma offerings gives a glimpse into this unique experience.

Katannuto Bhikkhu

When I was asked to write a short piece for the newsletter, my immediate response was, "Fine, OK". But then, when it came to writing it, it wasn't so simple. I began by scribbling quick phrases to chronicle my mind states and thoughts during the period before, during and after the Upasampada ceremony, but somehow it didn't capture the roller-coasting moods of inspiration, exhaustion, tenderness and excitement of the event. So I decided to take a different approach. I would try to explain how it was that a twenty-four year old, Latin American man ends up in Thailand wearing a white skirt, shaving his head and sweeping leaves on dusty monastery paths! But that piece came out contrived and corny. Finally, I decided to write a poem, responding to a friend's question: "But why can't you dance?" ... But I wasn't happy with that either.

If I had the skills to describe my love for the teaching
of the Four Noble Truths, I would do that.

Words are simply inadequate to describe what it has meant to join and to be a part of the Bhikkhu Sangha. Although there are times when I find myself in a cynical mood or fearful mind state, something in me knows that this is the best thing to be doing with my life. I know, too, that situations and people change - all the disrobings I have seen prove that. So I'm left without a poem, a narrative or an amazing story. If I had the skills to describe my love for the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, I would do that. If I could explain how my teachers and Dhamma friends have helped me, I would write about that, and if I could express my admiration of the Buddha's system of training, I would find a way to express it. Unfortunately, I don't have those skills - and it's OK!

All in all the past two and a half years have brought on things which I could have never imagined. I am left considering the meaning of my Pali name: 'One who feels gratitude'...and I smile.

Thitadhammo Bhikkhu

Daybreak - the swallows are too high
it will not rain today
this moment surpasses suffering -
as aspiration bounds free
blue butterflies...
innocents I remember once
float away into the light

on four noble winds
threshold of what greater freedom?
finally the dance of unknowing -
observed but not revealed
this perpetual swing
pendulum of ashes in silence
never returning
Total thought sensibly adjusting
without submission
made cumbersome by formalities of a day
yet the mind allows
that from the heart's deepest root
delight breaks away and bows
surrender levels the warm summer grass
the knee of private prayer
touches the earth
and joy leaps to not knowing...
once again.



Thanuttaro Bhikkhu

As the first day of life as a Bhikkhu dawned, I opened a book of haiku by Basho - a gift from a sister for my Upasampada.

Page one read:

In my new robe
this morning...
someone else



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Sharing the Blessings

The daily chant of dedication for those who have made offerings to the Sangha can be a source of real joy, especially when taken out of the familiar context. Here, Venerable Thanuttaro describes just such a spontaneous occasion this summer, while on tudong to his mother's home in Kent.

We leave our friends of Forest Row at 8.45 in the morning in search of the footpath out of town. Destination: Crowborough - 8 miles or so across country.

As we walk across the Ashdown forest, with the familiar views of my home countryside, memories arise of walking my dog; now I walk beside brown robes, a new friend - wearing sandals, feeling tired, feet hot.

Approaching the town, we pause to adjust our robes and take out our almsbowls. The main street is busy - mostly cars and lorries, belching out fumes. Shop keepers stand and stare from their windows. We find a spot with space for people to pass by, away from motorists. Standing there, with eyes down, bowls open and lidless held lightly in our hands, we feel very small and vulnerable. I brace myself for contact with strangers - ready or not, it's bound to come soon.

Many people feel that the best way to express this gratitude is with acts of generosity and kindness to others, and then to dedicate the happiness and joy created by doing these things to those they've loved.

An elderly lady makes a bee line straight for us, her purse in one hand and some coins partly concealed in the other. I respond quickly - catching the money, I step forward and press it back into her hand: "Thank you, a very kind offer but we are not trying to collect money; just food for our daily meal."

"You don't want money?" She said, with a look of disbelief, surprise and confusion.

"Thank you, no. We don't use money you see..."

"We are collecting food for our daily meal..."

"We are monks on a pilgrimage..."

"We don't carry a cooker or pots and pans, so anything you want to offer us that we can eat right away will be fine..." All stock answers by now.

"OK wait there, I'll be back."

The elderly lady returned; she had lots of energy: "Monks! Real monks, oh bless you, bless you!", she said, as she offered us sandwiches and two ice cold cans of coke: "It's hot, you'll need these..."

"Oh bless you, bless you... monks!?"

Other people gathered around now, "...just collecting food," said Tan Tissaro to a couple of ladies. Someone else came by and



gave us a carrier bag full of groceries. I thought to myself, "My goodness, we'll get swamped!", and heard my companion whisper, "Venerable, I think we'd better move off soon."

The old lady was still with us standing to our side. "Oh bless you, bless you," she went on, "You know, I'm 82", she said " ...Just lost my husband a few months ago... after 53 years... Don't know what to do with myself... I miss him so much ...I sit on our sofa, with his favourite sweater beside me, and put the arm around my shoulder ...Do you think it's OK to do that? Am I going funny or something? What do you think?"

My heart breaks open. She had a tear in her eye.

"Am I crazy or what, what should I do?"

I say to her, "No, not at all, that sounds perfectly understandable" What else can be said?

Looking into my heart, remarkably, the words came out as if by magic, effortless and clear: "Grief is very painful, isn't it. It's having lots of love and devotion for someone who isn't around to receive it any more. So much gratitude, but no obvious way of expressing it in any way that means anything."

"Many people feel that the best way to express this gratitude is with acts of generosity and kindness to others, and then to dedicate the happiness and joy created by doing these things to those they've loved. We call it the dedication of merit. It's said that these blessings reach beyond the realms of life and death, as we know them, out into the heavenly realms of existence - that they can be received by our departed loved ones and help them in their next life, whatever form that takes. Really there is no better way that you could express your gratitude to your husband than by what you have done today."

"So when we sit down for our meal, we'll do some blessing chanting for the people who have helped us today. We'll dedicate this very special occasion to your husband."

"That is the most beautiful thing I've ever heard," she blurted out, almost losing control. "Bless you, bless you. Oh, bless you!" She moved a short distance away. I could see her sitting on a wall, watching us as she dried her eyes.

"Let's go", said Tan Tissaro.

I followed in his footsteps, eyes lowered, knowing that if I looked anyone in the eyes, I'd probably fall apart.

Bless you, Crowborough.

Bless you, Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha.



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The Dalai Lama at the Barbican

Members of the Forest Sangha were fortunate enough to be able attend a series of talks given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama at the Barbican. Ajahn Sobhano offers some reflections.

The Dalai Lama's much publicised recent visit to the UK was something of a landmark in the history of the British Buddhist scene. In 1993, a wide range of Buddhist organisations from the various traditions and lineages that are now established in the UK made an invitation to His Holiness to give an extended teaching on the Four Noble Truths. The months of preparation for this event provided a framework for these diverse groups to consolidate themselves into what is now known as the Network of Buddhist Organisations. So not only was this the first time that the Dalai Lama had given such an in-depth teaching to a specifically Buddhist audience in the UK, but it was also a coming of age for Buddhism in Britain.

In fact Theravada was the foundation of all the Buddhist schools, without which the others would be rendered useless.

The teachings were introduced by Luang Por Sumedho who expressed his own heartfelt affection for His Holiness, and how much his uniting influence was valued by the increasingly diverse Buddhist world. The Dalai Lama was in sparkling form and, with his infectious and self-effacing humour bubbling over from the beginning, was able to establish an easeful atmosphere for the rigours of the instruction that was to follow.

Drawing largely on his own (Gelugpa) school's commentaries of the Abhidhamma, which includes the Madhyamaka philosophical interpretations of the Pattecasamuppada, His Holiness made no attempt to dilute the teachings for a Western audience. He followed the Tibetan teaching style that uses argument and rhetoric to establish theoretical principles, as a way of preparing the ground for the experiential penetration of the Dhamma. Of course this style was unfamiliar to many of us, but there were enough gems of wisdom to keep (most of us) alert throughout the two morning and afternoon sessions. Fortunately, for those with fading attention spans, each period either began or ended with half an hour or more of questions and answers which enabled His Holiness to give a practical context for many of the more metaphysical aspects of his teachings.

The two days of teachings were concluded with a Chenrezig(*) Initiation. A handful of us from Amaravati and Chithurst who were curious to witness the event were lucky enough to acquire seats in the first three rows in front of the Dalai Lama's ceremonial seat. The ritual itself was a surprisingly brief and briskly organised affair; it included an invocation and visualisations of the deity, as well as asseverations to undertake the practices of kindness and

compassion in one's everyday life. Afterwards the Dalai Lama made a point of expressing his appreciation for the presence of the Theravadan Sangha. It was often mistakenly understood, he said, that the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism were completely separate and self-sufficient forms of Buddhism. In fact Theravada was the foundation of all the Buddhist schools, without which the others would be rendered useless.

() In Tibetan Buddhism Chenrezig is the name for the Bodhisattva of Compassion, also known as Avalokiteshvara or Kwan Yin in the Chinese tradition.*



All the members of our Sangha who attended the teachings were grateful for the strenuous efforts made by His Holiness to impart the sublime meaning of the Dhamma to a Western audience. We were also touched by the extraordinary generosity of the NBO who had donated 50 tickets to our community for the event. The Dalai Lama has subsequently indicated his interest in giving another series of teachings in a couple of years' time, on the theme of meditation - a reflection perhaps of how significantly he values such occasions.



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High on Black Turtle

Venerable Yatiko writes from the Thai forest on the struggles and serenity that can be found in one of the last unspoilt areas in the region.

It's 5.45 a.m., the morning after the Uposatha, and though much of the past two hours have been spent watching bizarre Wun Phra morning hallucinations, and trying to be mindful of 'I'm nodding, I'm nodding', the immediate past thirty minutes have been strangely bright and blissful. Suddenly, I hear the birds enthusiastically break the silence with their morning music. After a few moments of indulging in this refreshing clarity, I slowly open my eyes. The meditation hall in which we spent the night is situated on the top of a mountain; it is open walled on three sides. Before us spreads a panoramic view of a wide mountain range covered by some of the last remaining virgin rain forest in Thailand; there are no villages to be seen, no sounds of civilization to be heard. Nestled in the valley floors are some low-lying clouds, making the mountains and the morning stillness feel all the more mystical. I'm inspired now. Reflecting on my good fortune, I look around me and see the other monks sitting, facing the sunrise. We all put forth effort last night. We tried hard and now it feels good. 'Cause and effect', I think to myself. Struck with a sense of devotion, I think of the Buddhas' words: Rightly speaking were it to be said of someone, "A being not subject to delusion has appeared in the world, for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare and happiness of gods and humans." It is of me indeed, that rightly speaking it should be said. For that alone I'm fortunate.

Dtow Dum [Black Turtle] is the Thai name for a forest region along the Thai-Burmese border, in the province of Kanchanaburi. Running north-south with the border is a mountain range spanning several hundred kilometres which, only a few decades ago was rich with dense rain forest and full of wildlife. In fact, almost all of Thailand was once so forested but today, after a few decades of hungry tree-chopping, the virgin forests are nearly all gone with only a few pockets of them scattered around the country still remaining. Dtow Dum is one of them.

When the mind is a bit bored, tired of its meditation object; when a few hours of walking and sitting have aroused little joy or interest, it can become quite convincing that to be unconscious would be a serious improvement on one's state of well-being.

We arrived as a group at Dtow Dum some six weeks ago. We set off not far from Kanchanaburi city on foot and did a three day tudong (walking expedition), which served as a sort of pre-retreat ritual - a time to let go of responsibilities and the routine at Wat Pah Nanachat, and to reflect on the time ahead and how we should use it. Having been here twice before, I knew what to expect: a huge forest, miles from civilization; tall old trees, bears, elephants, tigers, snakes, winding streams, winding paths; no chores, no group schedule, and lots of time to oneself. In short, a perfect opportunity to cultivate formal meditation practice.

Each of us has been given a small diang [little knee-high bamboo beds] in the forest, over which we hang our glots [mosquito net umbrellas] and fly sheets. A small area has been cleared around our diangs and a jonggrom path has been levelled out for walking meditation. A stream, along which all our residences are dotted, flows through the forest; it serves for bathing and washing.

The animals in the forest make their presence known just enough to remind us that our life here shouldn't be taken for granted. Over the years there have been many bear encounters, and one monk saw a wild cat wrestling with a barking deer. So far this year, we've had one monk chased up a tree by a wild bear, and another monk came back to his diang one day only to find a family of elephants bathing peacefully in the stream. Although the animals seem to prefer to keep to themselves, their presence is a tangible reality and rare is the night that goes by without hearing some leaves rustle in the forest, and the thought crossing through the mind, "What was that!" It certainly helps to take death reflections away from being mere abstract possibilities.

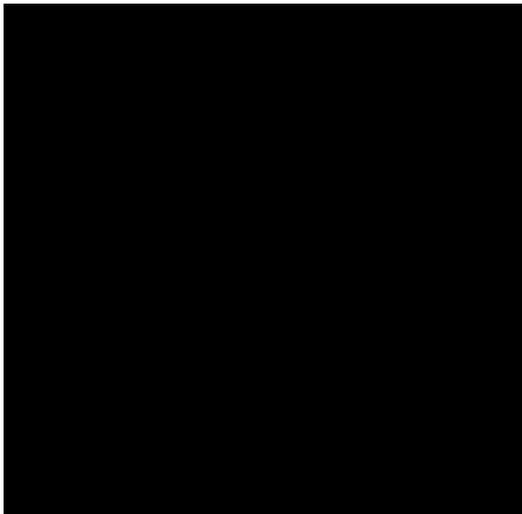
So, having arrived at Dtow Dum, I was well aware of what a special situation it was. How could I use it wisely? How could I use this time in such a way that the Buddha would approve of my efforts? I sincerely wanted to pour all I could into cultivating the Path, yet I wanted to proceed in such a way that wouldn't lead me to that particular despair which always seems lying in wait for one given to ambition - worldly or spiritual. The day of our departure Ajahn Pasanno gave a short reflection, in which he said casually and with a smile, "Go to Dtow Dum and see how refined the mind can get." For the first fortnight I would often call to mind these balanced words. The casual air with which they were spoken remained with me, and helped me to proceed with a light touch. So the first few weeks went by on something of a high for me. Inspired by the natural setting, the peace of the forest seemed to impress itself quite spontaneously on the mind. As must happen however, the inspiration phase passed and the nitty-gritty of facing the days in solitude began to show itself.

One of the main hindrances that can come up for many of us here is sloth and torpor. With distractions down to a minimum, frustrations are most easily avoided by just crashing out. When the mind is a bit bored, tired of its meditation object; when a few hours of walking and sitting have aroused little joy or interest, it can become quite convincing that to be unconscious would be a serious improvement on one's state of well-being. It doesn't, of course, solve the problem, but this isn't immediately obvious, and a habit of over-sleeping can slowly creep into one's daily routine. But we trudge on, trying to see an attack of sleepiness as impermanent, and reaping the benefits - both in terms of insight and contentment -



when we succeed.

If we had been living out here isolated as hermits, devoid of external feedback, we would have had only ourselves on whom to rely for an honest reflection of how things are going. But the individual who can do that is rare indeed, and this is where kalayanamitta (spiritual companions) can prove to be so invaluable. Accordingly, our group agreed to have discussion sessions on Uposatha nights, to share where we were at, to relate skilful means that we have found useful to each other, and to address issues that can creep up in group situations that some of us may feel are causing a particularly strong block in our practice.



Ajahn Samvaro played the role of facilitator, and guided us through discussions on various issues. A major theme was how to use different skilful means in cultivating metta for ourselves and others. We also related ideas on how to find profound emotional satisfaction through the monastic form and through meditation, and discussed fears that some of us had. Some of us had to work with fear from living in the wild forest, others found that the solitude could amplify social fears, and others were working with doubts over their basic ability to make this practice work. We could see how we all had some difficulties, and that we'd have to find the humility of heart to admit them to ourselves, and the courage of faith to face that which truly must be faced. Coming together like this, we could see how universal fear and doubt is, and also, more importantly, how others have faced and dealt with them. We could draw on their creativity, determination and patience, and reflect that we are not alone; we have noble friends who have been there and seen it through, and are progressing confidently on the Path.

During our time here at Dtow Dum, a balance seems to have been struck. In solitude we find the time to develop the path of training, to develop a calm mind and body, and to investigate deeply our experience of life. While in the group there is the time to nourish our aspirations, to encourage each other, to cultivate awareness in group sittings and to remind ourselves of the task at hand. And in all this, to trust that a powerful seed is being planted whose value we can hardly fathom, whose fruits may touch and nourish this world in ways we can't presently imagine, a seed whose goodness may keep rippling out to the world long after these original impulses to purification were conceived.

There are two weeks left now before we all head back to Wat Pah Nanachat; two weeks to make good use of the space and simplicity of the Dtow Dum forest. It applies to me here as it applies to everyone reading this: Now is the time. Now is the time to make all I can out of the conditions that are before me. Soon I'll be back at Wat Pah Nanachat where there are different things to focus on and different things to appreciate. Now, I have the day before me. I am in good health and good spirits. I am amongst good people. Again, words of the Master come to mind: "Bhikkhus, what should be done for his disciples out of compassion by a master who seeks their welfare and has compassion (on them), that I have done for you. There are these roots of trees, these empty huts. Develop meditation, bhikkhus, do not delay lest you later regret it. This is my message to you."



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SIGNS OF CHANGE

Italy; Ajahn Chandapalo

After at least a year of searching for larger and more secluded premises closer to Rome, Santacittarama is on the verge of moving to a new location, subject to the satisfactory conclusion of final negotiations. The property, an attractive seventeenth century farmhouse with around ten acres of land, comes close to an ideal compromise between isolation and accessibility. Standing on a small rise within a loop of the River Aniene, a tributary of the Tiber, it is surrounded by woods and hills that roll off in all directions, and provides a natural protection against possible encroachment by further building development. It lies five miles from Tivoli, a favourite holiday resort of the ancient Romans and to this day a popular tourist attraction thanks to its panoramic position, its artistic monuments and its fountains. The property is in a locality called Santa Balbina, only twenty-five miles east of Rome and easy to reach by car or public transport. The house is not very large, but should suffice until funds are available and permission obtained to build other structures, such as a meeting hall or temple and further living quarters. We may have moved in by the end of the year if everything works out. When next on a visit to the Pope, please give us a call too!

Amaravati; Ajahn Viradhammo

As this newsletter goes to print the richness and warmth of summer is beginning to change to the cooler mornings and stunning colours of autumn. It's been a fabulous year for butterflies and the purple flowering Buddleia which overhangs the walkway to the bhikkhu vihara has been covered by scores of Red Admirals and Monarchs throughout the last few months.

The summer is also a very rich time for hearing Dhamma at Amaravati and many are the opportunities to contemplate the teachings of the Buddha. Ajahn Sumedho's reflections at breakfast time, to the resident community, are filled with the spontaneity and warmth that informs his life and teaching. This is some of the Dhamma food that the community use for their practice and sets a contemplative tone to the rest of the day. As well as the regular schedule of retreats and meditation workshops, there are also the series of 10 public talks on Sunday afternoons during the summer. These have been well attended and both Ajahn Sumedho and I have enjoyed offering our thoughts and reflections. Ven. Assaji has been giving instructions in the study of the Pali language and the suttas, while Sisters Siripanna and Thanasanti have been offering guidance in the Dhamma and Vinaya to the anagarikas.

As for movements in the community these are always too numerous to mention but for those who are familiar with the sangha at Amaravati here are a few of the major shifts. Ajahn Sumedho was in Prague for a week in Sept.; in San Francisco for a week in Oct.; in New Zealand for half of November and December and in Thailand in January and February. Sister Upekkha has left for a year to practise in other monasteries and is presently at Wat Buddha-Dhamma in Australia. Sister Vayama is with Sister Upekkha and plans to continue her monastic life in the Southern Hemisphere. Ajahn Ariyasilo, one of the stalwarts at Amaravati for the past two years is in the Hammer wood enjoying a few months of kayaviveka at Cittaviveka. Vens. Katannuto and Thitadhammo are now bhikkhus and spending their first

rains at Chithurst. Ven. Dhammaratana has joined us from Sri Lanka, while Ven. Abhinnano, a New Zealander who has been a bhikkhu in Thailand for the past 8 years, has also joined us for the vassa. Cameron took the anagarika precepts at the end of August and Anagarika Sujata is in Russia helping her brother who is seriously ill.

Finally, in August Sister Medhanandi went to Florida to be with her ailing mother and to help her father during this difficult time. On the 6th of September Sister Medhanandi's mother passed away after a very long illness. We have been doing chanting and meditation, sending our feelings of metta/karuna to Sister Medhanandi, her father and the rest of her family.

The family camp was very successful with the final presentation, a drama about the eight worldly winds called 'Squirts World', being one of the most endearing musical productions since last year's classical production 'The Singing Chickens'.

One of the challenges at Amaravati is to create a community where not only monastics but also a limited number of lay practitioners can live on a more long term basis. The role of the long term lay residents is very important and our ordained community feel tremendous gratitude for their contribution to the well-being of Amaravati. Their participation in the life of the community and their work in the office, retreat centre, in maintaining the grounds, the vehicles, the buildings, the library and so on is an integral part of the scene at Amaravati. This blend of lay and monastic practitioners is somewhat unique in our monasteries and creates a very rich sense of community.

The temple is looking magnificent and all of us at Amaravati feel very privileged to have been able to watch this stupa-like structure grow and take shape. If all goes according to plan we shall be able to use the largely finished temple for our Kathina celebration on the 17th of November.

The on-going Saturday meditation workshops, the retreats held in the retreat centre and discourses on the observance days all add to the richness of Dhamma contemplation at Amaravati.

Ajahn Viradhammo has been meeting with the samaneras and anagarikas twice a week to consider the Vinaya and how that works as a tool for communal harmony and individual mindfulness.

The butterfly season at Amaravati has come to an end and the cycle of these little winged creatures moves to a different phase, awaiting yet another season of blooming Buddleia. The summer's richness will soon turn to the quiet of winter. For the resident community at Amaravati the colder weather will also bring the stillness of our winter retreat and with a bit of luck we shall be using the new temple for the months of January and February. This is a wonderful prospect.

Amaravati Lay-Buddhist Group; Chris Ward

In the Spring of 1995 at a Upasika study day, Nick Carroll, Cliff Glover and myself were discussing the value of local lay-Buddhist groups and how Amaravati could be a venue for such a group. After some subsequent discussion meetings started on Friday evenings from 8–10 pm in the Bodhinyana Hall.

The early meetings were used to suggest and agree a framework; meeting structure, how they would be led; what the themes should be, and what we should call the group. The name evolved from Friday Upasika Group to Amaravati Lay-Buddhist Group (ALBG) which seems simpler and more self-explanatory.

The meetings start with a short period of chanting followed by around 35 minutes of meditation. One of the group then introduces the evening's discussion with a talk of between 5–20 minutes. There is then an open discussion for around one hour and a final short chant.

The ALBG has proved very beneficial in a variety of different ways; providing a regular time for lay-Buddhists to meet and discuss aspects of the Buddha's teachings and our own practice. Many of us are relatively new to Buddhist teachings, which can seem quite daunting. The meetings provide an informal venue for learning basic teachings and for applying these in daily life. It has also provided an opportunity for lay-Buddhists to develop confidence in

talking about aspects of practice as, when the group started, there were very few who felt confident enough to introduce a subject.

Social meetings have also gradually become established, where we meet for afternoon tea at a house or go on a walk together. This has enabled the group to learn more about each other – about families, our work, our interests and also to discuss Buddhism in a completely informal environment.

Attending meetings can seem a chore but being with good people at Amaravati is an enjoyable event which generates joy and faith and encourages discipline.

The ALBG programme is displayed around Amaravati and there have been announcements in the Forest Sangha Newsletter. For further information telephone: (01442) 890-034



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EDITORIAL

Rite Relationship

Human society involves relationship, there is a need for people to communicate and to get along together. The Buddha, while frequently extolling the virtues of a solitary abiding, also made provision for this human need, emphasising it as a basis for wholesome behaviour. It can also be seen as a vehicle for insight into the nature of the very 'self' that seems to exist when we relate to one another.

For the monks and nuns, the vassa is usually a time for examining our training discipline and looking at the many structures and ceremonies that the Buddha established to support skilful relationship. These conventions encompass all aspects of relationship, ranging from that which can be seen as intensely personal (as in the ceremonies of Going Forth or confession of transgressions) to that which is beyond personality; examples of this are the almsgiving ceremonies, such as Kathina. There are also pujas, where we recollect our aspiration and make offerings to the Triple Gem. All in all, it makes quite a package. Although some people might feel that such rituals represent a regression into an age of blind superstition and magic, there is another way of looking it.

The longing felt by individual human beings to rediscover their connection to the whole has long been recognised. This can be expressed in many different ways, but not as something that can be experienced through the personality - 'me' in relation to everything else; it can only be known when the whole idea of 'me' is abandoned, which allows us to settle naturally into being what we truly are. Those of us who have begun to be alert to the tyranny of ego will of course realise that this is much more easily said than done, and there are many for whom the lure of "drugs, sex and rock 'n roll" as expedient means for 'losing oneself' can be quite overwhelming. This is where religious rituals can have a part to play; if carried out with a skilful attitude, they can be a potent means for taking us beyond the bonds of selfhood.

One has become calm, one has gone beyond getting old;
 one has gone beyond being born.

Most of us have grown up in a very materialistic, highly competitive society; we have lost touch with our roots. It is almost as though we need to rediscover and learn about ritual as a means for gladdening and freeing the heart. We also need to learn how to avoid the pitfalls that hinder this process. Firstly, there is the tendency to make too much of ritual, becoming intensely self conscious and anxious about getting everything just right, almost as though that in itself can somehow assist or delay our progress to Nibbana. The other extreme is to dismiss them as having no useful purpose - something simply to be endured or avoided altogether. However, when there is mindfulness sati and clear comprehension sampajanna we realise that there is no need either to follow them unquestioningly or to dismiss them; we can simply participate - or

not - with awareness.

Some people might feel an immediate sense of ease, intense joy or devotion; others might experience powerful resistance or aversion, or feelings of shyness and fear of making a mistake. These different responses can easily be understood in terms of the conditioning we have received over the years, but by remaining attentive to them and to what is happening around us we can find a sense of relaxation and ease. We begin to notice how the heart responds to such simple things as preparing and caring for a shrine, making offerings with reverence, chanting, bowing - either alone or with a group. We no longer need to judge ourselves or to maintain any fixed idea about what is happening.

When questioned by the Brahmin students, Punnaka and Nanda about the place of rituals and offerings in helping one to go beyond birth and aging, his response was that, in themselves, making offerings, listening to religious teachings and performing rituals were not enough - it is only through a total understanding of attachments that one can go beyond.

It is only: When a person has assessed the world from top to bottom, when there is nothing in the world that raises a flicker of agitation, then one has become a person free from the smoke fumes, the tremblings and the hunger of desire. One has become calm, one has gone beyond getting old; one has gone beyond being born.*

(* *Sutta Nipata*, translated by Ven Dr Saddhatissa, published by The Curson Press)

So the rituals we have can be seen as a means for freeing the heart from self concerns - as opportunities to say a wholehearted, "yes!" to what we value most, putting all our energy into realising Nibbana. We no longer need to tumble into a dull abyss, or to believe too much in those voices of self that tend to whimper, "But why wasn't I asked to do that?", "She shouldn't have done it like that", "Why bother?" We can rejoice in these opportunities for bringing a little more beauty and gentleness into our lives, and that remind us of our common humanity.

Ajahn Candasiri

**Even though we have
convention,
don't place your trust in it as
being the Truth.
If you cling to it suffering will
arise.**

Ajahn Chah

