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On Making a Mistake

Ajahn Brahmavamso is the Abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery in Western Australia. These Dhamma reflections are extracted from a talk he gave at the Dhammaloka Centre in Perth in 1990.

In this life that we have we often forget that it's no great thing to make a mistake. In Buddhism it's all right to make a mistake. It is all right to be imperfect. Isn't that wonderful? This means that we have the freedom to be a human being, rather than thinking of ourselves as someone wonderful and great who never makes mistakes. It is horrible, isn't it, if we think we are not allowed to make mistakes, because we do make mistakes, then we have to hide and try to cover them up. So the home then is not a place of peace and quiet and comfort. Of course most people who are sceptical say: "Well if you allow people to make mistakes, how will they ever learn? They will just keep on making even more mistakes". But that is not the way it actually works. To illustrate this point, when I was a teenager my father said to me that he would never throw me out or bar the door of his house to me, no matter what I did; I would always be allowed in there, even if I had made the worst mistakes. When I heard that, I understood it as an expression of love, of acceptance. It inspired me and I respected him so much that I did not want to hurt him, I did not want to give him trouble, and so I tried even harder to be worthy of his house.

Now if we could try that with the people we live with, we'd see that it gives them the freedom and the space to relax and be peaceful, and it takes away all the tension. In that ease, there comes respect and care for the other person. So I challenge you to try the experiment of allowing people to make mistakes - to say to your mate, your parents or your children: "The door of my house will always be open to you; the door of my heart will always be open to you no matter what you do." Say it to yourself too: "The door of my house is always open to me." Allow yourself to make mistakes too. Can you think of all the mistakes you have made in the last week? Can you let them be, can you still be a friend to yourself? It is only when we allow ourselves to make mistakes that we can finally be at ease.

That is what we mean by compassion, by metta, by love. It has to be unconditional. If you only love someone because they do what you like, or because they always live up to your

expectations, then of course that love is not worth very much. That's like a business deal love: "I will love you if you give me something back in return."

Can you think of all the mistakes you have made in the last week? Can you let them be, can you still be a friend to yourself?

When I first became a monk I thought monks had to be perfect. I thought they should never make mistakes; that when they sit in meditation they must always sit straight. But those of you who have been at the morning sit at 4:30 am, especially after working hard the day before, you will know that you can be quite tired; you can slump, you can even nod. But that is all right. It is all right to make mistakes. Can you feel how easy it feels, how all that tension and stress disappears when you allow yourself to make mistakes?

The trouble is that we tend to amplify the mistakes and forget the successes, which creates so much of a burden of guilt and heaviness. So instead we can turn to our successes, the good things we have done in our life; we could call it our Buddha nature within us. If you turn to that, it grows; whereas if you turn to the mistakes, they grow. If you dwell on any thought in the mind, any train of thought, it grows and grows, doesn't it? So we turn our hearts around and dwell upon the positive in ourselves, the purity, the goodness, the source of that unconditional love - that which wants to help, to sacrifice even our own comfort for the sake of another being. This is a way we can regard our inner being, our heart. Forgiving its faults, we dwell upon its nobility, its purity, its kindness. We can do the same with other people, we can dwell upon their goodness and watch it grow.

This is what we call kamma - actions; the way we think about life, the way we speak about life, what we do with life. And really it is up to us what we do, it is not up to some supernatural being up there who says whether you will be happy or not. Your happiness is completely in your hands, in your power. This is what we mean by kamma. It's like baking a cake: kamma defines what ingredients you have, what you have got to work with. So a person with unfortunate kamma, maybe as a result of their past actions, has not got many ingredients. Maybe they have just got some old stale flour, one or two raisins, if that, and some rancid butter, and - what else goes in cakes? - some sugar... and that is all they have got to work with. And another person might have very good kamma, all the ingredients you could ever wish for: whole wheat flour, brown sugar and all types of dried fruit and nuts. But as for the cake that is produced in the end... Even with very meagre ingredients some people can bake a beautiful cake. They mix it all up, put it into the oven - delicious! How do they do it? And then other people might have everything, but the cake they make tastes awful.

So kamma defines the ingredients, what we have got to work with; but that does not define what we make with it. So if a person is wise, it does not matter what they have got to work with. You can still make a beautiful cake - as long as you know how.

Of course the first thing to know is that the last way to make a good cake is to complain all the time about the ingredients you have. Sometimes in the monastery, if there is an ingredient missing the people who are cooking look in the pantry and just use whatever is there. They have to be quite

versatile and you get some very strange cakes, but they are all delicious, because people have learned the art of using what they have and making something of it.

So where is kamma heading? What are we actually making of it? Is it to be wealthy or to be powerful? No. This meditation, this Buddhism, the direction we are going in, is towards enlightenment. We are using the ingredients we have to become enlightened. But what does enlightenment actually mean? Enlightenment means there is no anger left in your heart. There is no personal desire or delusion left in your heart.

At one time there was a Russian teacher called Gurdjief who had a community in France. In his community there was one fellow who was just absolutely obnoxious. He was always annoying people and giving them a really hard time. So the community would meet together and they would ask Gurdjief to send him away, to get rid of the fellow, because he was always creating arguments and making people unhappy. But Gurdjief never would. However later on, after he died, they found out that he had actually been paying the fellow to stay there! Everyone else would have to pay for board and lodging. But Gurdjief was actually paying the fellow to be there - to teach the people a lesson. If you can only be happy when you live with the people you like, your happiness is not worth anything, because you are not being stirred up. It is like a glass of muddy water, when it is not stirred up it looks clear, doesn't it? But as soon as it is agitated, the mud comes from the bottom and is stirred up. It is good to stir up your glass just to see what is in there really. So Gurdjief used to pay this fellow to stir up everybody to see what was there.

A very good indicator of where one is in the spiritual life is to see how well you get on with other people - especially the difficult ones. Can you be peaceful when someone else is giving you a hard time? Can you let go of anger and irritation towards a person, a place, or towards yourself? Eventually we have to, otherwise we are never going to get to enlightenment, we are never going to get peaceful.

Imagine what it is like to say: "No more will I get irritated, no more will I fight or reject a person or their habits. If I cannot do anything about it, I will learn to peacefully coexist with that which I do not like. I will learn to peacefully accept the pain, instead of always turning my head away from the pain and seeking the pleasure." Imagine that!



Sometimes people think that if you do not get angry then you just tend to be a vegetable, you just allow others to walk all over you, you will just be someone who sits here and does nothing. But ask yourself: "What do you feel like after you have been angry? Do you feel full of beans, very energetic?" We get worn out when we are angry; it just eats up so much of our heart energy. Even when we are irritated or negative towards a person or a place, that eats up energy. So if we do not want to feel so tired and depressed, we can try, as an experiment, not getting irritated. See how much more wide awake and zestful we feel. Then we can send that energy out into caring for others, and to caring for ourselves as well. It is in our power to do that. If you really want to get on the fast track to enlightenment, try giving up irritation and anger.

So how do you give it up? Well, first of all, by wanting to give it up. But a lot of us do not want to give up our anger and irritation - for some obscure reason we like it. There is a wonderful little story about two monks who lived together in a monastery for many years; they were great friends. Then they died within a few months of one another. One of them got reborn in the heaven realms, the other monk got reborn as a worm in a dung pile. The one up in the heaven realms was having a wonderful time, enjoying all the heavenly pleasures. Then he started thinking about his friend, "I wonder where my old mate has gone?" So he scanned all of the heaven realms, but could not find a trace of his friend. Then he scanned the realm of human beings, but he could not see any trace of his friend there, so he looked in the realm of animals and then of insects. Finally he found him, reborn as a worm in a dung pile... Wow! He thought: "I am going to help my friend. I am going to go down there to that dung pile and take him up to the heavenly realm so he too can enjoy the heavenly pleasures and bliss of living in these wonderful realms."

So he went down to the dung pile and called his mate. And the little worm wriggled out and said: "Who are you?", "I am your friend. We used to be monks together in a past life, and I have come up to take you to the heaven realms where life is wonderful and blissful." But the worm said: "Go away, get lost!" "But I am your friend, and I live in the heaven realms," and he described the heaven realms to him. But the worm said: "No thank you, I am quite happy here in my dung pile. Please go away." Then the heavenly being thought: "Well if I could only just grab hold of him and take him up to the heaven realms, he could see for himself." So he grabbed hold of the worm and started tugging at him; and the harder he tugged, the harder that worm clung to his pile of dung.

Do you get the moral of the story? How many of us are attached to our pile of dung? When someone tries to pull us out we just wriggle back in again because that is what we are used to, we like it in there. Sometimes we are actually attached to our old habits, our anger and our desires. Sometimes we want to be angry.

So next time you get angry, stop and watch. Just take a moment of mindfulness just to see what it feels like. Decide, remind yourself: "Next time I am angry I am going to feel it, instead of trying to be clever, to get my own way or to hurt the other person." Just notice how it feels. As soon as you notice how anger feels with your heart - not with your head - then you will want to give it up; because it hurts, it is painful, it is suffering.

If only people could be more awake, more aware - know what it feels like, instead of thinking about it, there would be no problem any more. They would let the anger go very quickly because it is hot, it is burning. But we tend to see this world with our heads rather than with our hearts. We think about it, but very rarely do we feel it, experience it. Meditation starts to get you in contact with your heart again: and out of thinking and complaining, where all anger and desire starts from.

When you come from the heart, you can feel for yourself, you can be at peace with yourself, you can be caring to yourself. When I come from the heart, I can appreciate other peoples' hearts as well. That is how we can love our enemies, when we appreciate their hearts, seeing something there to love, to respect.

People get angry because they are hurting, they are not at ease. But if we are happy, we can never get angry at someone else; it is only when we are depressed, tired, frustrated, having a hard time; when we have got some sickness in our hearts, that is when we can get angry at other people. So when someone is angry at me I feel compassion and kindness towards that person, because I realise that they are hurting.

The first time I went to see someone who was supposed to be enlightened, I thought, "Crikey! I had better make sure I meditate before I get within ten miles of him, because he is bound to be able to read my mind, and that would be so embarrassing!" But an enlightened person is not going to be cruel and hurt you. An enlightened person is going to accept you and put you at ease. That's a wonderful feeling, isn't it: just to accept yourself. You can just relax, no anger and irritation. There is that great understanding, great enlightenment, that you are all right. What a lot of pain that would take away from human beings' lives; what great freedom it would give the people to participate in the world, to serve in this world, to love in this world, when at last they realise that they are all right. They do not have to spend so much time getting themselves right, changing themselves, always afraid of making mistakes. When you are at ease with yourself you will be at ease with other people, no matter who they are.



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Impressions from Bodhinyanarama

Ajahn Vajiro, who has been Abbot of Bodhinyanarama Monastery in New Zealand for almost three years, was interviewed by Ajahn Sucitto about his time there so far.

A.S. I wonder if you could give us a rough idea of what peoples' attitudes are towards Buddhism in New Zealand?

A.V. I think in general people don't really know what Buddhism's about. Nominally, it's an Anglican community, and there are some fundamentalists around but the majority in the censuses are 'No Religion'. Stokes Valley itself, where we live, is a place for first-time house-buyers, with a great variety of people in it. We live at the dead end of the main street, so we're very much a feature there. The people know us. They refer to us as "our monks" - even if they have nothing to do with the monastery, but I think they're still a bit in awe of us. Just the other day someone came who said, "I didn't know you could actually come in." Somebody else came to do the digging when our mains burst, with a chunky old mechanised digger on the back of a tractor; his wife came too and she just sat quietly in here for an hour while he was out there digging and she said, "Oh, I really like the quiet." So there's a mixture of responses. The most distressing sort of response was from someone who saw us on tudong - they made the sign of the cross with their fingers as if they were warding off the Devil. Another time I was walking along the road in Romat's, which is considered a red-neck area, and somebody shouted at me out of the window of their car. That happens everywhere you go so I didn't take much notice, but then the car came back and the passenger climbed out of the window and, sitting on the edge, he held on to the door and roof and yelled: "Go back to where you came!"... I thought, "Well, that's pretty Zen!"

A.S. Zenophobia!... Are there other Buddhist groups or people doing meditation?

A.V. Oh, yes. The person who's been here the longest, is Lama Samten up at Kokoppakoppa. He's been here for about twenty years. He says that New Zealand is very well endowed with teachers and centres - considering that the population is only three and a half million people. Then there is the Sphere group, which is related to Nanihal Rinpoche (formerly Venerable Anandabodhi, who instigated the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara and later Samye-Ling) and also many Christian centres, where groups have put up camp sites for their own retreats.

We could quite comfortably accommodate half a dozen more monks. We all live in kutis; it's a purpose-built monastery.

A.S. What kind of support is there for Bodhinyanarama itself?

A.V. As a Western monastery it's quite remarkable in that anagarikas are not absolutely necessary for it to function. The people who support the monastery assume that it's their responsibility to make sure that the bhikkhus are fed every day. So we have a roster and there are people nearly every day of the year who have arranged - sometimes a year in advance - to come and offer food; if there's any problem I just inform the committee, who's responsibility it is to look into things. It's a lovely situation. So on Monday it's the Burmese community;

Tuesday the Pakehas*; Wednesday the Thais; Thursday the Sri Lankans (except for the fourth Thursday of the month, which is the Thai Embassy). Then on Fridays, there's a group of Malaysians, or Chinese, or Pakehas, or Asian people who've been here so long a time that they consider themselves part of the New Zealand scene. On Saturdays, it's Sri Lankans again, and Sundays it's always the Laos who come. New Zealand's been very generous in taking in refugees and so there are a lot of Cambodians, and they also come.

** New Zealanders of European, as opposed to Maori, descent.*

A.S. Are there any other Buddhist monasteries in New Zealand - I mean Theravada places?

A.V. Yes, there's a Cambodian Temple quite near us which started at the same time as Bodhinyanarama with one Cambodian monk. Up in Auckland, there's a lot. There's the vihara which we use when staying there; a Lao vihara; two Cambodian viharas and a Thai temple. Then there's Sunnatarama, one of the former Ajahn Yantra forest monasteries, which is about ninety acres of very good bush with three young people living on it.

A.S. Do you miss the contact with the U.K.? Does the monastery feel a bit isolated at times?

A.V. Sometimes. That's why I don't worry too much about phone bills or getting connected to the e-mail or faxes. I feel that it's good to have contact. One of my closest contacts is with Tan Ariyesako, he's in Australia in a little hermitage. I don't have so much contact with the monastery in Perth, but if there's any sort of trouble we get into contact with each other, or if they want to come and visit - anything like that.

A.S. What, in terms of functions and routines is different here from how things are in the monasteries in Britain?

A.V. It's a smaller community, and the place has been very, very well established by Ajahn Viradhammo. Although there's not a lot of work that we have to do, there's sometimes a feeling of being stretched because it's actually quite big. We could quite comfortably accommodate half a dozen more monks. We all live in kutis; it's a purpose-built monastery. The kitchen is the only building here on the site that wasn't actually built for the monastery.

A.S. What about the daily routines? Do you have pujas and almsrounds?

A.V. To a certain extent. Very few people come for the evening meetings, so we're experimenting at the moment not having them except on Sunday, which is when there is an evening talk for the lay people. We've tried having retreats here but they didn't work out very well, so now I'd like to encourage people to invite us out to teach and to organise the retreats themselves. We've also been having Saturday afternoon workshops during a couple of months in the year. We have four a month from 4.00 to 5.30pm; that way people can do their shopping and also still go out in the evening! Maybe between 20 - 45 people would come here for those. They are pleasant to do.

A.S. And so there must be quite a bit of spare time for the monks. Do they have study sessions, or retreats for themselves or tudongs?

A.V. Well, there are sutta study sessions and discussions; we're going to continue with that. There is a lot of time, and privacy. You can't see another kuti



from the one you're in, so you don't need to see anybody from after the meal until the following morning. Personally, I tend to be around more, but generally there's a lot of space. Then we have tudongs and also more casual walk-about. There are many invitations to go to different Buddhist groups. You fly there (everybody flies everywhere in this country) - to New Plymouth, or to Gisborne, or down to Dunedin; sometimes we'd do that, and incorporate it with a walk-about in the country. Also we go to Auckland and Hamilton about once a month, and to Palmerston North every two months or so - that's about a couple of hours away from Stokes Valley. Then we might do some walking, or some trips around. But in terms of tudong, real tudong, generally, there's not a lot. I have a project to walk from one end of North Island to the other, as a way of connecting, with myself, with the country, and the different Buddhists here. Each year, if it works out, I'll go on and start from where I stopped. And that's fun. I usually travel with somebody who can carry food. Sometimes I don't know where I'm going to stop, but I usually have a destination a couple of days away, because part of it is to connect with Buddhists and people who are interested. It's actually quite demanding, because walking is physically hard, and then you're arriving somewhere and having to talk.

A.S. What about guests or people who are interested in becoming anagarikas or nuns?

A.V. We've got accommodation for guests - the accommodation for women is incredibly good. We try to have no more guests than community members; that, we feel, is a reasonable ratio to keep. We've had a few people wanting to be anagarikas, but none of them stuck it out. A couple became samaneras in Thailand but no one has actually made it past that whilst I've been here. We're still a bit peculiar here because the community is not large enough to actually show people how it works.

A.S. How many monks do you have at the moment?

A.V. Three monks and one samanera, which is about average since I've been here. When I first came there were five or six but most of them were on the point of going elsewhere.

A.S. Being out of the circuit as it were it must be difficult to get new people coming? It is a bit isolated.

A.V. Right. Also it's a place where I encourage renunciation in terms of generosity, in terms

of basic morality, and in terms of meditation. We are renunciants and this is a place where people can devote their lives to that - that's what I wish to do. I'm not into all sorts of therapies and meditation techniques; there are plenty of New Age places in this country where people can do those things. 'Renunciation' can sound very 'hard-line' but it can also be seen as that which encourages freedom: freedom from greed, from remorse and from harmful states of mind. It's just a different way of putting the same thing.

A.S. So you're coming up for your 17th Vassa as a bhikkhu, and your 3rd year as the abbot here. How's it going? Is it a learning experience as they say?

A.V. Yes, as they say. But I wouldn't wish it on anybody. I wouldn't recommend anybody to have that aspiration. I don't think that being an abbot is easy, and I'm not yet convinced about how useful it is. But if one does it in the spirit of it being a service that one offers, then it does bring up qualities that wouldn't arise if you could just keep passing the buck. Being the abbot, you can't do that, you are really responsible; it's up to me what happens. It's strange how that power works. It's like a great machine: this monastery, and the faith and goodness that have made it happen and supported it over the years; Ajahn Viradhammo and Ajahn Thanavaro, and all the people who have come through here and put such a lot of energy into it... Then they put someone like me as a figure-head, and whatever this little thing does affects the whole network. If the whole thing shakes then that affects me; and it's interesting to see that, if I can return to that stillness. It's nice here that there's a sense of spaciousness, that it's not that busy, so what I do is not going to be too disastrous!

A.S. Do you think that by the process of being here and learning you are getting any ideas as to the general direction for the future, for yourself, or for the monastery?

A.V. Well this monastery is a wonderful place as a resource for all the monasteries through the world that we're associated with. It's a place where someone like you, Ajahn Sucitto, can have a long solitary retreat; it's good as a place where senior monks and nuns can come and spend time on retreat. You can be more away from things. You can drop things, in a way you can't do if you're more accessible. Personally, I'll need space myself too - times when I'm not here - I don't know for how long. I don't see myself as abbot for ever here, at all. But at the moment, I'm applying for permanent residency which is a way of being able to stay in the country indefinitely. I might even think of citizenship. When I first came here I said I'd be here for anything between 3 and 20 years... and I've nearly completed three.

A.S. Well, I wish you good luck.



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Timeless Teachings

On 16th January we will be commemorating the fifth anniversary of Luang Por Chah's death. These Dhamma reflections come from a collection of his teachings assembled by Paul Breiter during the seventies. They are presented as an expression of reverence and gratitude.

Everyone knows suffering - but they don't really understand suffering. If we really understood suffering, then that would be the end of our suffering.

Westerners are generally in a hurry, so they have greater extremes of happiness and suffering. The fact that they have much kilesa (defilements), can be a source of wisdom later on.

To live the lay life and practise Dhamma, one must be in the world but remain above it. Sila [virtue], beginning with the basic five precepts, is the all important parent to all good things. It is for removing all wrong from the mind, removing that which causes distress and agitation. When these basic things are gone, the mind will always be in a state of samadhi.

At first, the basic thing is to make sila really firm. Practise formal meditation when there is the opportunity. Sometimes it will be good, sometimes not. Don't worry about it, just continue. If doubts arise, just realise that they, like everything else in the mind, are impermanent.

Living in the world, practising meditation, others will look at you like a gong which isn't struck, not producing any sound. They will consider you useless, mad, defeated; but actually it is just the opposite.

From this base, Samadhi will come, but not yet wisdom. One must watch the mind at work - see like and dislike arising from sense contact, and not attach to them.

Don't be anxious for results or quick progress. An infant crawls at first, then learns to walk, then to run and when it is full grown, can travel half way round the world to Thailand.

Dana [generosity], if given with good intention, can bring happiness to oneself and others. But until sila is complete, giving is not pure, because we may steal from one person and give to another.

Seeking pleasure and having fun is never-ending, one is never satisfied. It's like a water jar with a hole in it. We try to fill it but the water is continually leaking out. The peace of the religious life has a definite end, it puts a stop to the cycle of endless seeking. It's like plugging up the hole in the water jar!

Living in the world, practising meditation, others will look at you like a gong which isn't struck, not producing any sound. They will consider you useless, mad, defeated; but actually it

is just the opposite.

As for myself, I never questioned the teachers very much, I have always been a listener. I would listen to what they had to say, whether it was right or wrong did not matter; then I would just practise. The same as you who practise here. You should not have all that many questions. If one has constant mindfulness, then one can examine one's own mental states - we don't need anyone else to examine our moods.

Once when I was staying with an ajahn I had to sew myself a robe. In those days there weren't any sewing machines, one had to sew by hand, and it was a very trying experience. The cloth was very thick and the needles were dull; one kept stabbing oneself with the needle, one's hands became very sore and blood kept dripping on the cloth. Because the task was so difficult I was anxious to get it done. I became so absorbed in the work that I didn't even notice that I was sitting in the scorching sun dripping with sweat.

The ajahn came over to me and asked why I was sitting in the sun and not in the cool shade. I told him that I was really anxious to get the work done, "Where are you rushing off to?" He asked. "I want to get this job done so that I can do my sitting and walking meditation." I told him. "When is our work ever finished?" he asked. Oh! ...This finally brought me around.

"Our worldly work is never finished," he explained. "You should use such occasions as this as exercises in mindfulness, and then when you have worked long enough just stop. Put it aside and continue your sitting and walking practice."

Now I began to understand his teaching. Previously, when I sewed, my mind also sewed and even when I put the sewing away my mind still kept on sewing. When I understood the ajahn's teaching I could really put the sewing away. When I sewed, my mind sewed, then when I put the sewing down, my mind put the sewing down also. When I stopped sewing, my mind also stopped sewing.

Know the good and the bad in travelling or in living in one place. You don't find peace on a hill or in a cave; you can travel to the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, without coming any closer to enlightenment. The important thing is to be aware of yourself, wherever you are, whatever you're doing. Viriya, effort, is not a question of what you do outwardly, but just the constant inner awareness and restraint.

It is important not to watch others and find fault with them. If they behave wrongly, there is no need to make yourself suffer. If you point out to them what is correct and they don't practise accordingly, leave it at that. When the Buddha studied with various teachers, he



realised that their ways were lacking, but he didn't disparage them. He studied with humility and respect for the teachers, he practised earnestly and realised their systems were not complete, but as he had not yet become enlightened, he did not criticise or attempt to teach them. After he found enlightenment, he recalled those he had studied and practised with and wanted to share his new-found knowledge with them.

We practise to be free of suffering, but to be free of suffering does not mean just to have everything as you would like it, have everyone behave as you would like them to, speaking only that which pleases you. Don't believe your own thinking on these matters. Generally, the truth is one thing, our thinking is another thing. We should have wisdom in excess of thinking, then there is no problem. When thinking exceeds wisdom, we are in trouble.

Tanha [desire] in practice can be friend or foe. At first it spurs us to come and practise - we want to change things, to end suffering. But if we are always desiring something that hasn't yet arisen, if we want things to be other than they are, then this just causes more suffering.

Sometimes we want to force the mind to be quiet, and this effort just makes it all the more disturbed. Then we stop pushing, and samadhi arises. And then in the state of calm and quiet we begin to wonder - what's going on? What's the point of it? ... and we're back to agitation again!

The day before the first Sanghayana, one of the Buddha's disciples went to tell Ananda: "Tomorrow is the Sangha council, only arahants may attend." Ananda was at this time still unenlightened. So he determined: "Tonight I will do it." He practised strenuously all night, seeking to become enlightened. But he just made himself tired. So he decided to let go, to rest a bit as he wasn't getting anywhere for all his efforts. Having let go, as soon as he lay down and his head hit the pillow, he became enlightened.

External conditions don't make you suffer, suffering arises from wrong understanding. Feelings of pleasure and pain, like and dislike, arise from sense-contact - you must catch them as they arise, not follow them, not giving rise to craving and attachment - which is in turn causing mental birth and becoming. If you hear people talking, it may stir you up, you think it destroys your calm, your meditation, but you hear a bird chirping and you don't think anything of it, you just let it go as sound, not giving it any meaning or value.

You shouldn't hurry or rush your practice but must think in terms of a long time. Right now we have 'new' meditation; if we have 'old' meditation, then we can practise in every situation, whether chanting, working, or sitting in your hut. We don't have to go seeking for special places to practise. Wanting to practise alone is half right, but also half wrong. It isn't that I don't favour a lot of formal meditation [samadhi] but one must know when to come out of it. seven days, two weeks, one month, two months - and then return to relating to people and situations again. This is where wisdom is gained; too much samadhi practice has no advantage other than that one may become mad. Many monks, wanting to be alone, have gone off and just died alone!

Having the view that formal practice is the complete and only way to practise, disregarding one's normal life situation, is called being intoxicated with meditation.

Meditation is giving rise to wisdom in the mind. This we can do anywhere, any time and in any posture.



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■ Editorial: ■ Cultivating the Perfections; Sister Jitindriya

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Cultivating the Perfections

Sister Jitindriya recently returned to the UK after two years in Australia during her father's final illness. She spent both Rains Retreats at Wat Buddha Dhamma and, following her first, she wrote a piece for their newsletter; what follows is an extract from it.

One thing I've begun to realise more and more is just how long this path to enlightenment actually is! How much effort and patience and persistence is required if one's journey really is going to culminate in the complete ending of suffering.

During this time I've drawn some deep inspiration from the teachings of the Thai Masters, Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Mahaboowa. What shines through and is so striking in their example is their deep commitment to realising the Truth and their utter strength of mind in applying the practice - relentless determination and sustained effort. "This is what it's going to take," I would say to myself at times, to get through the mass of junk the mind can produce. It seems tirelessly able to re-hash the past and invent all sorts of futures - it truly is the greatest trickster and deceiver of all time.

Here

*Mutable
as flames
this night
feel*

*Gladdening
in the
weathered
wood
smoke, then*

...

*moods
of mind
entwine
the
nascence of
another
shade.*

*Rain on
canvas,
back ache
and the
full moon
inviting ...
stretching ...*

*Hours
piled on
hours of a
fickle
fingered
darkness
where
love*

*wreathed
pain,
rain, vain
moods are
all
consumed.*

Thaniya

The practice is always a matter of the present moment -
it's just about being here, responding to whatever is
arising with wisdom and compassion.

But I'm learning that indeed it also takes time to build one's forces against such deeply ingrained habits. In cultivating this path one needs to develop skills and qualities that will support and strengthen the mind, so it can probe more deeply into itself, withstand greater pressure from the distractions and buoy itself up during the more dark and difficult times. The Ten Paramitas, or Perfections, provide an essential 'check list' for me in my practice as to what attitude or quality of heart may need developing or reinforcing at any particular time.

These Paramitas are: Generosity, Virtue, Renunciation, Wisdom, Energy, Patience, Honesty, Determination, Kindness, Equanimity. The Buddha brought them to perfection in his 'pre-Buddha' journeys as a Bodhisatta - the power of such perfections and purity is what gave him the unshakeability and strength to achieve his final goal. Fortunately for us, it is not necessary to bring these qualities to complete perfection for the gaining of Nibbana (as this is the accomplishment of the Bodhisatta destined for Buddhahood) but we still need to cultivate them all as far as we can, if the heart is to find its freedom.

When one reaches an 'impasse' at certain times in practice, one can consider these qualities:

"Do I need to be a little more patient with myself (or others) ?"

"Will a little more kindness help dissolve the obstacle or the hardened fear in the heart?"

"Am I maintaining equanimity?"

"Could my sila (moral behaviour) be polished up a little?"

Perhaps a certain obstacle is teaching one an important lesson in terms of the fruit of wrong action. Perhaps we need to renounce something, let go of what we can do without, to enable balance and peace to be restored in the mind. Using mindfulness, investigation and wisdom one can find a balance for oneself in this way, to lead one through the difficulties, to lead one onward, or further inward.

"Am I really being honest with myself?" is a good question to pose at the right time, for we never really like to see ourselves in our more negative, or 'unlikable', modes. But in fact, 'seeing clearly' isn't just a matter of taking on board more 'honest' perceptions of oneself;



rather, it is to see that all perceptions of 'self', if grasped at and believed in, distort the truth; creating only more deception and dukkha. The Truth is in seeing the essential instability of all self-concepts and sensory experience. This is not to reject these things of the conventional realm, but to see them as transitory and totally unreliable; as fickle and as changeable as the weather. Seen in this light, it is clear that such things can never really be satisfying or lead to satisfaction in any way. How can they be what I am?...for when they are challenged in the light of Dhamma, they dissolve and disappear like a frightened phantom!

As we go more deeply in the practice we come upon those views and assumptions that have hidden in the depths of the psyche for who knows how long. They whisper quietly, but are extremely powerful commanders that direct and control much of our lives. These culprits are masters of disguise and take many forms but they are the roots of ignorance itself.

The continuance of the practice itself - in whatever conditions - works to purify the heart, as we come to see more clearly with mindfulness and acceptance just the way things are. In practising to see clearly the nature of our experience as impermanent and unsatisfactory (or stressful), a certain amount of delusion and dukkha drops away naturally. Insight arises. Other areas come into focus where we see that more skill and effort is required to break the shackles; with wisdom we should develop means that can help us to free ourselves.

So the path unfolds. And though I qualified it earlier as being something that is a "long" process, we must keep remembering that the practice is always a matter of the present moment - there is no practice outside of the present moment, so in this sense it is not really a matter of time at all - it's just about being here, responding to whatever is arising with wisdom and compassion. It is very important to have direction, a 'guiding star', and to know your map, but always look where you're walking, or it's likely that you'll never get to where you want to go, and neither will you know where you are!



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EDITORIAL

Microcosmic Challenges

A project like this newsletter is a perfect microcosm within which to study many facets of human existence. A year ago, it was clear to me that it would be a challenge. What is interesting is that the precise nature of the challenge is quite different than I had anticipated. I had thought that it was up to me to make it all happen; what I have found is that actually it is more a case of participating in a process. Externally, this involves receptivity: a response to the generosity and good will of others - and action: directing, guiding these energies into manifestation in a form that can be appreciated and of benefit. The internal effort is to find a balance in working with what is presented, appreciative of the limitations of aptitude, time, energy and equipment available. While on paper, it can be quite clear what should happen, when and how, in practice it may turn out differently. Someone goes away at a critical time; there is a hitch at the printers; there is a misunderstanding regarding the lay out; a last minute article is proffered that must be included... For a perfectionist, there could be all the makings of a nightmare of complete frustration and despair. Fortunately, a few years of letting go practice have generated a more philosophical approach, enabling each new issue to evolve in its own timescale, with its own particular flavour and idiosyncracies. Throughout most of the process the heart is able to remain light and at ease; there is a cheerful feeling that comes from working with what is presented, and a gradual moving away from those states of anguish over things what weren't quite 'right'. It takes effort, that same effort that each of us needs to make if we are to find perfect peace in a world that can never be perfect. One of the nuns expressed this very poignantly:

'Having struggled to remove the taint,
to prepare the finest,
I taste the bitterness, the incompleteness,
Ah... It is the flavour of the world.'

One time, while working on a particular issue in the very early 'scissors and paste' days, I was curious to notice a slight sense of disappointment that I was not able to do the whole thing myself - I wanted the newsletter to be my creation. But now, ten years on, I realise that there is a different kind of joy and satisfaction that arises from co-operation. While, as editor, I tend to be the one to receive much of the praise or criticism, it is abundantly clear that each issue is the product of the efforts and good will of a great many people. This time I'd like, as a way of showing appreciation, to mention some of them.

We can recognise the tendency of the untrained mind to
complicate everything and to try to manipulate and
control the things of Nature

There are those who contribute material (whether or not it finds its way into these pages), and those who transcribe taped Dhamma talks or help with typing. Others help guide and direct, casting a critical eye over possible material; while the artists of the community, notably

Venerable Abhinyano, prepare art work. Venerable Kusalo puts in many hours of work typesetting, preparing copy for the printers; then several Sangha members go through the whole thing, on the lookout for mistakes (true, a few get by, but without their careful attention it would be a lot worse). After a final polishing it goes to the printers, Chitra and Sugi at 'Ashford', and finally it comes to the community at Amaravati who spend a couple of days putting it into labelled envelopes to send out. Later on there is the feed back, and of course that's always helpful too - whatever form it takes!

In contemplating something relatively simple like this process of co-operation, we can begin to appreciate the interdependence of all things throughout all space and time. Everything has its place; having arrived here, it is maintained in balance, changing constantly as a result of manifold circumstances. It is quite beyond most of us to comprehend these mysteries. However, we have the potential to participate in this dynamic unfolding with mindfulness. We can recognise the tendency of the untrained mind to complicate everything and to try to manipulate and control the things of Nature; we can also let go of these complexities and 'problems' to find a place of simple ease in the heart. We realise that it's all right for things not to work out quite the way we had hoped, or to make a mistake, or for people to be upset with us. It doesn't need to be a problem. If we can do something to remedy the situation we do it; otherwise we make peace with it as it is, for nothing in the world can ever measure up to our ideas of perfection. Rather than seeing this as depressing or negative, we can draw inspiration from the teachings of the Buddha that point to a freedom from the world that comes about when we fully understand it:

By comprehending all the world in all the world,
just as it is,
in all the world there is release,
in all the world nothing is held.

Itivuttaka 112

Sister Thaniya

Notices

Obituaries:

John Wake: 1905 - 1996

On the 8th of October Farmer Wake, our neighbour and landlord at Ratanagiri, passed away at the age of 91. Our heartfelt thanks go to John for all his kindness and generosity over the years, and for the many lessons he has taught us. After so many years on Harnham Hill, his passing signals the end of an era.

Walter Stangl: 1914 - 1996

A regular helper in the major garden, grounds' clearing and drive construction in the early days at Cittaviveka, died peacefully in his sleep on the 27th of November 1996. Walter served (reluctantly) in the Austrian army during World War II and spent about four years in a concentration camp in Siberia as a result. He was fortunate to survive. After being released he was a Buddhist monk for a while in Thailand and a gardener at Kew. After his initial work, Walter generally spent a week or so at Cittaviveka every year, pruning and planting with boundless vigour. In the last years of his life he visited Russia and Mongolia on personal goodwill missions, bringing special food and treats with him as his way of paying off any bad karma. One of his happiest recollections was of bringing chocolate to a woman in St. Petersburg who had lost her husband in the war. She forgave him, saying that everyone made

mistakes and the war was over.

Monastery Name:

Now that the Devon Vihara is well established on the Hartridge it has been decided to rename it: 'Hartridge Buddhist Monastery'.



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SIGNS OF CHANGE

Extracts From Vassa Reports:

Amaravati:

The temple looks and feels great. In February the laying of the floor tiles, and the construction of the main building will be finished; but we will have used it before then for the Kathina and the Nuns' Going Forth pabbajja. Hats off to Ajahn Attapemo and Venerable Jutindharo who have helped in overseeing the work. The Upasika gatherings continue to be very popular. Ven. Kusalo's work with kids, schools and R.E. teachers is going well; he is building a network of interested lay friends to help with school visits and related activities. Most of the retreats organised by Jenna and Barry at the retreat centre are fully booked, and the Saturday afternoon meditation workshops continue to be much appreciated by lay practitioners.

Amaravati's mix of lay residents and male and female monastics is an interesting exercise in community living. Gradually, skillful ways of working together while still allowing space for the expression of individual temperaments are evolving. The samaneras and bhikkhus meet once a week, alternating 'business' meetings, and 'heart ' meetings where we try to get to know how individuals are doing in their practice and assess any issues of community dynamics.

A schedule that works well at Amaravati is to have a nine-day quiet period each month, from the full moon Uposatha until the day after the following Observance Day. Vinaya study has been in groups for those new to the training and those with more experience. Ajahn Assaji shared his impressive knowledge of the Pali texts by offering classes in Pali and the Suttas. Luang Por has been very generous with his time guiding individual members of the Sangha, participating in group meetings and offering his timeless reflections on non-attachment.

The Devon Vihara:

The community has been alternating between periods of retreat and activity. We have now completed five kutis [small huts for private retreat] and this has enhanced our enjoyment of the summer months. The last few weeks have been spent transforming a large and unpleasant caravan into a much more pleasant place of abiding for our guests.

The use of community life as a way of developing honesty, patience and tolerance has been a prevalent theme for us. We've tried to provide occasion for feelings to be aired within an allowing atmosphere and to provide support for each other as best we can; seeing our life here as an opportunity for increasing trust. This theme seems crucial in the cultivation of our meditation practice.

Santacittarama Monastery (Italy):

The search for a new property continues. Having eventually decided against the property near Tivoli, (being so close to a river, permission to build further would have been difficult to obtain), we have been putting a lot of effort into finding something more suitable.

Although we are only three, we do not have a language in common. I have occasional bursts of trying to learn Thai; Tan Jutindharo has started to learn Italian, and Amara attempts to speak English every now and again. However we manage to live together in reasonable

harmony and the lay community continue to provide support and to find sustenance from the Sangha's presence.

Wat Pah Nanachat (Thailand):

In addition to the daily Vinaya readings, there were weekly Sangha gatherings to bring up and consider different aspects of Sangha life. Ajahn Pasanno gave instruction in the practice, using the Anapanasati Sutta as a basis. Following his departure (after fifteen years as abbot) at the end of the year to help Ajahn Amaro in California, Ajahn Jayasaro will take over the leadership of the community. Before then there will be a meeting of all the Western monks in Thailand associated with the Ajahn Chah lineage.

Dtow Dum (Thailand):

Three monks spent the vassa in this area of pristine forest by the border of Burma. The heavy rains caused flooding, so that the monastery and nearby village were completely cut off; supplies of food had to be flown in by helicopter. Earlier in the year a large group of monks and novices had spent the greater part of the hot season there - a welcome escape from the heat of Ubon Province.

Poo Jorm Gorm (Thailand):

Apart from one meeting per week for Patimokkha or discussion on meditation practice, the four monks who spent the vassa here practised in solitude.

Wat Pah Sunnatavanarama (Thailand):

Ajahn Gavesako's efforts in setting up the monastery are bearing fruit. There is now a new sala, kitchen, toilets/showers and quarters for lay guests. The many trees which have been planted are flourishing. An abundant water source has finally been found. The vassa was harmonious and ended with a nine day retreat, which about 40 lay people participated in.

Abhayagiri Monastery (USA):

We began the rains retreat by celebrating Asalha Puja at Spirit Rock. The almsgiving that marked its ending was also held there, thanks to the kindness of Jack Kornfield and the staff in allowing us to use this spacious and conveniently located centre.

The resident community has been living in the 250 acre forest, mostly in tents. The small house has served as our shrine room, eating hall, kitchen, office, bath-house and male guest accommodation, although most male and female guests stayed in tents in their respective camping areas. It became apparent early on that greatest constraint on the community would be winter accommodation and facilities, so most of our physical energy has been focused on construction of kutis. So far three have been completed, mostly by a very vigorous and gifted neighbour. We aim to complete five before the winter retreat in February.

The other major construction project has been the new Dhamma Hall. Assisted by an amorphous crew of local and imported visitors, a dark cluttered garage has been transformed into an airy meditation space; it still needs finishing touches before the Buddha rupa arrives from Thailand - otherwise it is all done. Also, we now have four little caravans (or 'trailers'), so all seems to be well set for the winter rains.

We maintained a routine of Saturday and Observance night vigils and Dhamma talks, and also Vinaya instruction. Ajahn Amaro led day-long retreats at Spirit Rock and Green Gulch Zen Center, and gave teachings at monthly meetings in San Francisco and elsewhere. Throughout, there have been many visitors from both East and West Coasts. Ajahn Maha Prasert (a native of Roi-et) visited; he generously mobilised the supporters of his monastery in Fremont to help provide one of the caravans. A dozen or so teenagers from the Spirit Rock family programme also came, injecting a dose of youthful energy into the community one weekend.

A high point of the Vassa was an unexpected visit from Luang Por Sumedho during a whirlwind trip to San Francisco for the 'State of the World' conference. We were very grateful

that he managed to squeeze in a night's stay, to bless this new venture and to share some informal time meeting with the community. Several other monastic visitors have passed through, including Ajahns Sucitto, Jayasaro and Kalyano before the Rains, and Sr Thanasanti, who came to help lead a retreat in November. Ajahn Pasanno is due to arrive on New Year's Eve to take up residency here.

Despite all the activity that has been necessitated for the humans, the great forest has continually exerted a calming and expansive presence. The months have been punctuated by forays into the dense woods and along the ridge-path around its perimeter. We have noted the transition from 107F summer afternoons, to goldening leaves, rain and an autumnal nip in the air. Bears have been sighted (and smelled), rattlesnakes and numerous foxes, bob-cats, does with fawns, wild turkey and quail families, racoons and skunks have shown their presence - often with thumps and rustlings in the dark, convincing one that 'something very large and hungry is only one layer of thin cloth away...' But such is the midnight feast of Dhamma for the Samana.

Ratanagiri Monastery:

This has been a significant year for the community at Ratanagiri in many ways. We had to vacate our Guest Cottage at the beginning of 1996, and since then our guest accommodation has been limited to two small caravans and one room in the Vihara; for most of the time this has proved adequate. The current absence of any major building projects has allowed the resident community to take advantage of a less busy routine. And on the 11th of August the first ordination ceremony to be held at Ratanagiri was conducted by Ajahn Munindo, when Anagarika Axel became Samanera Revato.

We look forward to welcoming one new anagarika and one samanera to the community in time for the Winter Retreat. With the snows of winter already upon us, the focus now draws more inward.

News from the Nuns' Community:

With 3 anagarikas going forth and 2 siladharas returning after supporting their families in time of crisis, the Order of Siladharas feels a little less tiny. Also we expect Ajahn Sundara back in the spring time, and Sister Upekkha will have completed her sabbatical in July. These developments, together with the fact that there are now three elder nuns (over 10 vassas) and a number of others with 5 - 10 vassas, have provided the confidence for us to evolve in a new direction.

Earlier this year it was proposed that some nuns and anagarikaas occupy the Devon Vihara for two years, while Ajahn Subbato and the other resident bhikkhus spend time away. The idea of a community of nuns living apart from bhikkhus has been spoken about on a number of occasions by Ajahn Sumedho and other Sangha members; within the Order of Siladharas there is also much interest. So, with the approval of the Elders' Council, we have decided to take up this invitation. Ajahn Siripanna will lead the community of siladharas and anagarikaas there, while groups of nuns will continue to reside at both Cittaviveka and Amaravati.

