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Self-view, Personality and Awareness

A talk given by Luang Por Sumedho in July 2003.

When I was a teenager in the United States, to say that someone didn't have a personality was considered the biggest put-down. If you said, 'Oh, she doesn't have any personality,' it was a real insult. Because personality is terribly important if you're an American, to be a charming, intelligent, attractive, interesting person. A lot of social conditioning goes into being that, trying to become 'personality-plus'. But now, if I heard someone saying, 'Ajahn Sumedho has no personality,' I'd be flattered, honoured.

When we hear of the Buddhist teaching of letting go, people might think, 'If I let go of my personality what will be left? Will I be just a zombie? If I don't have any personality, how am I going to relate to anybody? I'll just be a blank, a totally empty form that sits there. No matter what happens, there will be no kind of emotion, no kind of language, or reaction.' It's very frightening to think of no longer being a real person, a personality of some sort.

We conceive that without a personality we would be *nothing*, and that's rather frightening. Even a negative identity would be better than that: like, to be able to say, 'I'm a neurotic man because I had abusive conditions in the past; because of misunderstandings and unfairnesses I have a lot of emotional and psychological problems in the present.' That would make someone interesting in a way, wouldn't it? Even with a negative identity, I could still take an interest in myself as a personality. So, to think of letting go of one's personality would probably be rather frightening. If suddenly all those views and opinions that make me into an interesting person or a fascinating character or a charming gentleman or whatever... or a famous monk, a great teacher, a meditation master.... These are the things you get faced with when you're in my position. People have even called me 'Your Excellency' or 'Your Highness'.

Somebody once even called me the Pope. So these honorific titles and superlatives are meant to show politeness and respect. But if someone thought they might suddenly become *nobody*, it could be rather frightening.

However, the Buddha's teaching on *anattā*, was to point out the reality of non-self in very simple ways. It wasn't a practice where your personality totally disappears for ever, where you no longer have any emotional feelings whatsoever and where you're just a total blank forever. *Anattā* is a practice for ordinary everyday life in which you notice when personality arises and when it ceases.

When you're really observing it, you'll notice that personality is a very changeable thing. Are you the same person all the time? You might assume that you are. But in observing the actual nature of personality, you'll notice that it changes according to who you're with, the health of the body, and the state of mind. When you're at home with your parents, when you're in a Sangha meeting, when you're chairman of a committee, when you're just a junior member of the Sangha, when you're the chores officer or the work officer or the guest officer, what happens? Personality of course adapts itself to those roles, those situations and those conditions.

So then, what is *awareness* of personality? I ask, because my personality can't know my personality. There's no way this person can know.... I cannot as a person know my own personality. To know the personality, I have to abide in awareness, in a state of openness and reflectiveness. There's discernment operating. It is not a blank kind of vacuous zombie-like mental state. It's an openness, intelligent and alive, with recognition, discernment and attention in the present.

I used to make it a practice to play with personality rather than merely trying to let go of it as the *cause*

celebre of practice. To think 'I've got to get rid of my personality and not attach to my emotions' is one of the ways we grasp teachings of the Lord Buddha. Instead, I would become a personality quite intentionally, so I could listen to and observe this sense of *me and mine*. I would practise bringing up the thoughts, 'Me, what about me?' 'Don't you care about me?' 'Aren't you interested in what I think and how I feel?' And 'These are my things, this is my robe, my possessions, my bowl, my space, my view, my thoughts, my feelings and my rights.' 'I'm Ajahn Sumedho,' 'I'm a Mahāthera' and 'I'm a disciple of Luang Por Chah', and on and on like that. 'This is what makes me an interesting person, a person that has titles and is respected and admired in the society.' I would listen to that. I would listen, not to knock it down or criticise it but to recognise the power of words, how I could create my self; I would more and more find the refuge in awareness, rather than in the conditions of my personality, in the fears or self-disparagement or megalomania or whatever else happened to be operating in consciousness.

In communal life one's personality is constantly being challenged in some way. The structures that we use, monks and nuns as well as the heirarchical positions – being ajahns, or majjhima monks or navakas or samaneras or anagārikas, anagārikās, silādhara – are positions we can take very personally. We can make them into personal property. If we're not mindful and developing wisdom, then the life here becomes one of developing an ego around being a monk or a nun.

So when the Buddha pointed to awareness, *sati-sampajañña*, he was pointing to the reflective capacity. For this I use the phrase 'intuitive awareness.' Although 'intuition' is a common enough word in English, I myself use it to refer to the ability to awaken and be aware, which is a state of reflection. It isn't thought; it's not filling my mind with ideas or views and opinions. It's an ability to receive this present moment, to receive both the physical and mental conditions as they impinge on me through the senses. It is the ability to embrace the moment, which means the embracement of everything. Everything belongs here, whether you like it or not. Whether you want it or don't want it is not the issue. It is the way it is.

If I get caught in preferences, views and opinions about what I need for my practice, I'm coming not from intuitive awareness, but from an ideal: 'It has to be like this, quiet and subdued. I have to control the situation. I have to calm myself. I have to make sure that the things around me aren't challenging me in any way, and aren't disrupting or irritating me.' So I become a control freak.

Having an ideal of what I want, I try to make it an experience for myself. I feel that if those conditions aren't present, I can't possibly practise. Then I could start blaming: 'Too many people here, too much going on, too many meetings, too many things to do, too much work, ba ba ba!' Then I go into my, 'I want to go to my cave'. I have this troglodytic tendency, wanting to be a recluse in a cave, to go off somewhere nice and quiet, somewhere protected from the dangers of life, somewhere where there's no challenges; because people are challenging, aren't they, when living in community with them. It's always a challenge, because we affect each other all the time in one way or another. That's just the way it is; it's nobody's fault. It's the way communities are.

In the Buddhist tradition, the third refuge is in Sangha, which for us means *this* community. Sangha is the Pāli word for 'community.' Then you might say, 'Well, that means only the Ariyan Sangha: the *sotāpannas*, *sakadāgāmis*, *anāgāmis*, *arahants*. So I need to find a community where I'm only living with *sotāpannas* at least; and if there's *sotāpannas*, hopefully a few *arahants* will be around too.' But then, try to find a community where that exists.... With a grasping mind, even if you found it, you wouldn't recognise it, because even *arahants* can be irritating. So instead of trying to find the ideal community, I use the community that I'm in.

When living in this community, people affect me; thus my personality arises, together with various emotional reactions. The refuge, however, is in the awareness of this, in *trusting* our ability to be aware. When we are committed to awareness, then whatever happens, it belongs. When we are confident in awareness, there's nothing that can be an obstruction except ignorance and forgetfulness.

The style of practice that we use here points us always to the present. It is about learning, recognising, exploring and investigating. What is the self? What is personality? Don't be afraid of being a personality, but rather, be conscious of it. Personality arises and ceases in consciousness. It changes according to conditions. But awareness is a constant thing, although we might forget it, getting lost in the momentum of emotions and habits. So it's helpful to have ways of reminding ourselves, like the mantra 'Buddho' that we use. 'Buddho' means 'awake', 'wake up', 'pay attention', 'listen'.

In practice I've used the listening faculty. I listen. When I listen, I listen to myself, and I listen to the sounds that impinge on my ears: the sounds within and the sounds without. This attentive listening is very

supportive to intuitive awareness. So I listen to the rain, I listen to the silence. When I listen to the silence, I listen to the sound of silence.

If you consciously notice this awareness, and appreciate it, you move more towards being nobody, towards not knowing anything at all, rather than being someone who knows everything about everything, and having all the answers to all the questions, and knowing the solutions to every problem. To be nobody knowing nothing is scary, isn't it? But this attitude helps to direct us, because there is a strong desire in us to become, to attain and achieve. Even with the best of intentions, if that kind of desire is not recognised, it will always control you, whether it is the desire to become something, the desire to control things, or the desire to get rid of annoying things or bad thoughts or irritations around you. So trust in this awareness, this openness, this receptivity, attention, listening. And question the personality. For instance, I bring up my own personality, 'I'm Ajahn Sumedho. These are my robes, and these are my spectacles.'

Somebody sent me a lovely card the other day. It had a quote that says 'There is no way to happiness: happiness is the way.' Simple as that. Happiness is the way, or mindfulness is. Mindfulness, how do you become mindful? And then we can give all kinds of advice on meditation techniques, developing mindfulness in this and that, and yet you can still have not a clue what mindfulness is, even though you've got it all figured out. So stop trying to figure it out. Trust in it, in your awareness in the present, even if you feel you're someone who can't do it; you think you're a heedless person with too many emotional problems, and think you have to get this level of *samadhi* before you can possibly attain anything. Listen to that. That's all self-view, *sakkāya-ditthi* operating. No matter how intimidated you are by your thinking, trust in the awareness of it and not in the judging of it. You don't need to get rid of it, but recognise: thinking is like this, views, opinions, attachment to views and opinions are like this. Then you'll begin to see what attachment is as a reality, as a habit that we've developed. And you'll see personality, when it arises and when it ceases, when there's attachment to it and when there's non-attachment.

Personality is not the problem; the problem is the attachment to it. So you're always going to have a personality, even as an *arahant*; but an *arahant* has no identity with it and no attachment. So we have ways of speaking and talking and doing things that might seem very personal or unique or eccentric or whatever.

But that's not a problem. It's the ignorance and attachment that the Buddha was always referring to again and again as the cause of suffering.

This awareness, *sati-sampajañña*, intuitive awareness, is not something that I can claim personally. If my personality started claiming it, it would just be more self-view, *sakkāya-ditthi* again. If I started saying 'I'm a very wise person,' then it would be self-view claiming to be wise. So when you understand that, how could you claim to be anything at all? Of course, on a conventional level I'm willing to play the game. So, when they say 'Ajahn Sumedho' I say 'Yes'. There's nothing wrong with conventional reality either. The problem is in the attachment to it out of ignorance.

Avijjā is the Pali word for spiritual ignorance. It means not knowing the Four Noble Truths. In the investigation of the Four Noble Truths, *avijjā* ceases. Awareness, the awakened state, takes you out of ignorance immediately, if you'll trust it. As soon as you are aware, ignorance is gone. So then, when ignorance arises, you can be aware of it as something coming and going, rather than taking it personally or assuming that you're always ignorant until you become enlightened. If you're always operating from the assumption that 'I'm ignorant and I've got to practise in order to get rid of ignorance,' then grasp that assumption, you're stuck with that until you see through the grasping of that view.

So I encourage you to develop this simple immanent ability. It doesn't seem like anything. It's not an attainment. Maybe you conceive of it as an attainment,



and so think you can't do it. But even if you can't do it, be aware of the view that you can't do it. Trust in whatever is going on. Because when I talk like this, people accuse me, 'Oh, Ajahn Sumedho's been practising a long time; he always had good *samādhi*, and so he can talk like that.' They go on like that, thinking that I'm a highly attained person, and that that therefore justifies their position. They compare themselves to their projection of me, without seeing what they're doing. They don't know *what* they're doing. They're lost in views about themselves and about others.

So I recommend that you trust in the immediacy, to give *enough* attention, which is not an aggressive wilfulness, but a relaxed openness, a listening and a resting. More and more through practice you recognise it, rather than pass it by or overlook it all the time. Then you can focus on whatever you like, on the breath or being aware of what's going on in your body for instance.

If this awareness is well established then you can decide what to focus on in any situation; but of course, you have to be aware of time and place. If I want to be aware of just bodily experience in the present and if I do that in the wrong place it doesn't work. Right now giving this talk, if I say, 'I'm going to do my sitting practice. Everybody shut up!', you know it's not the right time and place. But when I get down from here and go back to my meditation mat, it might be a good thing to do, to be aware of the physical sensations or the tensions or the breath, without judging or criticising, but just noticing, 'It's like this', accepting, allowing things to be what they are, rather than always trying to change or control them.

Once you see through self-view, the development of the path is then very clear. You trust in this awareness, in non-attachment. You are able to see that attachment is like this, non-attachment is like this. There's a discernment.

INTRODUCTORY MEDITATION—ĀMARAVATI

Saturday Afternoon Classes 2.00 pm – 4.00 pm

Meditation instruction for beginners;
with an opportunity for questions
to be answered.

Classes are in the Bodhinyāna Meditation Hall.

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When you attach to things, really attach, so that you get the feeling of what attachment, *upādāna*, really is. Don't just grasp the view that you shouldn't be attached to anything, because then you get attached to the view not to attach. So really be attached to *being* this, or to *having* a view; but observe attachment, really notice the power of attachment, *upādāna*, of ambition, of wanting to get something, wanting to get rid of something. Make it fully conscious. And then once you really see attachment, you can inform yourself to let go of it. Let go. Let it be. So you are more accepting of things until they fall away. Of course, you can't keep anything, because things are always changing. Even if you delude yourself that you can keep something by holding on, you'll eventually see that that's an impossibility.

Finally in practice, we're left with the existential reality of our humanity. We've still got these primordial drives, sexual desire and anger. But now we know better than to make them personal. With *sakkāya-ditthi*, self-view, we're always judging our sexual desires, and our anger, hatred, aversion and fear, and making them very personal. But now we can look at them for what they are. They're energies, they're a part of being human, of having a human body and being in a sensitive and vulnerable space. We begin to see and understand the nature of lust, greed, anger, hatred and delusion, because we have taken the *sakkāya-ditthi*, the self-view out of it, the attachment to it on a personal level. We see that these energies arise and cease according to conditions. However, if you still haven't seen through *sakkāya-ditthi*, then your whole life you'll be celibate and feel guilty about sexual desire and anger and hatred. You'll become neurotic through identifying with those energies and forces that are in fact part of human reality, and are not personal.

We all have these primordial drives as human beings. They are common to all of us. They are not a personal identity. Our refuge is in awareness rather than in judging these energies that we're experiencing. Of course, our religious form is celibate, so when sexual energies arise, we're aware of them, and don't act on them. They arise and cease just like everything else. Anger and hatred arise and cease. When the conditions for anger arise, it's like this; likewise fear, the primal emotion of the animal realm. But the *awareness* of lust and greed, the *awareness* of anger, the *awareness* of hatred and fear, that is your refuge. Your refuge is in the awareness. ❖

Some Final Words

*Extract of a talk given by Luang Por Chah to a large gathering of monks and laypeople
at Wat Nong Pah Pong, recently translated by Paul Breiter.*

In every home and every community, whether we live in the city, the countryside, the forests, or the mountains, we are the same in experiencing happiness and suffering; but very many of us lack a place of refuge, a field or garden where we can cultivate positive qualities of heart. We don't have clear understanding of what this life is about and what we ought to be doing. From childhood and youth through till adulthood, we learn to seek enjoyment and take delight in the pleasures of the senses, and we never think that danger will threaten us as we go about our lives, making a family and so on.

There is also for many of us, an inner lack of virtue and Dhamma in our lives, from not listening to the teachings and not practising Dhamma. As a result, there is little wisdom in our lives, and everything regresses and degenerates. The Buddha, our Supreme Teacher, had loving-kindness (*mettā*) for beings. He led sons and daughters of good family to ordain, practise and realise the truth. He taught them to establish and spread the teaching, and to show people how to live with happiness in their daily lives. He taught the proper ways to earn a livelihood, to be moderate and thrifty in managing finances, and to act without carelessness in all affairs.

The Lord Buddha taught that no matter how poor we may be, we should not let it impoverish our hearts and starve our wisdom. Even if there are floods inundating our fields, our villages, and our homes, to the point where it is beyond our capability to save anything, the Buddha taught us not to let it flood and overcome our hearts. Flooding the heart means that we lose sight of and have no knowledge of Dhamma.

Even if water floods our fields again and again over the years, or even if fire burns down our homes, we still will have our minds. If our minds have virtue and Dhamma, we can then use our wisdom to help us make a living and support ourselves. We can acquire land again and make a new start.

I really believe that if you listen to the Dhamma, contemplating it and understanding it, you can make an end of your suffering. You will know what is right to do, what you need to do, what you need to use and what you need to spend. You can live your life according moral precepts and Dhamma, applying wisdom to worldly matters. Unfortunately, most of us are far from that.

We should remember that when the Buddha taught Dhamma and set out the way of practice, he wasn't trying to make our lives difficult. He wanted us to improve, to become better and more skilful. It's just that

we don't listen. This is pretty bad. It's like a little child who doesn't want to take a bath in the middle of winter because it's too cold. He starts to stink so much that the parents can't even sleep at night, so they grab hold of him and give him a bath. That makes him mad, and he cries and curses his father and mother.

The parents and the child see the situation differently. For the child, it's too uncomfortable to take a bath in the winter. For the parents, the child's smell is unbearable. The two views can't be reconciled. The Buddha didn't simply want to leave us as we are. He wanted us to be diligent and work hard in ways that are good and beneficial, and to be enthusiastic about the right path. Instead of being lazy, we have to make efforts.

His teaching is not something that will make us foolish or useless. It teaches us how to develop and apply wisdom to whatever we are doing, working, farming, raising a family and managing our finances. If we live in the world, we have to pay attention and know



the ways of the world, otherwise we end up in dire straits.

When we have our means of livelihood, our homes and possessions, our minds can be comfortable and upright, and we can have the energy of spirit to help and assist each other. If someone is able to share food and clothing and provide shelter to those in need, that is an act of loving-kindness. The way I see it, giving things in a spirit of loving-kindness is far better than selling them to make a profit. Those who have *mettā* don't wish for anything for themselves. They only wish for others to live in happiness.

When we live according to Dhamma, we feel no distress when looking back on what we have done. We are only creating good kamma. If we are creating bad kamma, then the result later on will be misery. So we need to listen and contemplate, and we need to figure out where difficulties come from. Haven't you ever carried things to the fields on a pole over your shoulders? When the load is too heavy in front, isn't that uncomfortable to carry? When it's too heavy in back, isn't that uncomfortable to carry? Which way is balanced and which way is imbalanced? When you're doing it well, you can see it. Dhamma is like that. There is cause and effect – it is common sense. When the load is balanced, it's easier to carry. With an attitude of moderation our family relations and our work will be smoother. Even if you aren't rich, you will still have ease of mind; you won't need to suffer over it.

As we haven't died yet, now is the time to talk about these things. If you don't hear Dhamma when you are a human being, there won't be any other chance. Do you think animals can be taught Dhamma? Animal life is a lot harder than ours, being born as a toad or a frog, a pig or a dog, a cobra or a viper, a squirrel or a rabbit. When people see them, they only think about killing or beating them, or catching or raising them for food. So, we have this opportunity only as humans. As we're still alive, now is the time to look into this and mend our ways. If things are difficult, try to bear with the difficulty for the time being and live in the right way, until one day you can do it. This is the way to practise Dhamma.

So, I am reminding you all of the need for having a

good mind and living your lives in an ethical way. However you may have been doing things up to now, you should take a look and examine to see whether what you are doing is good or not. If you've been following wrong ways, give them up. Give up wrong livelihood. Earn your living in a good and decent way that doesn't harm others and doesn't harm yourself or society. When you practice right livelihood, then you will live with a comfortable mind.

We should use our time to create benefit right now, in the present. This was the Buddha's intention: benefit in this life, benefit in future lives. In this life, from childhood we need to apply ourselves to study, to learn at least enough to be able to earn a living, so that we can support ourselves and eventually establish a family and not live in poverty. But we sometimes lack this responsible attitude. We seek enjoyment instead. Wherever there's a festival, a play, or a concert, we're on our way there, even when it's getting near harvest time. The old folks will drag the grandchildren along to hear the famous singer.

'Where are you off to, Grandmother?'
'I'm taking the kids to hear the concert!'

I don't know if Grandma is taking the kids, or the kids are taking her. It doesn't seem to matter how long or difficult a trip it might be, they go again and again. They say they're taking the grandchildren, but the truth is that they just want to go themselves. To them, that's what a good time is. If you invite them to the monastery to listen to Dhamma, to learn about right and wrong, they'll say, 'You go ahead. I want to stay home and rest...I've got a bad headache...my back hurts...my knees are sore...I really don't feel well....' But if it's a popular singer or an exciting play, they'll hurry to round up the kids. Nothing bothers them then. That's how some folks are. They make such efforts, yet all they do is bring suffering and difficulty on themselves. They seek out darkness, confusion, and intoxication on the path of delusion.

The Buddha teaches us to create benefit for ourselves in this life, ultimate benefit, spiritual welfare. We should do it now, in this very life. We should seek out the knowledge that helps us do it, so that we can live our lives well, making good use of our resources, working with diligence in ways of right livelihood.

The Buddha taught us to meditate. In meditation, we must practise *samādhi*, which means making the mind still and peaceful. It's like water in a basin. If we keep putting things in it and stirring it up, it will always be

AMARAVATI CASSETTES

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murky. If the mind is always allowed to be thinking and worrying over things, we will never see anything clearly. If we let the water in the basin settle and become still, then we will see all sorts of things reflected in it. When the mind is settled and still, wisdom will be able to see things. The illuminating light of wisdom surpasses any other kind of light.

When training the mind in *samādhi*, we initially get the idea it will be easy. But when we sit, our legs hurt, our back hurts, we feel tired, we get hot and itchy. Then we start to feel discouraged, thinking that *samādhi* is as far away from us as the sky from the earth. We don't know what to do and become overwhelmed by the difficulties. But if we receive some training, it will get easier little by little.

It's like a city person looking for mushrooms. He asks, 'Where do mushrooms come from?' Someone tells him, 'They grow in the earth.' So he picks up a basket and goes walking into the countryside, expecting the mushrooms to be lined up along the side of the road for him. But he walks and walks, climbing hills and trekking through fields, without seeing any mushrooms. A village person who has gone picking mushrooms before, would know where to look for them; he would know which part of which forest to go to. But the city person has had only the experience of seeing mushrooms on his plate. He heard they grow in the earth and got the idea that they would be easy to find, but it didn't work out that way.

Likewise, you who come here to practise *samādhi* might feel it's difficult. I had my troubles with it too. I trained with an Ajahn, and when we were sitting I'd open my eyes to look: 'Oh! Is Ajahn ready to stop yet?' I'd close my eyes again and try to bear it a little longer. I felt it was going to kill me. I kept opening my eyes, but the Ajahn looked so comfortable sitting there. One hour, two hours, I would be in agony but the Ajahn didn't move. So after a while I got to fear the sittings. When it was time to practise *samādhi*, I'd feel afraid.

When we are new to it, training in *samādhi* is difficult. Anything is difficult when we don't know how to do it. This is our obstacle. But with training, this can change. That which is good can eventually overcome and surpass that which is not good. We tend to become faint-hearted as we struggle—this is a normal reaction, and we all go through it. So it's important to train for some time. It's like making a path through the forest. At first it's rough going, with a lot of obstructions, but returning to it again and again, we clear the way. After some time, when we have removed the branches and stumps, the ground becomes firm and smooth from

being walked on repeatedly. Then we have a good path for walking through the forest. This is what it's like when we train the mind. Keeping at it, the mind becomes illuminated.

So the Buddha wanted us to seek Dhamma. This kind of knowledge is what's most important. Any form of knowledge or study that does not accord with the Buddhist way is learning that involves *dukkha*. Our practice of Dhamma should get us beyond suffering; if we can't fully transcend suffering, then we should at least be able to transcend it a little, now, in the present.

When problems come to you, recollect Dhamma. Think of what your spiritual guides have taught you. They have taught you to let go, to give up, to refrain, to put things down; they have taught you to strive and fight in a way that will solve your difficulties. The Dhamma that you come to listen to is for solving problems. The teaching tells you that you can solve the problems of daily life with Dhamma. After all, we have been born as human beings; it should be possible for us to live with happy minds. ❖

Amaravati Lay Events – 2004

These events provide an opportunity to practice together and explore themes relevant to practice and lay life. They include silent and guided meditation, sutta study groups, yoga, discussion groups and other workshops. All groups are optional so you can participate in silence if you prefer. *All are welcome.*

Days of Practice – 9.45a.m. for 10a.m. – 5p.m. No need to book.
Please bring some food to share

Retreats – Advanced booking essential.

Registration from 5.30p.m. Retreats end at 4.00p.m. on last day.

January 17	Day of Winter Practice
February 14	Day of Winter Practice
March 13	Day of Winter Practice
April 8 – 12	5-day retreat 'The Factors of Enlightenment'
May 15	Day of Practice 'Generosity and Gratitude' – 10th Anniversary of AUA
June 18 – 20	Weekend Retreat 'Dukkha, Illness and Death in the Dhamma'
July 17	Day of Practice *
July 30 – August 1	Weekend Retreat for women
September 18	Day of Practice *
* October 8 – 10	Weekend Retreat
Nov 13 (prov)	Day of Practice * (<i>date to be confirmed</i>)
December 4	Day of Practice *

* Themes to be confirmed

For more information please contact:

Nick Carroll, 020 8740 9748 or Chris Ward, 01442 890034

Booking forms can be downloaded from www.Buddhacommunity.org or written to address below with S.A.E.

Organised by the Amaravati Upāsaka/Upāsikā Association (AUA), Amaravati Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP1 3BZ

The Divine Abidings

*Excerpts of a talk given by Ajahn Thāṇiyā at the Insight Meditation Centre,
Barre, Massachusetts, in April 1996.*

Mettā: loving-kindness

In Pali, the reflection on *mettā* goes, ‘*sabbe sattā sukhitā hontu*,’ which is translated as ‘May all beings be well.’ The practice of *mettā* is often talked about as if it should be emanated boundlessly across the whole world. In terms of our practice here, I’d like to present it in a slightly different way. For myself, *mettā* implies a well-wishing, a good-heartedness towards all the conditions of our minds and bodies. This is a far more difficult practice than spreading a sentiment across the world. It is far more difficult to rest in this particular moment and to love it.

It is hard to understand loving-kindness until we’ve received it ourselves, this unconditional well-wishing. For some of us this unconditional well-wishing will come through teachers or through community. They give us a sense that it’s not about who we are or what we’re like. It’s not about our personality. It’s just a sense of being wished well in a boundless, unconditional, non-judgmental kind of way. Having unconditional kindness extended towards me has helped me understand it. An instance of this occurred at Chithurst where I am living.

I often work in the grounds of the monastery, and am sometimes rather too zealous about it. I often find myself working on a job that takes a lot of physical energy. To make it worse, the instructions on the can will say, ‘This must be completed by nightfall. It cannot be done tomorrow.’ This scenario happens to me quite frequently. I have some friends who come past sometimes when I’m on one of these jobs. There was one not so long ago, just before winter. I was working away and they came past. I was soaking because I’d been working with water. They just looked at me as if to say, ‘Well here you are covered in water in late autumn. It’s not exactly sensible.’ What they actually said was, ‘The dark and cold are coming.’ Then they left. I was still in the middle of this job. It had to be finished that day. It couldn’t wait, so I pressed on.

Later, my friends came back. They said nothing. They got some tools and started helping. We silently got the job done, then packed the tools away. The darkness had come and the cold, but they said not a word. This was their response to somebody that they cared about. They simply helped me get finished, because it was obvious that I wasn’t going to stop. So, kindness comes, it supports and it helps. It takes no sides. It is an offering, a coming forth from the heart, and it offers itself without conditions.

Having felt what it is like to be cared for in a way that is free of judgement, I am learning how to relate in a similar way to my own life predicament, how to be present with whatever grief there is, or whatever anger, without pretending they are not there. Such kindness is the way to transcend these emotions, because to transcend emotions they have to be felt and known. We have to be present for them.

To make peace with conditions takes time and patience. There needs to be a willingness to give things time. There needs to be patience to gradually come close enough to touch them, to know them for what they are. It takes time for them to be known in accordance with Dhamma. So *mettā* means to be willing to wait for things to unfold in a natural way.

To me it’s important that we don’t use *mettā* as a pink cloud practice, using it to smother what we don’t like, and deny our unwillingness to love ourselves and others. You know, *Mettā* is not about sending out some kind of sentiment in this way. It is not about rejecting negativity or unhappiness. If we use it that way, it will just deepen our sense of failure. *Mettā* would then become merely another stick we beat ourselves with.

Karunā: compassion

The Buddha’s reflection for compassion is, ‘May all beings be freed from suffering.’ As with *mettā*, the practice of compassion begins with ourselves. Compassion is the ability to stop and to listen. Often there’s no need to say anything. Just having the willingness to be present is enough to liberate suffering; and to be present is something we can do for ourselves. When we see the extent of the suffering in our own bodies, and the suffering of painful mental states like grief, longing, or ill will, if we are willing to feel them, to know the suffering that’s present, then very naturally compassion arises. When suffering is felt in this way, then the heart softens. It is like when a three-year old is weeping in the night. When you go in to them, the natural response is, ‘Look, love, I’m here.’ The practice of *karunā* is that same softness, whether it is our own suffering we feel, or the suffering around us.

As we start to open to the suffering of birth, and to the suffering of a world that is constantly changing and shifting, as we allow ourselves to feel what life is really like, we stop trying to fill the great void we feel. Slowly we relax our demands on the world and start to turn outwards. Then *mettā* and *karunā* come to ripeness.

As we relax our grip on the world, we begin to ask ourselves, 'What shall I give?' And of course what we give is kindness and compassion.

***Muditā*: appreciative joy**

Muditā is the appreciation of the goodness of others. It seems to me important that we touch the beauty of the world, and the beauty of other peoples' hearts. This acknowledgement nourishes our own hearts, though we may find it difficult indeed to receive other people's goodness. This is something I have noticed in myself.

Many years ago when I was in Thailand, I used to work in the monastery kitchen. I would help the villagers cook the meals. After the meal, because they had their crops to do, I would say to them, 'Well, go home, and I'll look after the cleaning up.' There was one little girl who sometimes used to join us. She was an orphan. The villagers were a bit rough with her, so she used to snuggle under my wing. After the others had gone home she would help me do the cleaning up. After wiping the floor, we would rinse the floor rags, and hang them on the line. One day I had just started rinsing the rags, when I suddenly felt this little girl washing my feet. While she was washing them, I could feel a rising panic, and an urge to stamp my feet; but because she was so small I had to hold still, otherwise I would have hurt her. So I held very still and endured my feelings. When she had finished washing my feet, she started on my hands. She took each of my hands, carefully washed one side, turned it over, and washed the other. At that point, my feelings of resistance vanished. I suddenly understood the gift she was offering me, in washing my hands and my feet, and I saw that the only thing that I could offer in return was the ability to receive it.

In our lives we must similarly be willing to receive, and be willing to be vulnerable. We must allow ourselves to be not always together, not always the best, as if we were telling the world 'We're perfectly alright without you, thanks mate.' If we keep everything safe and controlled for ourselves so that we have everything we need, we will have no space for the miracle of human kindness and generosity. Although we may keep our lives secure and walled off, this walling off means that we will never receive the precious beauty of the world. So to practise *muditā*, joy, we must allow ourselves to receive it. It goes so much against our conditioning. We can, even here, stop and reflect on where this meditation centre comes from, and feel the respect for people like



Sharon and Joseph who twenty years ago, through some great faith, got this whole thing started, and then for all the people who have helped since.

***Upekkhā*: equanimity**

In contemplating equanimity I use the phrase 'not asking for anything.' For me the practice of equanimity lies in not asking for things to be any other way than they are, rather to be able to rest with things just as they are. With *upekkhā*, though we wish well-being, we don't demand that things be well; we understand Dhamma. This helps with *mettā*. It keeps us grounded. It prevents *mettā* from sweeping us away.

It's as if you come upon someone you love sleeping. When people are sleeping, their beauty is usually revealed, and there's a feeling of just wanting to hold there in that moment forever. But if you notice the movement of breath in the throat, you can see that to hold still for ever would be death, because movement, the movement of breath, is life. So the impermanence of things is also their life, their flow and their beauty. *Upekkhā* gives us the strength to hold steady with things, and the strength to let go. ❖

**From the editor:**

Although only a few credits are given in the newsletter, its production involves many willing hands. I would like to express my appreciation to everyone involved, and for the kind letters received. Tahn Varado

SANGHA NOTICES

From early January until the end of March, the monastic communities will be in retreat. During this time overnight accommodation will not be available for guests. Visitors may still come during the day to meditate or to help with mealtime offerings; if you would like to offer dāna, it is helpful, if possible, to let the kitchen manager know beforehand. For most of the retreat time at both Cittaviveka and Amaravati, visitors may come for evening puja at 7.30pm. A Dhamma talk will be given at Amaravati on Observance nights and at Cittaviveka on Saturday nights. The Saturday afternoon meditation workshops will continue at Amaravati; they will be led by an experienced lay meditator. Telephone messages will be processed daily throughout this time, but in general, responses to written requests will not be attended to until after mid-March.

AMARAVATI NOTICES**Vesākha Pūjā**

We will be celebrating Vesākha Pūjā - the day of the commemoration of the Birth, Enlightenment and Parinibbāna of the Buddha - on Sunday 30th May. More information about the day will be available nearer to the time.

CITTAVIVEKA NOTICES**Winter Retreat 2004**

We welcome applications from laymen who are experienced with meditation practice and the monastic lifestyle, who are willing to offer support to the Sangha during this special - silent time, February - March 2004. Two weeks minimum stay, a month or more preferred. Please write to the Guest Monk.

Garden Days Sat. 10th April, Sun 11th July. If you'd like overnight accommodation write to the guest monk/nun.

Forest Days: Sat. 24th April, Sun. 23rd May and Sun. 27th June. These afternoons will be spent helping the Sangha in ongoing work in Hammer Wood. Meet at the monastery at 1.00pm. If you'd like overnight accommodation write to the guest monk/nun.

Plumbing Help Needed

Chithurst welcomes long-stay guests with plumbing skills and experience, together with an interest in

helping the Sangha. Our antiquated plumbing system needs long-term study and understanding prior to possible modification.

HARTRIDGE NOTICES

The full moon of 8th November marked the close of the 'second vassa'. A most successful & harmonious three months was spent here with Ajahn Suriyo, Ajahn Gandhasilo & Anagārika Jaroslav in residence. Little by little, life is returning to Hartridge; more locals are discovering a resident community of samanās with whom to make a connection. The practice of pindapāta to Honiton on Tuesdays (market day!) has been revived and we have received a very positive response.

This year we will be on retreat January and February and will not be able to have visitors to stay until March. Visitors wishing to stay and participate in our simple lifestyle should write well in advance; we always appreciate willing workers helping us on our ten-acre plantation.

RETREATS IN THE UK**Buddhist/Christian Retreats at Turvey Abbey, 2004**

April 23 - 25: **Inner Silence and Awakening 1** - Meister Eckhart. An interfaith weekend, reflecting on the texts and direct teaching of Meister Eckhart, through the Benedictine contemplative prayer method of Lectio Divina.

September 17 - 19: **Inner Silence and Awakening 2** - Spirituality and Science. A contemplative weekend, exploring the teachings of great spiritual leaders, through the medium of Lectio Divina.

Leaders: George Wilson, Sister Lucy.

October 1 - 3: Meditation and Mindfulness

A Buddhist / Christian contemplative weekend, learning from each other's spiritual traditions.

Leaders: A Buddhist Nun and a Christian (Turvey) Nun. Information and Booking for Turvey

Weekends: Retreat Secretary, Turvey Abbey, Turvey, Beds, MK43 8DE.E-mail:

SisterLucy@turveyabbey.freeserve.co.uk

Tariff: £83 full board. Concessions available for students a7nd those on low income.

GENERAL NOTICES**Pilgrimage to Mount Kailash**

In June 2004, we will offer Ajahn Sucitto and Ajahn Akincano the opportunity to undertake a pilgrimage to China, Tibet and Mount Kailash. Also attending the pilgrimage will be ourselves, Kittisaro, Thanissara and Moyra Keane (from the Johannesburg group), who will gather in any prayers that you would like to send. These prayers will be written into a scroll and carried to the mountain and offered there, to all the

benevolent forces. The pilgrimage will also carry small packages of earth from the monasteries and Dhamma centres connected with the Forest Sangha. This earth will be left on the mountain to create a connection with Kailash. If you would like to offer your prayers, contact Thanissara or Kittisaro at dragonmtn@xsinet.co.za, in the UK contact Nimmala (01273 723378), and in Switzerland, contact Dhammapala Monastery.

Forest Sangha Newsletter

The current and many previous issues of the Forest Sangha Newsletter are now available to view or download from the internet at; <http://www.fsnewsletter.net> or by following the link from <http://www.amaravati.org>

The Forest Sangha Trust for Scotland

is a new charity aimed at establishing, in the long-term, a Sangha of the Theravāda Forest Tradition in the hills and forests of Scotland. If you would like to have more information, or to offer support, please contact The Charity Secretary, Forest Sangha Trust for Scotland (Registered Charity No. SC 034446), PO Box 7495, Perth, PH1 5YR, UK; e-mail: fstscot@hotmail.com

Sunyata Retreat Centre, Ireland

The present owners have decided to move on and are seeking others to buy this beautiful up and running retreat centre in the west of Ireland and continue it as a Buddhist meditation centre. If interested please contact Stan de Freitas, Sunyata Retreat Centre, Sixmilebridge, Co. Clare, Ireland. Tel: (from UK) 00-353-61-367073; email: info@sunyatacentre.com. Photos of the centre can be seen on the website www.sunyatacentre.com

NEWS FROM THE TRUSTS**Possible land purchase at Amaravati**

During the last year you may have heard that the monastery has been in discussion with our neighbouring farmer to purchase a sizeable piece of land on which we hoped to create woodland. An agreement was nearly reached, however for personal reasons, the vendor withdrew from making a sale at this time. Fortunately we remain on good terms, and it is probable that land will come up for sale in the next few years.

The community and the Trust would like to thank everyone who has offered help or support with the project over the past year. If you would like us to contact you if or when we hear of land for sale please leave your details with the EST Secretary at Amaravati.

Finally, as the year draws to a close, we would like to wish you a Happy New Year and take this opportunity to thank you for all your support over the last year.

We try to bring out the Newsletter quarterly, depending upon funds and written material. In the spirit of our relationship with lay people, we naturally depend upon donations: any contributions towards printing/distribution costs can be made to: 'The English Sangha Trust', Amaravati. In that same spirit, we ask you to let us know if you wish to be put on (or removed from) the mailing list, or if you have moved. Write to Newsletter, Amaravati. Back issues of the newsletter are available on the internet from: <http://www.fsnewsletter.net> We are working on improving the site and hope to be able to post latest issues in the near future.

Data Protection Act: The mailing list used for Forest Sangha Newsletter is maintained on computer. If you object to your record being kept on our computer file, please write to Newsletter, Amaravati, and we will remove it.

This Newsletter is printed by: Ashford Printers, Harrow. Telephone - (020) 8427-5097

Teaching and Practice Venues

Amaravati Retreats



MEDITATION GROUPS

These are visited regularly by Sangha members.

BATH – Thursday/Weekly	Catherine Hewitt, (01225) 405-235
EDINBURGH	Neil Howell, 0131-226 5044
GLASGOW – 1 st Friday/Monthly	James Scott, (0141) 637-9731
LEEDS AREA – Friday/Weekly	Daniela Loeb, (0113) 2791-375 Anne Grimshaw, (01274) 691-447
HAMPSTEAD – Wed/Weekly	Caroline Randall, (020) 8348-0537
LONDON BUDDHIST SOCIETY	Tel: (020) 7834 5858
58 Eccleston Square, London SW1(Victoria) Meditation Sundays: led by a monk or nun, every 2nd month. 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. Thursday classes – 6.00pm	
SOUTHAMPTON –	Ros Dean, (02380) 422430

MEDITATION GROUPS

These meet regularly & receive occasional visits from Sangha.

BEDFORD	David Stubbs, (01234) 720-892
BELFAST – Sunday/Weekly	Paddy Boyle, (02890) 427-720
BERKSHIRE – 2 nd & 4 th Wed/Monthly	Penny Henrion (01189) 662-646
BRIGHTON – Wednesday/Weekly	Nimmala, (01273) 723-378
CAMBRIDGE – Sunday/Fortnightly	Dan Jones, (01223) 246 257
CANTERBURY	Charles Watters, (01227) 463342
CO. CLARE, IRELAND – Wednesday/Weekly	Stan de Freitas, (00 353) 61 367-073
DUBLIN	Rupert Westrup, (01) 280-2832, (Dial: 00441 – from the UK)
HARLOW – Monday/Weekly	Pamutto, (01279) 724-330
HEMEL HEMPSTEAD	Bodhinyāna Group – Wednesday/Weekly in school term times Chris Ward (01442) 890-034
KENDAL – Sunday/Weekly	Fellside Centre, Low Fellside Jayasīli, (01539) 740-996
LIVERPOOL	Ursula Haeckel, (0151) 427 6668
LONDON/NOTTING HILL – Tuesday/Weekly	Jeffery Craig, (0207) 221 9330
LEIGH-ON-SEA	Rob Howell (01702) 482 134
MACHYNLLETH/MID. WALES – Monday/Weekly	Angela Llewellyn, (01650) 511-350
MIDHURST – 2 nd /4 th Wed/Monthly	Barry Durrant, (01730) 821-479
NEWCASTLE-ON-TYNE – Wed/Weekly	Andy Hunt, (0191) 478-2726
NEWENT, GLOUCS – Friday/Every 3 weeks	John Teire, (01531) 821-902, john.teire@virgin.net
NORWICH – 2 nd Thursday/Monthly	Elaine Tattersall (01603) 260-717
PEMBROKESHIRE/S. WALES – Weekly meeting and other events	Peter and Barbara (Subhadrā) Jackson, (01239) 820-790
PERTH – Saturday/Every 2 weeks	Neil Abbot, (07765) 667-499
PORTSMOUTH – 1 st Mon/Monthly	Dave Beal, (02392) 732-280
REDRUTH – Mon & Wed/Weekly	Daniel Davide, (01736) 753-175
SHEFFIELD	Greg Bradshaw, (0114) 262-0265
SOUTH DORSET – Thursday/Weekly	Barbara Cohen (Sati-sati), (01305) 786-821
STEYNING / SUSSEX	Jayantī (01903) 812-130
STROUD	John Groves, (07967) 777-742
SURREY/WOKING – Wed/Weekly	Rocanā, (01483) 761-398
TEESIDE THERAVADA BUDDHIST GROUP – 2 nd Wednesday/Monthly and 4 th Thursday	David Williams, (01642) 603-481
TOTNES – Wednesday/Weekly	Jerry, (01803) 840-199

2004 – Retreats

April 2 – 4	(Weekend) Ajahn Natthiko FULL
April 16 – 18	(Weekend) Sister Ānandabodhi and Sister Santacittā
April 30 – May 9	(10 day) Ajahn Amaro FULL
May 21 – 23	(Weekend) Sister Ānandabodhi
June 5 – 12	(8 day) Ajahn Jitindriyā and Ajahn Thāniyā# FULL
July 2 – 11	(10 day) Ajahn Vimalo
July 23 – 25	(Weekend) Tan Revato
Aug. 6 – 15	(10 day) Ajahn Vajiro
Sept. 3 – 12	(10 day) Ajahn Sumedho FULL
Sept. 24 – 26	(Weekend) Sister Mettā
Oct. 15 – 17	(Weekend) Ajahn Vimalo
Oct. 29 – Nov. 2	(5 day) Ajahn Natthiko
Nov. 19 – 21	(Weekend) Ajahn Thāniyā
Nov. 26 – 30	(5 day)
Dec. 10 – 12	(Weekend)
Dec. 27 – Jan. 1 2005	(6 day) Ajahn Khantiko

Exceptionally this retreat begins and ends on a Saturday, with registration on the first day at 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Availability of retreat places will be displayed on our website

Retreats in 2004 will operate on a donation basis

No booking fees are required

- Bookings are only accepted on receipt of a completed booking form. Note that bookings cannot be made by telephone or by e-mail messages. Booking forms are available from the website, by e-mailing or writing to the Retreat Centre.
- Unless specified otherwise, retreats begin in the evening of the first day. Registration on the first day is at 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. Orientation talk is at 7.15 p.m. Weekend retreats end at 4 p.m. Other retreats end at lunchtime.
- All weekend retreats are suitable for beginners. Generally it is advisable to do a weekend retreat before doing any of the longer retreats.
- Applicants requiring confirmation – either that they have a place on the retreat or that they are on the waiting list – are asked to supply a stamped addressed envelope or an e-mail address.

Retreat Centre Work Weekend 2004

Friday 1st – Sunday 3rd October

Participants gather on Friday evening. Work begins on Saturday morning. Part-time attendance is also welcomed. Please e-mail or write in for an application form.

**Telephone: 01442 843-239 e-mail: retreats@amaravati.org
website: <http://www.amaravati.org>**

V I H A R A S

BRITAIN

◆ **Amaravati Monastery**
Great Gaddesden,
Hemel Hempstead,
Hertfordshire HP1 3BZ
Tel: (01442) 842-455 (Office)
84-3239 (Retreat Info.)
Fax: (01442) 843-721
Web site: www.amaravati.org
Stewards: *English Sangha Trust, Amaravati.*

◆ **Aruna Ratanagiri**
Harnham Buddhist Monastery
Harnham, Belsay,
Northumberland
NE20 0HF
Tel: (01661) 881-612
Fax: (01661) 881-019
Web site: www.ratanagiri.org.uk
E-mail: community@ratanagiri.org.uk
Stewards: *Magga Bhavaka Trust.*

◆ **Cittaviveka: Chithurst**
Buddhist Monastery
Chithurst, Petersfield,
Hampshire GU31 5EU
Tel: (01730) 814-986
Fax: (01730) 817-334
Stewards: *English Sangha Trust, Cittaviveka.*

◆ **Hartridge Buddhist**
Monastery
Upton, Honiton,
Devon EX14 9QE
Tel: (01404) 891-251
Fax: (01404) 890-023
Stewards: *Devon Vihara Trust.*

THAILAND
◆ **Wat Pah Nanachat**
Bahn Bung Wai,
Amper Warin,
Ubon Rajathani 34310
Mailing for Thailand:
To be placed on newsletter
mailing list please write to
Amaravati.

NEW ZEALAND
◆ **Bodhinyanarama**
17 Rakau Grove,
Stokes Valley,
Wellington 6008
Tel: (+64) 45 637-193
Fax: (+64) 45 635-125
e-mail: sangha@actrix.gen.nz
Stewards: *Wellington Theravada Buddhist Association.*

◆ **Auckland Buddhist Vihara**
29 Harris Road,
Mount Wellington,
Auckland
Tel: (+ + 64) 957 955-443

ITALY
◆ **Santacittarama**
Località Brulla,
02030 Frasso Sabino (Rieti)
Tel: (++39) 0 765 872-186
Fax: (++39) 06 233 238-629
Website: www.santacittarama.org
Stewards: *Santacittarama Association.*

SWITZERLAND
◆ **Dhammapala**
Buddhistisches Kloster
Am Waldrand,
CH 3718 Kandersteg
Tel: 033 / 6 752-100
Fax: 033 / 6 752-241
Stewards: *Dhammapala 31921-201-5.*

NORTH AMERICA
◆ **Abhayagiri Monastery**
16201 Tomki Road,
Redwood Valley,
CA 95470
Tel: (707) 485-1630
Fax: (707) 485-7948
(Sangha literature and all
USA newsletters are
distributed from here.)
Web site: www.abhayagiri.org
Stewards: *Sanghapala Foundation.*

◆ **Boston Area:**
Buddhaparisa, Boston,
Mass. Tel: (781) 8 616-837

AUSTRALIA
◆ **Bodhinyana Monastery**
Lot 1, Kingsbury Drive,
Serpentine 6125 WA
Tel: (08) 95 252-420
Fax: (08) 95 253-420
◆ **Bodhivana Monastery**
780 Woods Point Road
East Warburton
Victoria 3799
Tel: +61 (0) 359 665-999
Fax: +61 (0) 359 665-998

◆ **Dharmaloka Buddhist**
Centre (Perth)
18-20 Nanson Way,
Nollamara 6061 WA
Tel: (08) 93 451-711
Fax: (08) 93 444-220
Web site: www.bswa.org.au
Stewards: *Buddhist Society of Western Australia.*



OBSERVANCE DAYS

On these days some monasteries are given over to quiet reflection and meditation. Visitors are welcome to participate in the evening meditation vigils. On the Full and New moons, there is an opportunity to determine the Eight Precepts for the night.

Moon Phase	○ FULL	◐ HALF	● NEW	◑ HALF
JANUARY	6 th (Tues)	14 th (Wed)	21 st (Wed)	29 th (Thurs)
FEBRUARY	5 th (Thurs)	13 th (Fri)	19 th (Thurs)	27 th (Fri)
MARCH	☉ 5 th (Fri)	13 th (Sat)	20 th (Sat)	28 th (Sun)
APRIL	4 th (Sun)	12 th (Mon)	18 th (Sun)	26 th (Mon)

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Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead
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Closing date for submission to the next issue is 20th February 2004.