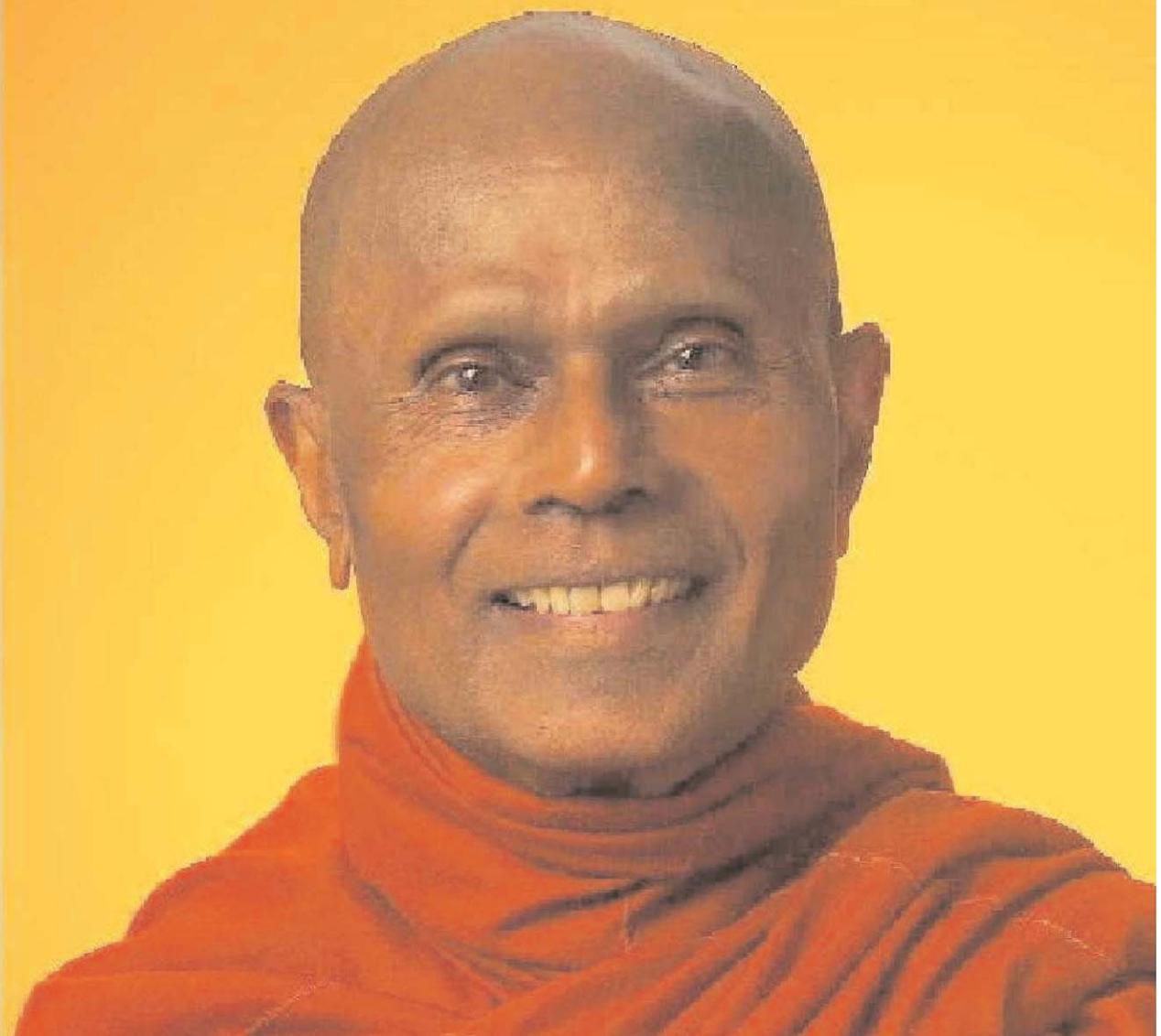


Preserving the Dhamma

Writings in Honor of
the Eightieth Birthday of
Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, Maha Thera



Preserving the Dhamma

Preserving the Dhamma

Felicitations, Recollections and
Dhamma Articles

in Honor

of the

Eightieth Birthday

of

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, Mahā Thera

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Preserving the Dhamma

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the Eightieth Birthday of Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, Mahā Thera**

Published by

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Cover Photograph, Tony Generico

Meritorious Flag Bearer of Peerless Arahat—original composition in Sinhalese by Professor Dharsana Ratnayake, translated by Irene Pandittesekera, layout by Kesera Pandittesekera.

*May the merit from this book go towards the long life
and well-being of our dear friend and teacher*

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana Mahā Thera

May he enjoy many more years.....

Foreword

The initial idea and request for a book to commemorate Bhante H. Gunaratana's eightieth birthday was conveyed to the Bhāvanā Society residents by one of Bhante G's relatives. Motivated by respect and gratitude this project was then taken up by the Bhāvanā Society residents and supported by the Bhāvanā Society's Board of Directors. Bhante G was informed of this project and gave his silent blessings, thinking it would benefit us more than him. But he indicated that he did not just want a book full of flowery tributes and lavish praise for all of his accomplishments in spreading the Dhamma throughout the world. It should be comprised mostly of dhamma articles and other useful instructions. So the editorial staff chose a Buddhist 'middle path' in regard to the contents of the book. The first section has some felicitation messages from a few eminent Sri Lankan Mahā Thera colleagues and some personal experience recollections from some of his dhamma students and friends. This is followed by a special essay by the renowned Buddhist Pāli scholar and writer, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi entitled, *Why did Bhante G come to the West*. Then comes an excerpt from Bhante G's autobiography, *The Journey of Mindfulness*. The middle larger section of the book is a collection of dhamma talks by various Western born Buddhist monks and nuns and prominent lay meditation teachers covering a wide variety of topics which illustrates their range of understanding of the Dhamma. The last section is a selection of questions from meditation students and answers by Bhante G recorded over the past years during retreats which elucidates his skill and Wisdom in answering difficult dhamma questions to Westerners. Also included is a wide selection of photographs to give a more visual sense of his long journey through life.

We hope that this varied compilation of material will give the reader a greater familiarity with the breath of experience of Bhante Gunaratana's long, fruitful life in sharing the joy and wisdom of the Dhamma in the World. May this appreciation of his work inspire him to continue sharing the Dhamma with all of us for as long as his mortal life lasts.

Bhante Y. Rāhula

The Bhāvanā Society 80th Birthday book editorial staff

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Felicitations Messages



Felicitation

Mahinda Rajapaksha
President of Sri Lanka

I consider it a privilege to have the opportunity of sending my greetings on this memorable occasion of the 80th birth anniversary of Bhante Henepola Gunaratana Nāyaka Thera, the chief prelate of the United States of America.

Having been born in a far flung village in Thumpane, Harispattuwa, the Nāyaka Thera's arduous journey experiencing numerous vicissitudes of life, up to the position of the Chief Prelate of such a great kingdom, is in fact exemplary for the rest of the Mahāsanga.

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana Nāyaka Thera's life is entirely dedicated for the propagation of the Doctrine of the Lord Buddha. The intriguing style of the language found in the books authored by the Nāyaka Thera vouch for his profound knowledge in Pāli and philosophy of Buddhism.

The service rendered by this great personage in propagating the doctrine of Buddha, deserves the respect of the entire Buddhist world.

On this occasion of the 80th birth anniversary, I invoke the blessings of the Triple Gem and sincerely wish health and long life to Bhante Henepola Gunaratana Nāyaka Thera.

July 24th 2007

Mahinda Rajapaksha



Greetings From Sri Lanka

Bhante Ambewela Paññasara Thera

Chief Incumbent of Piliyandala Buddhaloka Mahāvihāra
Anunāyaka Syampali Mahā Nikāya (Uva Division)
Sri Saddharmavagisvaracarya

I consider it a great privilege to be able to add this message of goodwill to this Felicitation Volume which is being published in honor of the 80th birthday of the most Venerable Henepola Gunaratana Mahā Thera, the Chief Sangha Nāyaka of the United States of America, and President of the Bhāvanā Society of West Virginia.

I came to know Venerable Henepola Gunaratana Mahā Thera 53 years ago on the occasion when both of us were admitted as students at the Padhanaghara Missionary Training Center in Dematagoda, Colombo. Within a few days our friendship began and over time, grew into full stature and continues to do so to date.

At the conclusion of our studies at the Center, I joined the teaching profession and Venerable Gunaratana began his missionary career. This did not interfere with our friendship. From the first day I got to know him, he has turned out to be one of my dearest friends. Wherever he has been and in whatever position in life, he has always made it a point to keep me informed about his whereabouts and doings. Whenever he visited Sri Lanka, he never failed to visit me.

Our friendship grew in strength because of our close association with one another. There shall never be a breakdown of that. Venerable Gunaratana has the gift of learning. He has an inborn skill in remembering whatever he sees or hears once or twice. He is at the same time lovable, pleasant in speech, modest, efficient, dedicated and thoroughly disciplined.

In an age when human goodness is being subordinated to the worth of rupees and dollars, I see Venerable Gunaratana as a manifestation of the totality of human virtues. With his profound knowledge of the Dhamma and the Vinaya and his mastery of Buddhist modes of meditation, he stands as a sage who guards value like a treasure.

I do not know whether there is any other Sri Lankan monk comparable to him who traverses the world, delighting people with the message of Buddhism. Complying with the injunction of the Buddha *Caratha bhikkhave carikam...lokanukampaya*, Venerable Gunaratana has planned his life. There are few countries in the world, if any, where he has not taken the message of Buddhism.

Starting his missionary activities in India, where the Buddha was born, he later found his way to America. There he has acquired about 45 acres of forest land in West Virginia, about one hundred miles from Washington, D.C., and established the Bhāvanā Society. The excellent service he has rendered since shall remain an unforgettable landmark in his distinguished life.

The Bhāvanā Society today is fully equipped with accommodation and facilities for those undertaking meditation practice: meditation kutis and walking tracks, a spacious meditation hall and image house, a *sīma mallika* for the performance of Upasampada ordinations and other ecclesiastical acts, a library, a kitchen, a dining hall, ponds, and modern toilet facilities.

At the Bhāvanā Society, located in America where nothing can be had without payment of money, food and lodging are provided free of charge to monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen of diverse nationalities, who are resident there. Similar facilities are even extended to whole families of faithful devotees who go there for the purpose of meditation during retreats and holiday seasons. At the time I stayed there in 1997, there were 20 meditation kutis and other dormitory rooms. The benefits that thousands of people have received from this well appointed center are incalculable.

In Sri Lanka today there are many scholarly monks who are well learned in the Dhamma and the Vinaya, but many of them lack fluency in foreign languages. On the other hand, those who possess language skills are deficient in their knowledge of the Dhamma. This indeed is a lamentable drawback. Venerable Gunaratana is fluent in many languages, has a profound knowledge of the Dhamma and the Vinaya, and a thorough scientific grasp of the techniques of meditation. He has a perfect mastery in explaining the Buddhist doctrine of liberation to his listeners. He is a perfect model of a Sangha leader and an unrivaled missionary. He is as much a source of pride to the Buddhist world as he is to Sri Lanka.

I consider it a great honor conferred on me to have been invited to congratulate him on his eightieth birthday. With all sincerity I wish, through the grace of the Triple Gem and the power of the Devas, good health and long life to my worthy friend Venerable Gunaratana Mahā Thera, who as the Chief Sangha Nāyaka of United States of America and President of the Bhāvanā Society is rendering to the Buddhist world an invaluable service.

May the Mahāthera be in the care of the Fully Enlightened Buddha.

Ambewela Paññasara Mahā Thera

Best wishes for a Contented and Peaceful Life

Bhante Tibbatuvawe Sri Sidhartha Sumangalabhidana

Mahānuwara Upokshita Pushparama Vihāradhipathi
Malwathu Mahā Vihāraya
Kandy
January 18, 2007

It is with great pleasure that we send this message of best wishes to Ven. Dr. Henepola Sri Gunarathanabhiddhana, the Director of the Meditation Center in West Virginia in the United States, on the occasion of the commemoration of his eightieth birthday.

We fervently believe and acknowledge that the chief incumbent Rev. Dr. Henepola Sri Gunarathanabhiddhana who has engaged in the dissemination of Buddhism in the United States and other foreign nations for over sixty years is a priest possessed of sublime intelligence and a deep understanding of the Buddhist philosophy with an unwavering commitment to his chosen path.

In 1996, the Central Committee of the Malwathu Mahā Vihāra Sanga Sabha, which is dedicated to activities of Buddhist Sāsana throughout the world, had the privilege of according him the honor of Dharma Keerthi Sonuththara and designating him as the Chief Incumbent Priest of North America, including the United States.

On the occasion of the celebration of his eightieth birthday, we wish Rev. Dr. Henepola Dharma Keerthi Sri Gunarathanabhiddhana a long, peaceful, and contented life.

Sincerely,

Tibatuvawe Sumangala

Message for Bhante Gunaratana's 80th Birthday

Bhante Kirinde Sri Dhammananda Nāyaka Mahā Thera

**Sangha Nāyaka of Malaysia and Singapore
The Buddhist Mahā Vihāra, Kuala Lumpur**

(Note: Ven. Sri K. Dhammananda Nāyaka Mahā Thera passed away shortly after having submitted this message. Bhante Gunaratana had the good fortune to have visited his old friend one week before his death.)

The 150 years that stretched between the mid 1800s and the end of the last century could well be described as a golden era for Theravāda Buddhism, because it was during this period that this branch of the sublime teachings of the Buddha took root and became firmly established in the West. It was a time when the predominant religious beliefs in Europe were shown to be incapable of standing up to the close scrutiny of scientific analysis, resulting in huge numbers of people abandoning their previously held convictions and turning to Asian religions—notably Hinduism and Buddhism—to provide satisfactory answers to their spiritual questions.

In the case of Buddhism, part of this need was supplied by Western scholars like Dr. and Mrs. Rhys Davids, Christmas Humphreys, and Maurice Walshe—just to name a few. But there were also many



Bhante G (on right) with Bhante Dhammananda (center) 1958

Asians who helped to make Buddhism relevant to the West—among them notables like Ven. Walpola Rāhula, Ven. Narada and Ven Ananda Maitreya. These pioneer monks and many others like them devoted their entire lives to explaining the ancient teachings from India; making them relevant to a people whose culture and mental make-up were so vastly different from their own. Most of these great masters have passed away, but we are still fortunate there are others who are still active in bringing the Buddha Sāsana to the Western world.

Among them we are proud to acknowledge Ven. Dr. Henepola Gunaratana, whose dhammadūta work in the West spans a period of almost four decades. My own association with him goes even further back, when on a visit to Sanchi, India, I was fortunate to meet him as a resident monk in the Vihāra there, and invited him to assist me in my duties at the Kuala Lumpur Buddhist Mahā Vihāra.

When Ven. Gunaratana arrived here on 5 November 1958, he knew very little English. But it was clear in his mind that his mission was to spread the Dhamma in that language. And so he applied himself very seriously to learning it, almost from the basic level. In the ten years that he lived in Malaysia, he endeared himself to the devotees of the temple by his excellent interpersonal skills, as well as his exemplary personal conduct, befitting the monastic training he had received in Sri Lanka.

On 27 July 1968, however, he was forced to relocate to the United States, as his visa to stay in Malaysia had expired. Once again he showed the same determination for self-improvement to serve the Buddha Sāsana. As chief incumbent to the Washington Buddhist Vihāra he had a very busy schedule fulfilling his missionary duties all along the East Coast of the US, yet still found time to pursue his formal studies, which culminated in his earning a PhD. He then founded the Bhāvanā Society in West Virginia, where he is fondly known as “Bhante G”.

Today Ven. Gunaratana is a globally-acclaimed scholar monk in the Theravāda tradition and in spite of his advancing years, he travels all over the world conducting meditation retreats and giving numerous talks which hold his audience enthralled.

As a fellow monk, I am proud of our association and salute the enormous contributions he has made in the propagation of the Buddha Sāsana. I am proud that the Buddhist Mahā Vihāra in Kuala Lumpur served as a training ground in his missionary work and I earnestly wish that he will continue his excellent services for many years to come. I also hope that younger Theravāda monks from Sri Lanka and other countries will be inspired by his selfless example and continue the task of spreading the Dhamma—“excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end, for the benefit and welfare of gods and men.”

I believe that no matter how much we advance in spreading the sublime message through the electronic media, nothing can ever replace the time-tested method of erudite practicing monks, steeped in the ancient traditions, who speak from the heart to their earnest listeners. Monks like Ven. Bhante Gunaratana have proven that there is no better method to spread the Dhamma than from personal experience of it.

The Most Ven. Henepola Gunaratana Nāyaka Mahā Thera

Bhante Kurunegoda Piyatissa Nāyaka Mahā Thera

Chief Incumbent of the New York Buddhist Vihāra , Founder & President,
Buddhist Council of New York , Vice President World Buddhist Sangha Council

We are immensely delighted to hear that the most Venerable Dr. Henepola Gunaratana, known more popularly—thanks to his pleasant demeanor—by the endearing term Bhante G, is due to reach his eightieth year of life. He cuts an exemplary figure among the great many senescent, virtuous, disciplined and unscathed bhikkhu characters; the likes of whom the Buddha has, in his wisdom, described as personages adorning traits that beautify priesthood. Ranking among the well-versed in dhamma, he is also one of its most renowned teachers.

His autobiography, that came out in print only recently, is lucidly expressive of the way that trials and tribulations presented by society can be surmounted and how much the world could profit by it. The priceless examples that it contains would certainly serve as invaluable guide to those who today are inclined to be dissuaded to a point of withdrawal in the face of minor setbacks in life. His never-say-die attitude and steadfastness are inherent qualities that deserve appreciation as well as the approbation of all.

If, for reasons of immaturity in young age or for some other reason, he were to have lost spirit or morale, we of the present day—much as the Dhamma-starved worlds of the east and west—certainly would have lost forever the chance of making the most of the distinguished repository of dhamma that he is. Distracted by personal difficulties, prompted by various drawbacks in life—that both lay and ordained people should pay attention to, contemplate on, and make capital of—is the spontaneous show of relentless determination in the face of adversity that is the signature tune of his life story.

While dedicating the force of wholesome merits acquired by us to the most Venerable Dr. Henepola Gunaratana Thera—who is no stranger to the East and West, much as to the North and South, and known widely in most Buddhist and Buddhist-friendly countries—we also wish to invoke the blessings of the Triple Gem to bestow upon him health, energy, and courage in abundance; to enable him to continue rendering at his discretion his invaluable service to the world in general and to the Buddha’s dispensation in particular.

Yours in the Dhamma,

Kurunegoda Piyatissa Nāyaka Mahā Thera

My Most Respected Teacher: Bhante Henepola Gunaratana Nāyaka Mahā Thera

Bhante K. Uparatana Nāyaka Thera

President:International Buddhist center
2600 Elmont street, Wheaton, MD

“Saddho silena sampanno Yaso bhoga samappito Yan yan padesan bhajati Tattha tattheva pujito”

“When a man has faith, and virtue possessed of fame and wealth, wherever he lives he will be honored.”

(Dhammapada; 303)

We should have good parents to realize a good future. They are our teachers in the beginning. They can change our future with different ways of guiding us. If they guide us wrongly we will do bad things; if they teach us well we will turn out doing well. Therefore our parents should receive good respect from us. Without their good guidance and protection we might not turn out to have good qualities.

The second part of our life is having a good teacher or teachers. They can play another wonderful role in our destiny. If they did well we will have a good life here and after death. Both of these groups have an important relationship for our destiny. We have to give them due respect while they are still alive and after death as well. That is the way Buddha has explained it to us. This is a very practical thing. If we honor, respect, protect and treat them well, we also be getting lot of unseen protection and power for our life. They are the foundation pillars for our life. Therefore always we respect our parents and teachers and wish them a good health and long life.

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana Nāyaka Thero is the unique person who helped change and develop my life. He was my first teacher, guide, father and friend.

I met him when I was about seven years old, while I was living with his teacher and my grandfather, Kiribathkumbure Sonuttara Thero, at his temple at Maladeniya, Mawatagama. At that time Bhante Gunaratana was in Malaysia and came to attend his teacher's 80th birthday celebrations. He started to teach and guide me at that time.

Everyday I woke up at 6:00 a.m. and swept the temple compound and other places, at Sonuttara Thero's direction. While I was cleaning outside, Bhante Gunaratana came to me and taught how to sweep and how to hold the broom in the proper way. That is the first lesson I learned from him. Also at that time he made some intention about my future in his mind. I became a monk in 1966 under Bhante Gunaratana and Ven. Muruddeniye Ratanapala, and was given the name Ven. Katugastota Uparatana. They were my teachers at ordination. From that day I started to stay at Maladeniya tem-

ple with his brother monk.

Again, after two years Bhante Gunaratana came to this temple from America. At that time, I was staying in the temple without receiving a proper education. Soon after he came he understood that I was wasting my time without studying. Therefore, the very same day he discussed this matter with Ven. Galkatiwala Sri Devananda Thero at Maliyadeva College, and I was admitted to that institution of learning. In this way I was able to begin my formal education in 1968 and I finished my studies there. Even from a distance Bhante G always looked out for me and gave good intelligent advice that con-



Bhante G's preceptor
Bhante Kiribathkumbure Sonuttara Thero

tinued to make my life better. He is a wonderful teacher of my success. I am the only Sri Lankan that he has undertaken to guide as his pupil.

In 1981 he changed my whole life in a very wonderful way. Bhante G wanted a monk to come and work with him at Washington Buddhist Vihāra in the USA. By my good fortune, he appointed and selected me. So I happily and duly came to America that year and engaged myself with a lot of religious services at the Vihāra with him. At that time I learned many useful things from him about how to live as a monk and work in a foreign country. I got many blessings from him. He is my supreme spiritual guide. I have learned many spiritual things from him. He taught me how to help needy people without expecting any reward or thank you from them. I think I have seen the example of the Buddha in Bhante G's life. His services, guidance and teachings are very important to the Western and modern world. He understands the Buddha's teachings very well and he knows how to blend it with the changing, evolving conditions and offer it to the world.

Therefore I wish Bhante G to have good health and a long life for the benefit of all beings. I can never forget him or repay his kindness; he will stay in my mind forever.

I am very happy to have this chance to write a message for this, his 80th birthday tribute book. I sincerely wish, with the blessings and power of the Triple Gem of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, that Bhante G will continue to be a guiding light to countless beings on their path to the end of suffering. May he attain Nibbāna.

Bhante K. Uparatana Nāyaka Thera

Why Did Bhante Gunaratana Come to the West?

An essay

by

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi is an American Buddhist monk from New York City. He obtained a BA in philosophy from Brooklyn College and a PhD in philosophy from Claremont Graduate School. After completing his university studies he traveled to Sri Lanka, where he received novice ordination in 1972 and full ordination in 1973. From 1984 to 2002 he was the editor for the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy, Sri Lanka. He currently resides at Chuang Yen Monastery in New York and teaches there and at Bodhi Monastery. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi has authored many important publications, either as author, translator, or editor, including *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Majjhima Nikāya, 1995), *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Samyutta Nikāya, 2000), and *In the Buddha's Words* (2005). He is currently engaged in a translation of the Anguttara Nikāya.

INTRODUCTION

The years that followed the assassination of John F. Kennedy turned out to be one of the most turbulent phases of modern American history. On college campuses around the country, pot replaced beer as the intoxicant of choice. The Beat Generation of the 1950s gave way to the hippies, and wild-eyed prophets roamed the halls of universities, a copy of Alan Watts's *The Joyous Cosmology* in one pocket, a stash of psychedelic drugs, the short-cut to nirvana, in the other. The Beatles, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and the Grateful Dead transformed pop music with their bold fusion of rock, rhythm and blues, and folk, graced by brilliant, mind-boggling lyrics.

The Sixties also gave birth to a collective consciousness aimed at promoting greater social justice in the nation and the world. The civil rights movement took off and rapidly gained momentum, spearheaded by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. The Cold War continued to hang heavy as the backdrop of American life, but an obscure country in faraway Southeast Asia called Vietnam came to the foreground, pushing even nearby Cuba to the margins. In Vietnam, the U.S. had become embroiled in a seemingly unwinnable war that, at any given time, would demand the efforts of half a million American military men and women. Over fifty thousand of them would return home in faceless body bags, sending shock waves through the hearts of the TV-watching public. In record numbers, war-weary Americans took to the streets of the largest U.S. cities, carrying signs that read "Make Love Not War" and "Bring Our Troops Home NOW."

The year 1968 marked the climax of the turbulent sixties. Hardly had the year begun than the Vietcong launched its Tet Offensive, attacking major cities throughout South Vietnam; in Saigon they even came close to the U.S. embassy. The aspirations of millions of black Americans were dealt a tragic blow on April 4th, when a hostile gunman in Memphis assassinated Martin Luther King, Jr. The U.S. presidential campaign heated up when "LBJ" announced that he would not seek another term as pres-

ident. As the nomination conventions approached, Robert Kennedy, intent on the Democratic nomination, was assassinated on June 5th, joining King in the corridors of tragic deaths. Nixon accepted the Republican nomination on August 23rd, and in the last week of August, the streets of Chicago, venue of the Democratic National Convention, erupted in violence, when police stormed protesters demanding a candidate who would take a stand against the war. “Chicago ‘68” became the symbol of the Sixties: the clash between an idealistic, almost anarchistic younger generation aspiring for a new order of peace and social justice, and an entrenched old order intent on maintaining its hold on power even by the use of force.

It was on September 18, 1968, only three weeks after the explosive events in Chicago, that a plane from Amsterdam touched down at Kennedy International Airport in New York—carrying among its passengers a short, shaven-headed Buddhist monk from a country then known as Ceylon, but now known as Sri Lanka. The monk was none other than Venerable Henepola Gunaratana Mahāthera, who was just arriving in the U.S. for the very first time. His own account of his arrival, recorded in his candid autobiography, *Journey to Mindfulness*, is laced with ironic humor. He writes that he arrived in New York with only one lead, the address and phone number of a Chinese Buddhist temple in the Bronx. His attempts to phone the temple at a pay phone met with repeated failure, because he just kept on dialing the number and didn’t know that one had to put a dime into the coin slot. His inquiries from the woman at the airport’s information desk were met with puzzled stares. He asked people in the arrivals area how to get to the Chinese temple in the Bronx, assuming everyone at Kennedy Airport knew where the Chinese Buddhist temple was. Taxi drivers refused to take him to the Bronx—an area they seemed to consider as dangerous as the battlefields of Vietnam.

Why did Bhante Gunaratana come to the West? My question is modeled on the famous question posed in Zen Buddhism: “Why did Bodhidharma—the first Indian patriarch of Zen—come from the West?” In Zen, this question is used as a *koan*, a mind-twisting theme for meditation, intended to set off a spark of enlightenment called *satori*. If a student asks this question of his Zen master, the master might answer with a shout or a blow from his staff. When I raise my question, “Why did Bhante Gunaratana come to the West?”, I also want this question to function as a theme for meditation, though in a somewhat different way from a *koan*. I want the question to function as a theme for deep reflection in order to bring out the astonishing way different lines of causation intersect in the unfolding of historical events; in this case, the migration of one prominent teacher of the Dhamma from Asia to America. I see in the answer to this question—or, I should say, in the *attempt* to answer this question, for no answer is fixed and final—the merging of three distinct but interdependent lines of causation. We might call this the “interdependent arising” of three lines of causation, or the “confluence”—the flowing together—of three streams of events. The *first* is the autobiography of Bhante Gunaratana himself, the course of personal events that led, step by step, to his arrival at Kennedy Airport that fateful day in 1968. But personal biography occurs against the background of a larger picture. The two other strands of causation make up this larger picture, and together they help explain, not merely why Bhante G was arriving at JFK that day, but why he stayed on in America and why his presence here has been so timely. One, the *second* line of causation, is the story of the revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka; beginning in the late nineteenth century and culminating in the establishment of the Washington Buddhist Vihāra. The other, the *third*, is the recent cultural history of the West, par-

ticularly America, which opened it to the message of Buddhism and thus to the mission of someone like Bhante G. I will deal with each of these lines of causation in turn. When the three are brought together, we can understand not only why Bhante G arrived in the West, but why his destiny eventually led him from the Buddhist Vihāra Society in Washington, D.C., to the Bhāvanā Society in High Point, West Virginia.

PERSONAL HISTORY

One could answer the question, “Why did Bhante Gunaratana come to the West?” simply by saying: “To serve as a resident monk at the Washington Buddhist Vihāra.” That was his commission, and that was why he came. This answer, however, while true as a simple fact, does not cut deep enough. It does not take into account the preceding life history that prepared him for such a destiny, to be one of the first bhikkhus to bring Theravāda Buddhism to the U.S. and the first to truly set down roots here—to make America his homeland and the field for his cultivation. It also leaves out the future, his later role as a respected and much loved meditation teacher and founder of the Bhāvanā Society. If we look deep enough, this role might already have been prefigured in his past.

For Bhante G’s personal story, I rely for the most part on *Journey to Mindfulness*,¹ but I will select from this autobiography only the highlights, the key points along the often jagged path that eventually led him to his destiny as a meditation teacher in the U.S.A. Bhante Gunaratana was born on December 7, 1927, in the small village of Henepola, near the upcountry town of Kandy. His native village, he tells us, consisted only of a cluster of huts and a nearby Buddhist temple that served as the public meeting place. The people of the village were poor, but they all had “unshakable confidence” in the law of kamma, which gave them the incentive “to try hard and carry on, regardless of the difficulties in our lives” (p.14). This belief, no doubt, explains the tenacity and vigor with which Bhante G, throughout his life, has pursued each of his goals.

Both of his parents were devout Buddhists. During his childhood, his mother told him stories about the Buddha’s past lives as a bodhisattva, an aspirant for Buddhahood; these stories—the Jataka tales—inspired him with concrete examples of the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion during the long period of his training over many past lives. His mother impressed him as one who understood and lived the Dhamma—standing out in her young son’s mind as a walking embodiment of metta; “almost a holy person” (p. 26). His father was stern and irascible, given to bouts of anger that sometimes culminated in harsh beatings. But he was also a pious man who built the temple’s preaching hall, a sturdy structure that was still standing when Bhante G visited his native village in 1996. As a young boy, Bhante G (or Ukkubanda, as he was then named) often went to the temple with his parents to listen to sermons preached by the local monks. He would watch in awe as the lay people venerated the monks and, over time, the idea of becoming a monk took root in his mind. This itself was not at all unusual for a young Sinhalese boy in a Buddhist village during this period, but what he tells us next is truly extraordinary: he dreamed of learning English and teaching the Dhamma in English. Learning English, he believed, would make him “the ultimate educated monk” (p. 34). Here, in the mind of this young boy not yet in his teens, we can see the intersection of the past and the future: the past, in the accumulation of experience and habit formations from previous lives, propelling him towards the life of a bhikkhu; the future, in his destiny to become a monk with a doctorate from an American univer-

sity teaching the Dhamma in English all around the world.

By the age of eleven, the games of boyhood had lost interest for him and he wanted only to enter the Sangha, the 2500-year-old order of monks. His ordination as a novice took place at a temple in another small village about six miles from his own, under a monk named Venerable Sonuttara who, like his father, also had a volatile temper. His days at the temple combined heavy work duties with the study of Pāli and learning basic Buddhist texts by rote. However, the education he was receiving—from teachers who themselves lacked formal education—failed to satisfy him. He wanted to learn more, and the temple, with its endless round of duties, started to feel like a prison. Following his novice ordination, he disrobed and re-ordained several times, until at the age of sixteen he re-ordained under his original teacher on condition that he be sent to a monastic school. Thereafter he would never disrobe again.

His teacher sent him to a small primary school for monks in the Gampaha district, Vidyasekhara Pirivena, about fifteen miles from Colombo. There, he quickly became known as the smartest student in the school. He discovered he had a photographic memory and without much effort he mastered Sinhalese, Pāli, and Sanskrit, the primary languages; he also learned Tamil, Hindi, and English, the optional languages. Note that by learning English he was moving closer to his childhood ideal of preaching the Dhamma in the language of the educated elite.

In 1947 he received *upasampadā*, higher ordination, at the Malwatta Mahāvihāra, the Kandy headquarters of the Siyam Nikāya, the monastic fraternity to which his temple belonged. A few days after his higher ordination a strange thing happened. Together with a monk-friend, he was invited to participate in a seven-day *paritta* ceremony, a popular ritual in Sri Lankan Buddhism at which a book of “protective discourses” is chanted before a large assembly of devout lay people. In his excessive enthusiasm, he declined even the breaks for sleep, persuading older monks to yield him and his friend their turns to chant. At the end of the week, with hardly any sleep, he felt himself on the verge of a nervous breakdown. To his amazement, he found he had totally lost his memory. He could not recognize letters, could not read, could not remember what he had been told. It seemed that his whole education, and with it his future monastic career, was in jeopardy—barely ten days after his higher ordination.

For most of the next year, he embarked on a frenzied search for a cure, pursuing the whole gamut of methods from conventional medicines to bizarre rituals; but none of them worked. At a point of utter desperation, he writes, “A very unusual thought occurred to me: Perhaps meditation would help” (p. 97). Though he had been a monk for years, he had never seriously meditated before, since in Sri Lanka at the time, the practice of meditation had almost disappeared from the training program of upcountry temple monks. Using his knowledge of the theory of meditation, he began to meditate late at night and early in the morning, or whenever he could catch some time alone. Eventually, through meditation, his memory began to return; unexpectedly, too, his quick temper began to come under control, and he found something he had not previously known: peace of mind. With the discovery of meditation, he now had the other essential “tool” that would prepare him for his later vocation in the West: that of a meditation teacher.

Two years after his loss of memory, in 1949, he was able to resume his studies at the Vidyasekhara Pirivena and at the end of the year he passed final exams in eight subjects. His eagerness to learn English, however, got him into trouble, since his grades in English were much better than those in

Sanskrit. In 1950, he was admitted to Vidyalankara Pirivena, one of Ceylon's most prestigious monastic colleges and a nerve center in its renaissance of Buddhist learning. He writes that in 1952 he decided to leave school. Though he only had to sit the final exams before graduation, the exam fees were fifteen rupees and he didn't have the money. After leaving the monks' college, he continued taking English classes wherever he could find them. For a reason he could not fully understand, the strong desire to learn English still burned in him.

One weekend in 1953, on a visit to his old school, he overheard a conversation in which it was mentioned that a Buddhist missionary school in Colombo was looking for a promising new student. He knew at once that this was something he should explore. The next day he went to Colombo to meet the director of the school and gained admission. The other students were already half-way through the three-year program, but Bhante G threw himself into his schoolwork and soon caught up. Again, we see how his strong determination enabled him to overcome initial obstacles.

Towards the end of 1954, he took his final exams and did well, and then he received his overseas assignment. The director would send him to Tanzania, in Africa! Bhante G balked at this assignment, "half a world away." He asked to be sent to India instead, which was much closer to home, and the director kindly agreed to this request. Ironically, his first assignment in India was not to be a true missionary, in the sense of one who propagates the Buddha's teaching, but to serve as assistant custodian at one of the ancient Indian Buddhist shrines, the great stupa at Sanchi. The Sanchi stupa housed the relics of the Buddha's chief disciples, Sāriputta and Moggallāna, and was also famed for its four gateways, said to have been built by King Asoka in the third century B.C. Bhante's main task, besides secretarial duties, was to meet pilgrims and explain to them the significance of the vignettes adorning the gateways.

Before long, problems erupted at Sanchi, and as so often happened in the early life of this monk, not a few stemmed from his quick temper and sharp tongue. Clashes with the chief monk at Sanchi and the prospect of advancing his education at Benares Hindu University lured him to Benares. There, beginning in February 1957, he took up residence at the Mahābodhi Society—the office of the *Indian Mahābodhi Society* and not the Ceylon branch, he later found to his consternation. He also worked among the former Untouchables, who had converted to Buddhism under the guidance of their leader, Dr. Bhimarao Ambedkar. Owing to a technical detail in filing his application, he did not gain admission to Benares University, but he found a school near the temple, Das Gupta College, where he could take classes in English and other secular subjects, without having to pay tuition.

In October of 1957, he was sent to Bombay, where, for a full year he worked among the poor Untouchables. He lived under the most austere conditions, serving the new converts selflessly with hardly a thought for his own comfort and convenience. He would sometimes travel among the neo-Buddhists for a week or two at a time, going from one village to the next without returning to his own temple. The family he was visiting would serve him food while someone sitting next to him would fan him to keep the flies away. Though he was aware that eating under such conditions was going to make him ill, "I never said no to their invitations; I couldn't refuse the Untouchables' heartfelt hospitality" (p. 162).



Bhante G and Bhante Dhammananda

In September 1958, Bhante received a letter from Venerable K. Dhammananda, a Sri Lankan monk who had a large temple in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Two years earlier, when Ven. Dhammananda visited Sanchi, Bhante had spoken to him about coming to Malaysia to help him with his missionary work. Now the letter of invitation came, accompanied by a visa application. After a quick trip back to Ceylon to visit his mother (his father had died the previous year), Bhante set sail for Malaysia, arriving in Penang in November 1958.

The Buddhist temple at Kuala Lumpur served mainly the Sinhalese families living in the area, as well as a few Chinese Buddhists too. Though the Sinhalese parents wanted the monks to teach the Dhamma to their children in Sinhala, Bhante G decided to conduct his Sunday School classes in English, aware that this would be more useful to the children in their daily lives. This drew criticism upon him from the more conservative Sinhalese parents, but support came from the better educated ones.

His days at the temple passed busily giving dhamma sermons in both English and Sinhala on Sundays and full-moon days, teaching the Sunday School for children, and conducting a Buddhist correspondence course for people who wanted to study Buddhism by mail. However, his desire to improve his English and extend his learning continued to obsess him. He took outside courses at every opportunity he could find, and then in 1960 he decided to take the University of Cambridge's external examinations. Over the next four years he managed to pass all three grades of the exams, but he did not succeed in winning admission to the University of Malaysia, which he felt as a crushing disappointment.

After nine years in Malaysia, Bhante received word that the Malaysian immigration authorities would not extend his visa a tenth time. This meant that by the end of 1968 he would have to leave Malaysia permanently. In 1967, he took a trip all over Asia. While in Japan, he met another Sinhalese monk, Venerable Ratmalane Sivali, who told him that a Sri Lankan temple had just been established

in Washington, D.C., and that they were looking for an English-speaking monk with missionary experience to assist the resident monk. Ven. Sivali gave him the address of the temple and the name of the resident monk; he also suggested that he contact the Sāsana Sevaka Society at Mahāragama in Sri Lanka, the organization responsible for administering the temple in Washington.

At the end of his six-month Asian tour, Bhante returned to Sri Lanka where he met Venerable Madihe Paññasiha Mahānāyaka Thera, the patron of the Washington Vihāra, and the lay officials of the Sāsana Sevaka Society. Soon after returning to Malaysia, he received a formal invitation from the Sāsana Sevaka Society asking him to go to Washington to become a resident monk at the vihāra. His description of this occasion in his autobiography underscores its significance as a peak moment in the fulfillment of his aspirations: “I was forty years old, and finally I was about to do what I’d always wanted: to teach dhamma in English, in the capital of the foremost English-speaking country in the world. I was going to the United States.” (p. 176) He returned to Sri Lanka to make a pilgrimage to all the ancient sacred sites of the island, and then set out on the long trip, with stops in fifteen countries along the way, that would eventually take him to the United States.

The last leg of this trip was the flight from Amsterdam to New York City, which landed at Kennedy Airport on September 18, 1968—just three weeks after the turbulence in the streets of Chicago flashed across TV screens everywhere and stole the newspaper headlines. In a country beset with chaos and confusion, a man had arrived bearing a message of timeless wisdom and peace. Though the event drew no TV cameras and no newspaper reporters flocked to the arrivals lounge at JFK, his arrival would mark a decisive moment in America’s religious history.

THE BUDDHIST REVIVAL

Bhante G arrived in New York en route to Washington, D.C., where he was to serve as a resident monk, and then as general secretary, at the Washington Buddhist Vihāra. And so, once again, one could answer the question, “Why did Bhante Gunaratana come to the West?” simply by saying: “To serve as a resident monk at the Washington Buddhist Vihāra.” That was his commission, and that was why he came. This answer, however, while true as a simple fact, does not cut deep enough. This time, it does not cut deep enough because it does not explain how a Buddhist temple with roots in Sri Lanka came to be established in Washington, D.C. While America is a secular nation whose constitution expressly forbids any connection between church and state, the country had been predominantly the home of three major biblical religions: Judaism, Roman Catholicism, and Protestant Christianity. Buddhism was an Asian religion. True, since the late nineteenth century there were Japanese and Chinese minorities in the U.S. that included significant numbers of Buddhists, and thus a Japanese or Chinese Buddhist temple would have been comprehensible. But how did a Buddhist temple staffed by monks from a Theravāda Buddhist country like Sri Lanka come to be established here?

To understand this connection requires that we make an excursion backwards into the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The historical connection between Theravāda Buddhism and the Sri Lanka sense of national identity has always been intimate. The *Mahāvamsa*, the medieval verse chronicle of Sri Lanka, records the legend that the Buddha, while lying on his deathbed, declared that his religion would be established in Lanka and he entrusts to the gods the responsibility for protecting Buddhism there. The chronicle also reports that in the third century B.C., the Buddhist monk Mahinda, son of the

great Indian emperor Asoka, led the first organized Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka. Mahinda preached the Dhamma to the reigning king Devanampiyatissa, who immediately adopted the new religion. Buddhism quickly spread among the royal family at the capital Anuradhapura and from the palace it flowed out to the common people. Shortly after Mahinda's arrival, large numbers of Sri Lankans, many of royal birth, requested admission into the Sangha. When Mahinda's sister, the nun Sanghamittā, arrived some months later with a group of nuns, the opportunity arose for women to receive ordination.

Down the centuries, the fortunes of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka were closely interwoven with the state. Because the Sinhalese kings assumed the responsibility for supporting Buddhism, the religion flourished when the monarch was favorably disposed towards the religion and declined when the king was indifferent or hostile to it, or when the country was overrun by foreign forces. At the beginning of the sixteenth century this pattern was about to be dealt a fatal blow. At the time, Sri Lanka was hardly a unified country. The sea coast was under the control of foreigners, chiefly the Moors, while the inner regions were divided into small fiefdoms ruled by minor chiefs more concerned with their own advantage than with the promotion of Buddhism and the support of the Sangha. The king of the country, ruling at Kotte, a small territory near the western coast, was weak and ineffectual, and thus was easy prey for the Portuguese when they arrived in quest of wealth and raw materials. By exploiting the Sinhalese ruler's precarious situation, the Portuguese gained a foothold in the country and began a campaign aimed at winning control over the island. They converted the king's grandson, the heir to the throne, to Catholicism and had his effigy coronated in Lisbon. As part of the agreement by which he would be given Portuguese support, Catholic missionaries came to preach the Gospel and convert the native population to the Roman faith. The methods they used were ruthless. Monasteries were razed to the ground, libraries set on fire, monks slaughtered en masse, public forms of Buddhist worship prohibited on pain of death, and monastic universities demolished.

The Portuguese gradually gained complete control over the entire maritime circuit of the island and pushed inland, right up to the hills encircling the kingdom of Kandy. The Sinhalese, however, marshaled their forces against the foreign invaders and finally, with the aid of the Dutch, expelled them from the island. The Dutch, who replaced them in the lowlands, were primarily interested in trade monopolies, but in the early years of their rule they tried to spread the Calvinist faith. Roman Catholicism was declared illegal, and its priests were banned from the country. Many Sinhalese and Tamil Catholics nominally embraced Protestantism, but the knowledge of the religion was rudimentary, because there were not enough ministers, and very few of them could speak either indigenous language, Sinhala or Tamil, fluently enough to maintain their hold on converts.

Partly due to the impact of the Portuguese conquest and partly to internal degenerative forces, during the seventeenth and eighteenth century the Sangha had deteriorated to such an extent that on several occasions there were not enough monks in the island to perform the higher ordination. Twice in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the kings of Kandy sent missions to Arakan in Burma to bring monks to Sri Lanka to confer the higher ordination on qualified novices. These missions, however, merely restored the higher ordination but did not provide strict disciplinary governance or improve monastic education within the Sangha; thus within a short time, laxity, corruption, and

degeneration again set in, until by the following century the higher ordination was once again lost. It was during the eighteenth century that there arose a far-sighted monastic reformer, Ven. Velivita Saranankara, who persuaded the reigning king, Kirti Sri Rajasingha, to send a mission to Siam to request a chapter of monks to come to Sri Lanka to restore the higher ordination. The mission, headed by the Siamese elder Upali, arrived in Sri Lanka in 1750, and at the Malwatta Mahāvihāra in Kandy, conferred the higher ordination on numerous candidates. This event marked the birth in Sri Lanka of the Siyam Nikāya, the monastic fraternity into which Bhante Gunaratana would be ordained some two hundred years later at the same Malwatta Mahāvihāra.

Late in the eighteenth century, the British began making incursions into Sri Lanka from India, and in 1796 the Dutch surrendered their territories to them. In 1815 the British gained control over the Kandyan kingdom, the final stronghold of the Sinhalese chieftains. At a solemn ceremony of the Kandyan chiefs and the monks, the last Sri Lankan king, Sri Wickrema Rajasinghe (1798-1815), was deposed and his dominions vested in the British Crown. In principle, the British governor assumed the Sri Lankan king's traditional responsibilities for protecting Buddhism and supporting the Sangha. But in actuality the foreign rulers hardly felt comfortable in this awkward position and under pressure from the Christian Church repeatedly reneged on their commitments. Thus the British colonial government adopted a religious policy that in effect encouraged the Christian missionaries to intensify their attempts to proselytize the indigenous population of the island.

The Christian conversion campaign was conducted on three fronts.² The first was education, which enabled a minority community of Christians providing a job-oriented education to the non-Christian majority, to pursue an implicit agenda of converting their pupils to Christianity. The second was the printing press, which was used to print not only tracts promoting the Christian gospel, but also a flood of anti-Buddhist propaganda. The third took the shape of public debates, and it was this third arena that proved to be the Achilles' heel of the Christian missionaries.

After the Buddhists had endured enough humiliating blows in what they considered the "isle of the Dhamma," a Buddhist monk with oratorical skills named Ven. Mohottiwatte Gunananda rose to the defense of Buddhism and challenged the Christian missionaries to an open debate on the respective strengths of their respective faiths. Having studied Christianity in detail, he was confident that he could prove the superiority of Buddhism in a direct confrontation with representatives of the colonizing religion. Over the next seven years, three debates were held, in 1866, 1871, and 1873, the most famous being the debate of 1873, conducted over a period of two days at the west coast town of Panadura. Here, before a crowd of 10,000 spectators, most of them Buddhists, Ven. Gunananda proved himself the unmistakable victor. His triumph sent waves of fresh hope through the Sinhalese Buddhist intelligentsia, giving them a new feeling of pride in their ancient heritage. They now came to see that Buddhism was not a dark shroud of superstitions, as the Christian missionaries had been telling them, but a rigorous and rational philosophy of life built on formidable intellectual pillars.

News of the Panadura debate spread all the way to New York, where it came to the attention of an American Civil War veteran named Col. Henry Steele Olcott. In 1875 Olcott, together with Madame H.P. Blavatsky, had formed the Theosophical Society, an organization that drew inspiration from the philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism. Wishing to support the Buddhists in their efforts to counter the Christian missionary thrust, Olcott and Blavatsky decided to travel to Sri Lanka. They arrived

on the island on May 17, 1880. A week after their arrival, they knelt before a Buddha image at a Buddhist temple in Galle and, amidst a large throng of spectators, took the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from a Buddhist monk. The sight of two white people from the Lands of the Conquerors bowing to a Buddha image and undergoing the initiatory rites of their own religion gave immense psychological encouragement to the Sinhalese Buddhists.

While Blavatsky proceeded to India, Olcott stayed on in Sri Lanka, where he founded the Buddhist Theosophical Society (BTS). The BTS began Buddhist Sunday schools to rival the missionary schools. Before long, the organization established regular elementary and high schools modeled after the Christian mission schools, but with a Buddhist component in their curricula. Altogether the BTS established some 300 schools in Sri Lanka—some equal to the best of the mission schools in providing a modern English education to Buddhist children. The children who studied at these schools were trained for administrative, professional, and mercantile positions under the colonial regime. It was mainly through these schools that modern Buddhism diffused into the society and became the basic religious ideology of the educated Buddhist middle class.³

Olcott's lectures profoundly inspired a young Sinhalese Buddhist from a Colombo mercantile family named Don David Hewavitharana, who had earlier attended sermons by Ven. Mohottiwatte Gunananda, the Panadura orator. In 1884, at the age of nineteen, David joined the BTS and soon became a favorite of Olcott and Blavatsky, who encouraged him to study Pāli and "to work for the good of Humanity." In 1885, Hewavitharana vowed to live as a *brahmacārī*, a full-time celibate, and took the name Anagārika Dharmapāla. The word *anagārika* means "homeless one" and traditionally described the state of a Buddhist monk. Dharmapāla, however, did not take formal monastic ordination but committed himself merely to observing full-time celibacy so that he could work more freely for the cause of Buddhism than a monk, restrained by the rules of the monastic code, could do.

Before long, Dharmapāla became the most articulate spokesman for the Sinhala Buddhist renaissance. His lectures and writings linked together the themes of Buddhism, Sri Lankan nationalism, and Sinhalese ethnic identity, in a way that motivated Sinhalese Buddhists to rediscover the greatness of their ancient history, including its Buddhist heritage. In 1891, Dharmapāla visited the holy places of Buddhism in northern India and found, to his dismay, that they were all in decrepit condition. He was particularly disturbed at the condition of the Mahābodhi temple at Bodhgaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, which was then under the control of a Hindu priest. Having vowed to struggle for the transfer of control over the temple to the Buddhists, he founded the Mahābodhi Society, with branches in both India and Sri Lanka, to support him in his work. He also commenced publication of a Buddhist magazine, the Mahābodhi Journal (1892). We should remember that it was for the Mahābodhi Society that Bhante G worked during his sojourn in India.

Though his base was in India, Dharmapāla regularly visited his home country and his speeches and writings continued to exercise a strong influence there and beyond. In 1893, he attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago as a representative of Theravāda Buddhism. Here, Dharmapāla argued passionately against the claims of Christianity, defending Buddhism as the religion of science and rationality. Perhaps most significant for future trends, Dharmapāla did not rest content merely calling for a revival of Buddhism in its traditional lands and for a Buddhist renaissance in India. Rather, he saw Buddhism as having a new universal message for all humankind, and he called

on the young Buddhists of Asia to share this message with the world:

Young Buddhists of Asia! The time is come for you to prepare yourself to enter the battlefield of Truth, Love and Service and carry the message of Equality, Brotherhood, Compassion, Selflessness, Renunciation to the energetic people of England, Germany, United States, France and other countries.... These countries should know of the supreme Truths promulgated by the Lord Buddha, who taught them 2500 years ago to the most enlightened people of Aryan India.... Let the People of these countries know the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the seven Principles of Enlightenment, and the 12 bases of the Law of Causality.⁴

This article was published in 1927. One could well imagine that the mother of one “young Buddhist of Asia” who was to take birth towards the end of that year had somehow heard Dharmapāla’s speech and had vowed that her son-to-be would one day convey “the supreme Truths promulgated by the Lord Buddha” to the energetic people of the United States.

Sri Lanka gained its independence from Britain in 1948. Hardly eight years later, a major milestone in Theravāda Buddhism’s interpretation of its own history was due to arrive: the 1956 Buddha Jayanti. This year was to mark the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*, the theoretical midpoint of the “Buddha Sāsana,” the full lifespan of Buddhist history. For Sinhalese Buddhists, moreover, the Buddha Jayanti meant the completion of 2500 years of Sri Lanka’s own history, which according to tradition began with the arrival of Vijaya on the island at the same time that the Buddha passed away. While Buddhists generally understood the passage of time to bring a gradual decline in the fortunes of Buddhism, popular belief held that the halfway mark in the history of their religion was to be accompanied by a worldwide Buddhist revival and the spread of the Dhamma to many lands where it had never previously flourished. Within Sri Lanka, Buddhist activists emphasized the need to restore Buddhism to its “rightful place” in the life of the nation. The Sinhalese Buddhists, both monks and laity, perceived themselves as a disadvantaged majority, outranked by an English-educated Christian elite that gave a privileged status to Christianity. But the Sinhalese Buddhists also believed that the Buddha Jayanti provided an opportunity, not only to restore to Buddhism the pristine glory that it had previously enjoyed within Sri Lanka, but also to spread the light of the Dhamma all over the world. They had already seen Buddhists from the West come to their country, ordain as Buddhist monks, and achieve eminence in the Sangha. So there seemed to be no reason why Buddhism could not be successfully propagated in the Western countries themselves, with Sri Lanka as the source of propagation. As one prominent Sinhalese Buddhist intellectual formulated these hopes: “Buddhism will rise to great heights again and blossom forth once more in Sri Lanka. From there it will spread all over the world.”⁵

One project taken up in connection with the Buddha Jayanti was the sending of missionaries, or *dhammadūtas*, to other countries. The idea of setting up Buddhist temples in the West, however, hardly needed to be inspired by the approach of the Buddha Jayanti. Already as far back as 1926 a Buddhist *vihāra* or temple had been established in London, the key figure behind this project being none other than Anagārika Dharmapāla. Through the years the London Buddhist Vihāra has been occupied by prominent Sri Lankan monks, among them Ven. Nārada Mahāthera, Ven. Saddhātissa Nāyaka Thera, and Ven. Medagama Vajiragnāna Nāyaka Thera, the present chief incumbent. Under the stewardship of the Anagārika Dharmapāla Trust, the Vihāra continues to exist today in spacious premises in

Chiswick.

In 1952, the Colombo businessman Asoka Weeraratne founded the German Dharmadūta Society in the back room of his family shop, later moving it to separate premises purchased with funds he acquired through a zealous fund-raising drive. Weeraratne's burning ambition was to promote the spread of Buddhism in Germany and he saw the need to have a Buddhist center right in the heart of Germany itself. Having searched for suitable premises throughout Germany, he found the ideal site he wanted in the lovely Frohnau district of Berlin. The place he discovered was *Das Buddhistische Haus*, an old Buddhist compound built by the German Buddhist pioneer Paul Dahlke in 1924. Under Weeraratne's initiative the German Dharmadūta Society purchased the compound, renovated it, and in 1957 brought it back to life as the Berlin Buddhist Vihāra. In the same year, Asoka Weeraratna organized the first Buddhist mission to Germany, led by three Sri Lankan bhikkhus whom he accompanied on their journey. From that time to the present, the Berlin Vihāra has helped to maintain a Theravāda presence in Germany.

When Sri Lankan-based vihāras already existed in Britain and Germany, the inevitable next target in the spread of the Sri Lankan monastic missions to the West was the United States. To fulfill this mission was the task taken up by Ven. Madihe Paññasiha Mahānāyaka Thera, a highly respected monk from the Vajirārāma Monastery in Colombo. Vajirārāma was one of the elite monasteries that in the 1930s and 1940s had attracted educated young men inspired by a reformist vision of Buddhism similar in many ways to that preached by Anagārika Dharmapāla, but with a much softer and mellower flavor. Its founder, Ven. Pelene Vajiragnāna, was an erudite scholar-monk highly respected among the educated classes in Colombo and its suburbs. Though Ven. Vajiragnāna did not speak English himself, he attracted English-educated pupils who became known under such monastic names as Nārada, Piyadassi, Bope Vinīta, and Ampitiye Rāhula. Madihe Paññasiha hailed from Matara, in the deep south, and was not fluent in English, but he impressed his teacher and fellow monks with his erudition, leadership qualities, innovative ideas, and concern for the protection of Buddhist interests in the newly independent nation. In the run-up to the Buddha Jayanti, he served on the Committee of Inquiry charged with rectifying the grievances of the Buddhists. After Vajiragnāna's death in 1955, he became the chief monk or Mahānāyaka Thera of the Amarapura Dharmarakshita Nikāya, the monastic fraternity to which Vajirārāma belonged. In 1958, he established the Vajiragnāna Bhikkhu Training Centre near the town of Mahāragama, a short distance from Colombo, to train young monks in accordance with the traditions of his teacher. In this endeavor he was supported by the affiliated lay organization that he had created, the Sāsana Sevaka Society.

In 1964, Ven. Paññasiha visited the U.S., accompanied by Olcott Gunasekera of the Sasana Sevaka Society.⁶ While in Washington, D.C., the two attended a Vesak celebration conducted in traditional Sri Lankan style on the grounds of the Textile Museum, organized by Dr. Kurt F. Leidecker, a scholar of Buddhism and professor of religious studies at Mary Washington College, and Mr. Nimalasiri Silva of the Embassy of Ceylon (then the name for Sri Lanka). On their return to Sri Lanka, Ven. Paññasiha decided to establish a Theravāda vihāra in Washington, the capital of the most powerful country on earth. Together with Mr. Gunasekera, he formed a new branch of the international service division of the Sasana Sevaka Society which was to oversee the launching of the Washington Buddhist center. They requested Ven. Bope Vinīta, another Vajirārāma monk, to take responsibility for the project. Ven.

Vinīta had spent the past two years studying at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University and thus was familiar with the American social and intellectual landscape. He had previously helped establish Buddhist temples in Germany and Great Britain and therefore seemed eminently well qualified for the job.

Ven. Vinīta accepted the assignment and departed for Washington, taking along a Buddha statue and a relic of the Buddha. He arrived in June 1965 and soon after moved into a first-floor apartment in an apartment building on Harvard Street, in northwest Washington, which was to serve as the first headquarters for the new vihāra. On July 23rd, soon after moving into the apartment, Ven. Vinīta held the inaugural meeting of the fledgling Buddhist Vihāra Society. At every step he was given the full support of the Ceylon Government through its embassy in Washington. According to its constitution, Ven. Madihe Paññasiha, as the patron of the Buddhist Vihāra Society, was responsible for appointing the abbot or “chief incumbent monk” of the vihāra, who then by virtue of his position as abbot became the president of the society.

Ven. Vinīta served as the abbot or “chief incumbent” of the vihāra, and first president of the Buddhist Vihāra Society, until May 1967. In that month Ven. Dickwela Piyananda Mahāthera, a scholar-monk with a specialization in Sanskrit literature, arrived. At the request of Ven. Vinīta, Ven. Paññasiha appointed Ven. Piyananda the next abbot of the vihāra and thus the second president of the society. The two monks continued to dwell in the “apartment vihāra” on Harvard Street. But earlier, in 1967, Ven. Vinīta and the Ceylon Embassy had arranged to purchase from the Government of Thailand a house at 5017 16th Street NW that the Thai Embassy had used as its education counselor’s office and as a dormitory for Thai college students. Before the deal was completed, in February 1968, Ven. Vinīta left the U.S. on account of ill health, and Ven. Piyananda became the sole resident monk. On May 26th of that year he moved to the building on Sixteenth Street, which became the new home of the Washington Buddhist Vihāra and the first proper Theravāda vihāra in America. But, with Ven. Vinīta gone, Ven. Piyananda needed a younger monk to help him with his heavy burden of work. The Sasana Sevaka Society back in Sri Lanka thus sent out feelers for a Sri Lankan monk who knew English well, was interested in missionary work, and could adapt to the sometimes difficult conditions that an Asian monk would have to face when attempting to propagate the Dhamma in the West. It is curious that they did not turn to any of the Vajirārāma monks qualified in English. Perhaps they felt that the few who knew English well, such as Ven. Piyadassi, were needed in Sri Lanka to serve the Sri Lankans from the English-educated Colombo professional class; they may also have been apprehensive that younger monks were too much at risk of disrobing when faced with the temptations of the West. In any case, once their need for a monk became known, it was only a matter of time before a letter of application arrived at the office of the Sāsana Sevaka Society from one Sri Lankan monk who had long experience of missionary work in India and Malaysia and was then residing at the Sri Lankan temple in Kuala Lumpur. As we know, his name was Ven. Henepola Gunaratana.

Thus, when we raise the question “Why did Bhante Gunaratana come to the West?”, we can provide an answer that draws upon a long historical background. The answer might begin with the monk Mahinda’s mission that brought the Dhamma from India to Sri Lanka. It might include the intimate relationship between Buddhism and the Sri Lankan state, the decline of Buddhism during the colonial period, and the impetus given to a Buddhist revival by Ven. Mohottiwatte Gunananda and the

Panadura debates; Col. Olcott's efforts to rejuvenate Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Anagārika Dharmapāla's call to young Asian Buddhists to carry the light of the Dhamma throughout the world; the excitement aroused by Buddha Jayanti and the enthusiasm to establish Buddhist vihāras in Western lands. And all this would dovetail with the dreams an eleven-year-old Sri Lankan boy once had of becoming a monk and preaching the Dhamma in English.

THE AMERICAN SPIRITUAL SOIL

Bhante G arrived in New York en route to Washington, D.C., where he was to serve as a resident monk, and then as general secretary, at the Washington Buddhist Vihāra. And so, once again, one could answer the question, "Why did Bhante Gunaratana come to the West?" simply by saying: "To serve as a resident monk at the Washington Buddhist Vihāra." That was his commission, and that was why he came. But once again one would have to counter that this answer, while true as a simple fact, does not cut deeply enough. This time, it does not cut deeply enough, because it does not lay bare the prospects for promoting Buddhism this monk faced when he arrived in America. If one takes a paint brush, dips it in paint, and moves it across a space, it won't create a picture unless there is a surface for it to meet—a canvas, a piece of paper, or a mural. If a bird descends from the sky, it won't build a nest unless it finds a tree with branches suitable for building a nest. If a seed drops to the ground, it won't germinate, send down roots, and begin to grow unless it meets fertile soil. Similarly, for Bhante G to have realized his own potentials in coming to the West, he had to find suitable conditions in America for unfolding that potential. What exactly was the American spiritual soil upon which Bhante G landed?

In the late 1960s, America was going through a turbulent phase of its history in which all the old rules by which people lived seemed to have lost their relevance and an intense quest was on—launched on a variety of fronts—to find new guidelines to sensible living. Mainstream theistic religion had succeeded too well in adjusting the radical message of the Cross to the comforts and complacency of Main Street, U.S.A. Those who wanted "Christianity in the raw" became "Jesus freaks" or "born-again Christians," who usually had more in common with their fellows exploring Buddhism, Yoga, and Vedanta, than they did with their co-religionists attending their neat, tidy churches on Sunday mornings. Books on all sorts of alternative philosophies of life rolled off the press and into the shelves of counter-culture bookshops, while a disturbing number of university students took up the psychedelic message: "Turn on, tune in, and drop out." They gave up the conventional pathways of living, such as school, job, and family, and took to the countryside to live in alternative communities. Others who remained within the mainstream quietly sought new guidelines to wholesome living and new values in an age deprived of the dogmatic certainties of the past. A number of those seeking new ways to wisdom stumbled upon the ancient wisdom of the East, and among the many strange paths they explored some found the straight, direct, clear highway of the Buddha.

As a living faith, Buddhism probably first came to America with the Chinese immigrants who began to arrive at our shores in the nineteenth century, especially after the California Gold Rush of 1849. Over the next few decades several Buddhist temples were opened. These, however, conducted their services in Chinese and had virtually no impact on the indigenous American population. During the same period, Protestant missionaries intending to propagate the Christian Gospel in Asia studied Buddhism with the aim of denigrating this religion of the East. Uniformly, they depicted Buddhism as

a creed that was atheistic, passive, pessimistic, and escapist, which sought the annihilation of the individual in a night of eternal nothingness. Edwin Arnold's life of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia*, published in 1879, helped to change this perception of Buddhism. This epic poem portrayed the Buddha in a way that satisfied both the yearnings of the romantic idealist and the pragmatic demands of the hard-core rationalist. Immensely popular both in Britain and the United States, the book stimulated an intense interest in Buddhism and a new respect for its founder.

The next major milestone in the progress of Buddhism on American soil was reached at the World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893. Here, Buddhist delegates from Asia had the opportunity to explain their faith to an audience comprised mainly of educated American men and women. One of the Buddhist delegates was the Japanese Zen master, Soyen Shaku, who later played an important role in introducing Zen to the U.S. But the most eloquent and charismatic representative of Buddhism was Anagārika Dharmapāla, whom we met earlier. Standing before an audience draped in his saffron robes, Dharmapāla boldly proclaimed the end of God-centered religion and the triumph of the non-theistic teachings of the Buddha. After the Parliament, at a simple ceremony, a Jewish businessman named C. T. Strauss took the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from Dharmapāla, becoming the first formal convert to Buddhism on American soil.

Over the next few decades, scholarly translations and writings helped to make the teachings of early Buddhism available to inquisitive Americans—whether they had a personal interest in Buddhism or merely wanted to expand their fund of general knowledge. Paul Carus's *The Gospel of Buddha* (1894), written in a popular style with a biblical flavor, gave a wide-ranging presentation of the Buddha's life and teachings. Henry Clark Warren's *Buddhism in Translation* (1896), a more scholarly work, offered translations of many texts from the Nikāyas and the *Visuddhimagga*, arranged by way of subject matter. The translations of the Nikāyas from the Pāli Text Society began to appear in England, and under the title *Buddhist Legends*, the Harvard Oriental Series issued E.W. Burlingame's three-volume translation of the magnificent stories from the *Dhammapada Commentary*. Despite the title, this work brought the Buddha to life as a real historical person walking the roads of the Ganges plain and tending to the day-to-day problems of his monk disciples and lay followers.

Although works on Early Buddhism were readily available in America from an early period, for various reasons interest in Buddhism in America initially did not focus on Theravāda, the earliest school, but on Zen. Several factors may have been responsible for this. One was the writings of the prolific Japanese scholar D.T. Suzuki, which enchanted whole generations with the stories of Zen masters who awakened their disciples to the experience of *satori*, sudden enlightenment, with shouts, blows from a staff, and whimsical replies to their urgent questions. Another factor was the presence in the U.S., even as far back as the early twentieth century, of a few genuine Zen teachers like Nyogen Senzaki and Sokei-an, who cautiously introduced their American students to the practice of sitting meditation. Still a third was the writings of Suzuki's Anglo-American popularizer, Alan Watts, who attempted to build bridges between Asian thought (especially Zen) and modern psychology. In the 1950s, the "Beats," the bearded, pot-smoking rebels of the American counter-culture, took up Zen as their philosophy of choice, convinced that their own reckless antics were comparable to the strange doings of the Zen masters.

Serious interest in Buddhism of various stripes gained momentum in the 1960s. Disillusioned with

materialism, many young Americans, unable to find their way back to their Christian and Jewish faith, began exploring the wisdom of the East, and by now the number of reliable books on Buddhism was considerable. America's increasing involvement in Southeast Asia must also have contributed to the expanding interest in Buddhism, which intensified still more as the Vietnam crisis grabbed the headlines. Almost as if in response to a felt need, true Buddhist masters from Asia started popping up in different parts of America, usually quietly and unobtrusively. The West Coast had perhaps the highest density of Buddhist teachers newly arriving from Asia. The San Francisco Zen Center opened even as far back as 1961, guided by the diminutive Japanese Soto Zen master, Shunryu Suzuki. This event might be taken to mark the beginning of the "flowering of Buddhism" in America during the 1960s. As the decade progressed, several Zen centers would open in Los Angeles as well; Master Hsuan Hua would start the Sino-American Buddhist Association in San Francisco; several Tibetan centers would open, including those founded by Tarthang Tulku and students of Chogyam Trungpa. There was still no center for Theravāda Buddhism—the most ancient Buddhist tradition—but as we mentioned earlier, Ven. Vinīta, studying at Harvard Divinity School in the early 1960s, took note of the interest Americans were evincing in Buddhism and informed his superior back in Sri Lanka, Ven. Madihe Paññasiha, about the prospects for spreading the Dhamma here. Ven. Paññasiha took Ven. Vinita's advice and made a trip to the U.S. in 1964 to explore the feasibility of establishing a Theravāda Buddhist center in America. After returning from that trip, he made his decision: a Theravāda Buddhist vihāra would be set up in Washington, and it would be staffed by monks from Sri Lanka. Then it was only a matter of time until, in 1968, Bhante G joined the vihāra to serve as general secretary.

As he began teaching at the vihāra and giving lectures around the D.C. area, Bhante Gunaratana quickly noticed that Americans were drawn to Buddhism primarily because they wanted to learn meditation. He could see that Americans were suffering from a deep inner unrest, from a sense of pervasive meaninglessness, from constant stress, and they looked to Buddhism to present them with a practice that would yield peace and inner happiness and could clear up the confusion in their spiritual lives. He could also see that his role at the Washington Buddhist vihāra, and the vihāra itself, was from the very start burdened with a taunting ambiguity. On the one hand, the vihāra seemed to have been geared to serve the diplomatic community of Buddhists from Asian countries, who needed a Buddhist temple for their rites of worship and traditional festivals. On the other hand, the mission the vihāra had ostensibly set itself, and the one that inspired Bhante, was to spread the message of the Buddha among Americans, to pass on to them the wondrous light of the Dhamma. If these two purposes could be fulfilled in perfect harmony, then the vihāra might have flourished and Bhante would have seen no reason to leave its halls. However, as time went on, the two purposes, rather than converging, seemed to diverge ever further from one another.

At the time of its founding in 1965, the Washington Buddhist vihāra was the only Theravāda Buddhist temple in Washington, indeed in the entire United States; thus it served the Buddhist communities of all the Theravāda countries, Buddhists of Mahāyana backgrounds, and Americans interested in the Dhamma. For this reason, communal concerns were subordinated to an overriding dedication to the Dhamma and the vihāra began with a sense of adventure. Though working in the nation's capital, the first monks, during their first years in D.C., were pioneers seeking to hew a highway

through a spiritual wilderness. Here they were, clad in the ochre robe, proclaiming such teachings as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, dependent origination, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness—proclaiming them not as university professors, not as amateur lecturers, but as monks ordained in the oldest Buddhist tradition—proclaiming them to people who had never heard such teachings before, and who listened to them with rapt and curious attention. During this early period the monks had to bring together Buddhists from different backgrounds and encourage them to work together in harmony; they had to introduce newcomers to the Dhamma; they had to face a variety of challenges, including the indignities that dark-skinned, shaven-headed monks might meet in an American city as they walked the streets and rode the buses wearing their ochre robes.

In the mid-1970s, however, the situation began to change. Large numbers of immigrants from different Southeast Asian communities arrived and settled in the greater Washington area, and before long, temples sprang up representing their distinct ethnic groups. In succession, there appeared a Thai temple in nearby Maryland; two Vietnamese temples, Mahāyana and Theravāda, both within walking distance of the vihāra; a Japanese Mahāyana temple down the street from the vihāra; a large Cambodian temple in Maryland; a Lao temple in Virginia; and a Burmese temple in Maryland. As a consequence, the ethnic communities that earlier had regarded the Washington Buddhist vihāra as their “home temple away from home” began to drift away, until the only ethnic group that was left at the vihāra was the Sri Lankans, along with a small band of devoted indigenous Americans. Originally an international Buddhist center, the Washington Buddhist Vihāra had gradually become transformed into an outpost of Sri Lanka, and cultural observances were gaining the upper hand over spiritual practices. Thus when Bhante Gunaratana succeeded Ven. Dickwela Piyananda as president of the vihāra on the latter’s retirement in October 1980, he found himself the abbot of what was virtually a Sri Lankan temple. This was not the vision around which the vihāra was founded, nor was it the ideal he had originally envisaged for himself when he had left for the U.S. in 1968, keen on spreading the Dhamma among those who had never before known of it.

I came to the vihāra in May 1979 and could see the changes taking place in the congregation. At the time, our congregation still consisted of Sinhalese, Burmese, Vietnamese, and American Buddhists. But during the three years I resided at the vihāra, a Burmese monk came and before long was involved in setting up a Burmese temple, which would pull the Burmese devotees away. Then a Vietnamese Theravadin monk came to set up a temple for the Vietnamese followers of Theravāda, and we would thus lose the Vietnamese Theravadins. By the time I left the vihāra to return to Sri Lanka, in May 1982, the ethnic range of the congregation was narrowing.

It was just about this time that a new option presented itself to Bhante. This option, offered by his friend Matt Flickstein, was to set up a meditation center independent of the vihāra. This proposal agreed exactly with what Bhante himself had been inclining towards. Even during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Bhante started to spend more time away from the vihāra, teaching meditation retreats around the U.S. Matt convinced Bhante that it was possible to set up a meditation center and that such a center would answer an important need. Already, American lay Buddhists who had practiced in Buddhist Asia had set up meditation centers in the U.S., the most successful being the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. So why not an insight meditation center under the guidance of a Sri Lankan monk, with an added emphasis on monastic training? The conditions, Matt

emphasized, were exactly right. There were many Americans keen on learning mindfulness meditation, and many who had practiced with Bhante at retreats held at other places around North America would rejoice at the news that he had set up his own center.

So, starting in 1982, Bhante and Matt searched for funds to purchase property, sought out a suitable piece of property, and then set about the hard work of creating the Bhāvanā Society out of thin air. Back at the vihāra, however, trouble was brewing. One of the resident Sri Lankan monks, who had arrived in 1980 even while I was still at the vihāra, began playing the nasty political game of winning the favor of lay devotees and then pitting them against the chief monk. As time went on, he found that he had a strong enough faction behind him to risk directly attacking Bhante G. Bhante struggled on for several years as head of the vihāra, while he was also engaged in establishing the Bhāvanā Society. Finally, the board of directors gave him an ultimatum: he would have to choose between the Washington Buddhist vihāra and the Bhāvanā Society, or allow the Bhāvanā Society to be absorbed by the Buddhist vihāra Society. Faced with this choice, and aware that the vihāra had been turning more and more into a Sri Lankan cultural and religious center, Bhante took the courageous step of resigning from the vihāra to commit himself full time to the Bhāvanā Society.

What seemed to be a defeat eventually turned into a victory. By giving himself full time to the Bhāvanā Society, Bhante could fully tap his own talents as a meditation teacher, and over the years his popularity has soared until his name has become almost synonymous with Buddhist mindfulness meditation. He has authored three popular books, including his autobiography. He has traveled to all the continents on earth to conduct retreats and has won the affection and esteem of thousands of people—Buddhist and non-Buddhist—in many lands.

EPILOGUE

At the end of *Journey to Mindfulness*, Bhante Gunaratana relates how his monastic fraternity, the Malwatta Chapter of the Siyam Nikāya, awarded him the title “Chief Sangha Nāyaka Thera [Leading Monk of the Order] for North America.”⁷ The fraternity wanted to present him the title as far back as 1985, but then he had refused it, for he was not keen on honors and titles. However, in 1996 they were absolutely insistent, and at that point, after several attempts to escape the honor, he felt he was obliged to accept.

In his biography he describes the ceremony that was held for him at the Malwatta Mahāvihāra. Bhante had written to me about this ceremony, requesting me to attend, which I did. After the ceremony, he paid a return visit to his home village, where a huge crowd of people came to meet him, including all his surviving relatives. At the temple, an old man reminded everyone that it was Bhante G’s father that had built the preaching hall, built it with his own hands, and the hall was still standing strong and firm seventy-five years later. As he stood there, looking at the hall, Bhante G had to struggle to hold back the tears.

In this event, the three lines of causation that I have described in this essay flow seamlessly together. We have here the *biographical* stream of causation, the story of Bhante G, from his boyhood dream of becoming a monk who would preach the Dhamma in English, to its fulfillment in his receiving the title of Chief Sangha Nāyaka Thera for North America. This flows together with the *Sri Lankan historical* stream of causation: a monk who was born during the “glow” of the Buddhist revival, who was

educated at one of the Buddhist institutes that originated as part of the revival, who did missionary work in India at Mahābodhi Society centers established under the inspiration of Anagārika Dharmapāla, who came to the U.S. to serve at a Buddhist vihāra established in the trail of the 1956 Buddha Jayanti. These two streams of causation then flow together with the third stream of causation, *the American spiritual quest* of the late 1960s: the various factors that prepared America as the soil for Bhante to devote his talents as a Buddhist teacher, specifically a teacher of Buddhist mindfulness meditation; his years at the Washington Buddhist vihāra teaching Buddhism while learning to understand the American mindset and how to present the Dhamma to Americans; the conflicts at the vihāra and the creation of the Bhāvanā Society; and then his success as a much loved meditation teacher who gives retreats all around the world. And this finally all comes back to recognition by his Sangha brothers in his home country, at the temple where he was ordained, and honor from his relatives in the village where he set out many years ago, set out on this long journey that took him many miles from home.

¹ Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, *Journey to Mindfulness: The Autobiography of Bhante G.* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003).

² Aloysius Pieris, *Prophetic Humour in Buddhism and Christianity* (Colombo: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, 2005) pp. 9-10.

³ Gananath Obeyesekere, "Colonel Henry Steel Olcott's Reforms of the 19th Century and their Cultural Significance" (<http://aryasangha.org/obeye-1.htm>).

⁴ Our Duty to the People of the West (1927). (<http://www.vipassana.com/resources/dharmapala/an79.php>)

⁵ G.P. Malalasekera, Presidential Address to the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, 1953; quoted in George Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), p. 79.

⁶ Much of the information below on the early history of the Washington Buddhist Vihāra is based on Michael Roehm, "A Few Fragments from the Vihāra's Twenty-Five-Year Chronology" in *The Washington Buddhist Silver Jubilee Commemoration of the Washington Buddhist Vihāra* (Washington: Buddhist Vihāra Society, Inc., 1991), pp. 9-12. Some of Roehm's dates differ from those in *Journey to Mindfulness*, but his dates seem to be carefully substantiated.

⁷ *Journey to Mindfulness*, pp. 253-58.

Autobiography of Bhante G

© Bhante Henepola Gunaratana with Jeanne Malmgren, 2003

Excerpted from *Journey to Mindfulness: The Autobiography of Bhante G*, with permission of Wisdom Publications, 199 Elm St., Somerville MA 02144, www.wisdompubs.org

[This excerpt was arranged by Jeanne Malmgren.]

I was born on the seventh of December 1927, in Henepola, Ceylon. Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka, is a teardrop-shaped island off the southeast coast of India. It is a beautiful place of lushly-forested mountains, rice paddies, and farms of rubber plants and tea trees.

In the late 1920s, the tiny village of Henepola was home to about forty families. The village was not accessible by road, and it had no school, police station, post office, shops, or restaurants. No one in Henepola had electricity or running water, but there was a small river that ran through our village. The nearest large town was a three-mile walk on a narrow dirt path that wound through groves of coconut trees and tea estates.

My mother's name was Herat Mudiyansele Lokumenike. My father's name was Ekanāyaka Mudiyansele Puncibanda. I was the youngest of seven children. My mother was thirty-seven when she gave birth to me. My birth was attended by a midwife, who received a measure of rice and a coconut for her trouble.

Two weeks after my birth, when it looked likely I was hearty enough to survive, my father walked a half-mile to the nearest village, Dehideniya. There, he told the chief the name he had given his third son: Ekanāyaka Mudiyansele Ukkubanda. Ukku means small and banda means treasure. As I got older my parents decided to call me Kudabanda, which means something like "small boy."

My father built our house himself. It was maybe thirty by forty feet. The roof was made of straw, dried fronds from coconut trees, and scraps of tin. The walls were made of mud, reinforced with strips of bamboo. The floor was made of mud, like the walls, but every so often my mother and sisters smeared fresh cow dung over it, using their bare hands. Manure was considered a germicide, its odor the smell of freshness. We walked on that floor every day, barefoot.

Our parents shared a deep devotion to Buddhism. Every morning we children woke up to the singsong chant of them reading Pāli suttas. These daily recitations served as our lullaby at night, too. Before we even learned the alphabet, we could recite Pāli devotional stanzas from memory.

Buddhism, in fact, permeates my earliest memories. Our entire village's anchor was the temple. People went there to visit the monks and ask them to chant suttas for nearly every event: weddings, birthdays, serious illness, and deaths. The monks served as teachers, preachers, and advisors; sometimes even as physicians. People also enjoyed simply chatting with the monks at any hour of day or night. The temple was always open.

Four times a month—on the full moon, the new moon, and each quarter moon—people typically spent a twenty-four-hour period at the temple. Some people sat down to meditate, others did walking meditation or stood near the sacred Bodhi tree, reciting scriptures. Monks and laypeople took turns delivering sermons in the preaching hall, where people sat or reclined on the cool concrete floor. I remember as a child, I'd doze off in my mother's lap during those sermons.

Both of my parents knew how to read and write in Sinhalese, which was a rarity in our village and in most of rural Ceylon. Because my father was literate, and was known as a man of dignity and strict moral principles, he was the most highly respected man in Henepola. The other villagers often came to him to settle their disputes.

My mother had no formal education, but she was very intelligent. She taught herself how to read and write, and she knew a lot about herbal medicine. Her intuition was powerful. My mother understood and lived the words of the Buddha. She made sure all her children heard stories of the Buddha's life and learned about his compassion and wisdom. She herself was a walking example of metta, always treating anyone she met with gentleness and soft words. In many ways, I considered her almost a holy person.

Since we had no electricity, we relied on the dim light of coconut oil lamps. Sometimes, when we didn't have enough oil for the lamps, my mother made a torch out of nuts from the kekuna tree. Although our village didn't have running water, our family was lucky, because about two hundred yards from the house we had a private well fed by a spring. My mother and sisters hauled the spring water to the house in large earthen pots. For bathing, we used primitive buckets made of fibrous sheaths shed by areca palm trees.

No matter how clean we kept our bodies, our clothes, and our mattresses, we all suffered the agony of bed bugs. I vividly remember scratching the swollen, red places on my body where bed bugs had bitten. Although the itching was terrible, I never thought to wish for anything else; it was just a part of life.

Leeches were another problem. Whenever my brother and I went exploring, we'd come home with leeches clinging to our legs or burrowed between our toes. We would pull them off, but often their minute teeth stayed imbedded in our skin. I still have scars on my legs.

My siblings and I had no toys. We played with sticks, dry palm fronds, coconut shells, and frayed pieces of discarded rope. Our playground was the sand in front of our house, the rice fields, or the threshing grounds where farmers separated rice from its stalks. I also loved to climb trees and explore the forest.

At age seven, I started school. The nearest one was run by Catholic missionary nuns. I loved it, mainly because of the delicious lunches we were served each day. I attended [that] school for about a year before the Buddhist temple in Dehideniya opened a primary school. All the children of Henepola, perhaps thirty or forty of us, switched schools. Every morning, when the teacher walked in, we stood next to our benches and bowed, hands folded in front of our chests.

Before lessons began, in Pāli we all recited the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. Even the youngest children knew these recitations by heart, because everyone had heard their parents chanting them at home every single day of their lives. The school curriculum included Sinhalese grammar, history, science, arithmetic, and of course, Buddhism.

I loved pretending I was a bhikkhu. I would wrap a piece of white cloth around myself and sit down under a tree in the forest. I imagined that the other trees were people, and I preached to the crowd of silent listeners, reciting a few Pāli stanzas I'd heard at the temple. The impulse to ordain and that deep longing to wear the saffron robe flowered in me very early. By the time I was eleven, I had lost interest in boyhood mischief and I'd also lost interest in school. I pestered my parents about becoming a bhikkhu, long enough that they finally began to take my request seriously. With some reluctance, my father finally agreed to let me try temple life. My mother cried because she hated to see me leave home, but she saw in my determination that it was inevitable. And she was certainly not the only mother in Ceylon to give her son to the religious life.

In April 1944, after my most recent (novice) ordination, I began my formal monastic education at Vidyasekhara Pirivena. I was very happy there, living among other teenage monks and spending my days studying. We studied Ceylonese history and important dhamma texts such as the *Anguttara Nikāya* and the *Majjhima Nikāya*. We also were taught a whole host of languages: Sinhalese, Tamil, Hindi, English, Pāli, and Sanskrit.

On full-moon days I gave half-hour dhamma talks. One time I decided to “wing it.” All I did was memorize the Visakhuposatha Sutta, then repeated it to my audience. The experimental sermon was a disaster. I was finished reciting within ten minutes, then I simply babbled on for five more minutes. It was embarrassing, and it taught me a valuable lesson about the value of diligent preparation. It wasn't until much later in my career as a monk that I again felt confident enough to give sermons without preparation.

Eventually, the date of my higher ordination was set: June 25, 1947. Finally I would become a full bhikkhu, agreeing to follow 227 precepts. I could hardly wait. During the ordination [ceremony], I thought of my mother. How I wished she could have witnessed this! Because of her back injury, she couldn't walk the nine miles from our village. But if she had been there that day in Kandy, she surely would have shed tears of joy, seeing her youngest son at last become a fully ordained monk.

In 1950 I was admitted to Vidyalandara Pirivena, a college for monks near Colombo. In 1952, all I had to complete before graduation were the final exams. The exam fee was fifteen rupees, and I didn't have the money. So I dropped out. After college, I continued taking English classes wherever I could find them.

“Little monk,” people would say, “why do you insist on learning English? Only laypeople use English, and very few at that. You need to settle down at a temple and fulfill your duties there.”

“But I might go abroad some day,” I would protest. “I might need to know English.”

They would look at me like I was crazy.

In 1953, when I heard two monks discussing a vacancy at the Buddhist Missionary School in Colombo, I immediately knew this was something I wanted to do. Unfortunately, the students were already halfway through their three-year program, so I would have to struggle to catch up. Toward the end of 1954, it was time for final exams ... and then ... our overseas assignments. The trip from Ceylon to India was only twenty-two miles across the Indian ocean, a simple ferry ride, but for me it was a grand journey and the inauguration of my world travels.

My life as a Buddhist missionary was beginning in a very auspicious place. The site of the temple at Sanchi dates back to the third century B.C.E., when King Ashoka, a devout Indian Buddhist, sent

his son and daughter, Mahinda and Sanghamitta as missionaries to carry the Dhamma to Ceylon. Before they left India, they visited the site of the Sanchi temple. In 1954, the Mahābodhi Society built a temple to enshrine holy relics of the Buddha and two of his main disciples, Sāriputta and Mahā-Moggalāna. Pilgrims often came to Sanchi to pay their respects to the relics and to see the great gateways built by King Ashoka. There were four of them, built in the third century B.C.E.

When I was in India in the 1950s, there were 80 million Untouchables. Because I spoke Hindi, I was frequently asked to minister to Untouchables who were Buddhist converts. In February 1957, I arrived in New Delhi, ready to go to work. My work there was among the Untouchables. Every Sunday I went to their meeting hall and gave a dhamma talk. I also visited Untouchable communities on the outskirts of the city. I also found a nearby school, Das Gupta College, where I could take classes in English. The only problem was, the other students verbally harassed me. I think they thought I was an Untouchable because I spent so much time in Untouchable areas.

In November 1958 I boarded a ship in Madras. The ship was bound for Japan, but would stop in Malaysia, which is where I would disembark—and begin the next chapter of my missionary career. When I arrived in Kuala Lumpur, I was welcomed by the eminent monk who had invited me to Malaysia: Venerable Dhammananda Thera. The temple served the fifty or so Sinhalese families living in Kuala Lumpur. A few Chinese Buddhists visited, too. Very quickly I realized that I needed to improve my English if I was going to be an effective teacher there. The Sinhalese parents wanted us to teach dhamma to their children in Sinhalese, but the children spoke mainly Malay or English. So I decided to start conducting most of the Sunday School classes in English, to make the children more comfortable and willing to listen. Some of the Sinhalese criticized me, but the more educated ones saw the value of their children learning English. Dhamma concepts are hard enough for young children to grasp, and if I taught in a language they couldn't understand, they would be frustrated and not want to come to the temple.

The desire to improve my English burned in me like an eternal flame. First, I took afternoon classes at a school run by a Hindu organization, then at a private high school where the principal allowed me to attend tuition-free. Later, I went to another private school closer to the temple and there, a temple supporter paid my tuition.

Meanwhile, the immigration authorities of Malaysia had informed me that they couldn't extend my visa anymore. I would have to leave the country by the end of 1968. So I began to consider my options. While touring Japan, I met another Sinhalese monk who told me that a Sinhalese temple had been established in Washington, D.C., the first Sinhalese temple in the United States. He said they were looking for an English-speaking monk with missionary experience to assist the monk already there.

Quite soon after I got back to Malaysia, I received the letter that would determine the next chapter of my life. It was formal invitation from the Sāsana Sevaka Society, asking me to come to Washington, D.C., to be a resident teacher at their temple. My assignment was to begin the next year, 1968.

I was forty years old, and finally I was about to do what I'd always wanted: to teach dhamma in English, in the capital of the foremost English-speaking country in the world.

My new home was a rundown, three-story brick house on 16th Street, Northwest, the former Thai embassy. The house was huge: eight bedrooms, four bathrooms, an attic, and a basement. The Thai

embassy had housed college students there, and students can be hard on a building.

When it came to renovation, I didn't know what I was doing. So I walked one mile to the nearest hardware store and started asking questions. Then I had to carry home any materials I purchased, including lumber. After awhile, I had some help from a few Thai people who came to the temple. And eventually, some Burmese and Vietnamese families also joined. We tore out walls and turned several rooms into one large one, to serve as a shrine room. Then we went to work making the bedrooms livable. I hammered and chiseled, put up studs, and blew insulation. I was also responsible for the other daily tasks at the temple.

Most of the time, I was exhausted. My days ran from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m.; and if visitors came to the temple, I had to drop whatever project I was working on and receive them. Some of the families who belonged to the temple brought meals as an act of dana, but it certainly didn't happen every day. So I taught myself how to cook.

As a monk living in Asia, I had been waited on much of my life. Never did I expect to come to America and be a manual laborer and a cook and a repairman. To tell the truth, I was quite angry.

But of course, I couldn't turn around and go back to Asia. Eventually, I began to enjoy the work. It was interesting to learn so many new skills.

In December, on my forty-first birthday, the sale of the building finally closed. The Washington Buddhist Vihāra—sale price \$33,000—was officially ours.

During those first few years at the vihāra, we always seemed to have just enough money to pay the bills. Our mortgage was \$172 a month. Along with utilities, our expenses added up to \$500 or \$600 a month. All of it, of course, had to come from donations. Each month we took in about \$600 or \$700. Somehow, it always came out on the plus side. Just barely. We started enrolling people as members, and slowly the vihāra grew. Within a couple of years we had finished the major repairs to the building.

In 1971, at the age of forty-three, I was admitted to American University as a freshman. Because of my duties at the vihāra, I only had time for two classes a semester. I spent the next couple of years running the vihāra, being a university student, and traveling to other universities to give lectures on Buddhism.

In 1972 I started leading a meditation class at American University. The university chaplain gave us a large room in the chapel for our meetings. We furnished it with comfortable meditation cushions. About a week after we started, I arrived early one day and found that someone had slashed every single cushion with a knife. That was one of my earliest tastes of religious discrimination, American style.

The next year, American University appointed me its Buddhist chaplain; a new position created for me. The university had chaplains of other faiths, but never before a Buddhist. The news was printed in the campus newspaper. Immediately someone wrote to the university's president, demanding to know why he had appointed a "heathen" as chaplain.

One day in 1975 someone at the State Department called looking for me. The man asked if I'd like to help some refugees from Vietnam who were arriving in the United States. The State Department needed a Buddhist chaplain to minister at one of the refugee camps being set up in Florida.

My work with the refugees was very rewarding. I felt I was providing necessary comfort to people at a very difficult time in their lives. I was there, basically, to console the ten thousand Vietnamese who

had begun arriving. The familiar sight of a Buddhist monk seemed to be a life preserver for many of the refugees who were scarred by war and now transported to a totally alien land. I was told I should visit them daily, perform religious services, and provide whatever spiritual comfort they needed.

By the end of August, most of the Vietnamese had been transferred. The State Department wanted to dismantle the camp. I had been away from the vihāra for four months. As soon as I got home, some members of the board of directors pounced on me. "You've been neglecting the vihāra," they said.

In the late fall of 1976, I informed the vihāra's board of directors that my mother likely was dying and I needed to go home. In December I boarded a plane and headed home to Sri Lanka. I had put together a wonderful surprise for my mother.

Some friends in Malaysia donated a slide projector, and I also collected an FM radio with a cordless microphone. I had about five hundred color slides of places I had visited all over the world. There were temples, skyscrapers, landscapes, animals, and festivals. I wanted to show my mother where I had been all these years while I was gone from home.

When I arrived in Sri Lanka, we had the slide show at my sister's house. Because there was no electricity there, we had to run extension cords from her neighbor's house. My mother sat, fascinated, as she looked at the slides and listened to my narration. Her eyes were shining. We started the show at 10 p.m., and it went on until 2 a.m., but my mother never seemed to get tired. That was our last good time together. The next day I said goodbye to her, and I left for Colombo. The day after that, I got a call from my nephew. My mother had died. All through my monastic career up to that point, I was always striving to please my mother. I wanted to make her happy, more than any other person in the world. She was so proud that I was a monk and teaching dhamma all over the globe. Now that she was gone, whom would I try to please?

Even today, I feel great fondness for the memory of my mother.

After returning home to Washington in the spring of 1977, I resumed classes at American University. I was in my second year of master's studies. Meanwhile, the vihāra was flourishing. In the nearly ten years since I had come there, our membership had multiplied a hundredfold. The devotional services and meditation classes were very popular, with both Americans and Sinhalese attending. I also began to receive more and more invitations to teach and lead meditation retreats around the country. It was the late 1970s and meditation centers were beginning to crop up everywhere.

In 1980 I earned my doctorate in philosophy. On graduation day, I was amazed to see two dozen Sinhalese friends in the audience. "Bhante," one of them said, "when did you ever find time to earn a PhD.?" I laughed at the truth of his question. When people visited the vihāra, they usually saw me mowing the lawn, giving a dhamma talk, or fixing a leaky faucet. I had a full-time job there. But my other full-time job was, and always has been, being a student.

As soon as I earned my doctorate, several universities offered me faculty positions. I didn't accept any because my first responsibility was the vihāra. By then we had close to three thousand members, with a good mix of American and Asians. Several more Sinhalese monks arrived to live in Washington, and the big house on Sixteenth Street became quite a lively, busy place.

When Matt Flickstein and I started our land search, I had \$50,000. It was the money the State Department paid me for working at the refugee camp in Florida, plus honoraria for speeches I made

and classes I taught—anything I had earned on my own, outside of my work at the Washington Buddhist Vihāra.

Matt and I started driving around Virginia, looking for pieces of land for sale. We opened a bank account in the name of our new enterprise: Bhāvanā Society. I told the monks at the vihāra and the board of directors that we were raising funds for a new meditation center outside of Washington somewhere. I never said it would be under the auspices of the Washington Buddhist Vihāra, but that is what they assumed.

I had gotten tired of temple politics. The original founder of the Washington Buddhist Vihāra belonged to the Amarapura Nikāya sect of Theravāda Buddhism. I belonged to another sect, Siyam. One monk, sent in 1980 to live at the vihāra, said because I was of the Siyam Nikāya sect, I didn't belong at a temple established in the Amarapura Nikāya sect. He tried to stir up arguments to turn the other monks against me.

By the mid 1980s, I was worn out by the bickering. I started to think more and more about getting away, about living in a peaceful place where I could simply teach dhamma and not worry about the politics of running a temple.

As soon as word got around that Matt and I had bought land, some of the members of the Washington Vihāra were up in arms. Some stopped giving donations; others refused to bow to me. Secret meetings were held, to which I was not invited. In late 1984 I decided to visit Sri Lanka. I had not been there for nine years, and my family asked me to participate in an offering ceremony for the memory of our mother. I also had several invitations to speak in other countries, and I thought I could combine it all into one trip.

When I got back to Washington in May 1985, the atmosphere at the vihāra was icy. The board of directors demanded that I meet with them immediately.

“Why didn't you affiliate this new place with the Washington Buddhist Vihāra?”

“Because I want it to be a monastic mediation center,” I said, “not a cultural center.”

I stuck it out for three more years, but it wasn't easy. Finally the board of directors gave me three choices. I could resign as president of the Washington Buddhist Vihāra, I could resign from the board of the Bhāvanā Society, or I could allow Bhāvanā Society to be absorbed into the vihāra. I gave them an answer on the spot. “I'll resign from the vihāra,” I said.

I immediately sent my letter of resignation to the head of the Amarapura Nikāya sect in Sri Lanka. I asked him to allow Venerable Mahāragama Dhammasiri to take my place.

By the time I moved onto our new property in West Virginia, we had already drilled a well and there was electricity. But only the skeleton of one building rose in the forest. Despite these meager accommodations, I was happy. I felt as though I could truly serve the Dhamma at this place. Here, in this isolated mountain valley, I could make a place where people would come to experience peace.

I didn't do it to become famous or attract disciples or raise a lot of money. All I wanted was to see monks, nuns, and lay meditators strolling the paths, deep in meditation and contemplation of the Dhamma.

My only companion in those early days was Venerable Yogavacara Rāhula, a young American monk who had ordained in the mid-1970s in Sri Lanka. Bhante Rāhula would prove, over the years, to be my right-hand man and the most energetic, dependable bhikkhu I had ever met.

On our first ordination day, in July 1989, I ordained three men and one woman, as a novice. The Bhāvanā Society had consecrated its sima, and it also had its first monks and nuns. My dream of a forest monastery was taking shape. I was delighted beyond words.

At Bhāvanā Society, we take the monastic discipline very seriously. Visitors and lay residents are asked to observe eight precepts. I have always felt that we don't have to relax our discipline to attract people to our center. People have a tremendous respect for discipline. When they see how we live here, it inspires them. They also appreciate the fact that we operate Bhāvanā Society solely on dana, instead of dues. In this culture, dana makes a very powerful statement. Our reliance on dana, our trust that the help will be there when we need it, is so rare in America that it seems to open people's hearts and minds. I think they trust us more because we clearly are not trying to take something from them. Instead, we're offering them something.

From the beginning, I also was very firm that there would be few cultural trappings at Bhāvanā Society. I didn't want the center to look like a Sinhalese temple, or an American meditation center, or a Japanese zendo. I wanted it to be a place where people of all traditions, of all ethnicities and national origins, would feel at home.

When I look back over the arc of my life, I am amazed. Seventy years ago, I was a barefoot boy in a jungle village on an island in the Indian Ocean, drawing pictures in the sand with a stick. Today I'm a post-doctorally educated monk with friends and students all over the world. In 1977 I became a United States citizen, so America is home now. Although I've tried to scale back my travel in the last few years, invitations to teach and lead meditation retreats keep coming from all over the world. I have realized my goal of teaching dhamma in the language that is most widely spoken all over the world.

Bhāvanā Society, like any spiritual center, has its difficulties. But those of us on the board of directors are pleased with how it's turning out. In 1997 we constructed a beautiful meditation hall. I have performed a dozen ordinations. We've built and renovated a total of nine buildings, and twenty kutis dot the woods on our property.

I feel that I have finally settled into the lifestyle I envisioned for my later years. I can't imagine any other life for myself but this one as a monk, teaching the Dhamma. It is what I was born to do, and I feel so grateful for the opportunities it has given me.

Reflections on the Influence of Bhante Gunaratana

Ven. Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano

In the fall of 1976, I made my way to Washington, D.C., in hopes of learning how to practice Buddhist meditation. There I met Bhante Gunaratana, who was at that time already well into his teaching career in the U.S. This was good fortune for me, not only because he was knowledgeable about meditation and much else, but also because he spoke excellent English and--what was especially significant--understood American culture. This understanding, together with his enthusiasm and skill in teaching, enabled him to get across the Dhamma to American students who had no background in Buddhism at all.

Venerable Gunaratana welcomed me and many others who sought his instruction, patiently answering questions and gradually introducing us to the great range of the Dhamma. At that time, I had no doubt quite confused views. Yet in listening to him I gradually began to see that the Buddha's teaching was beautifully rational, well ordered, and practicable. It was a pleasure to practice meditation under Bhante G's guidance, as I began to understand that meditation was a logical discipline that could be carried out coolly and steadily.

My principal interest when I first came to Washington was simply the technique of formal meditation, as I had the naive idea that this was what mattered above all in the search for enlightenment. Thanks to Venerable Gunaratana, who did not limit his advice to technique alone, I learned better. In the many talks I heard him give, Venerable Gunaratana explained the Noble Eightfold Path in such a way that I started regarding it in more than a distant, theoretical way; realizing that the Buddha's teaching was vast and varied and important to understand in both its intellectual and its experiential aspects.

Over the years, I more than once benefited from Venerable Gunaratana's generous hospitality and was able to consult him on many subjects. Apart from the direct advice I received, I benefited just by observing him in his daily life as a Buddhist monk, noting his dignity, his kindness, and his devotion to the Dhamma, and thereby developing for myself some idea of what the Buddhist life ought to be. Many people are now aware of Venerable Gunaratana's public life as a monk, his writing, and his world-wide teaching, but not everyone knows of the hard work he put in, day-by-day, in the running of a temple and the hundred chores and duties he quietly fulfilled, year after year. Diligence, I am sure, is one of those fine Buddhist virtues he has practiced and developed.

Though versed in the Buddhist traditions of Sri Lanka, Venerable Gunaratana has never presented the Dhamma as something foreign, exotic or alien to American culture. Rather, as a true messenger of the Dhamma, he has presented it faithfully, in our own idiom, as the universally attractive way to liberation. The great and growing number of his appreciative students testifies to the excellence of his method.

Everyone who has happily found his way into the teaching of the Buddha probably looks back, after the passage of years, and wonders how it was that such good fortune came to be. I think that in most, if not all cases, it must be on account of meeting, at some opportune time, with one or more excellent, inspiring persons, without whose influence life might easily have turned another way. Certainly that was true for me. Certainly my first meeting with Bhante Gunaratana was extremely fortunate, in that my tentative, poorly-informed interest in Buddhism found a source of solid instruction and encouragement.

These days, there will be many grateful students congratulating Bhante Gunaratana on a long life of building institutions, writing, teaching the Dhamma, and stimulating the growth of Buddhism in North America and around the world. I wish to express my own gratitude and appreciation for his showing me, over the course of many years, such kindness and consideration, and for pointing out that which can really be relied on in this impermanent world: the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. For me and many others he has done the worthy work of a teacher, thereby accumulating—and deserving—much merit. Beyond this, he has made his life’s work an example that all who care about the propagation of the Buddha’s teaching can admire and learn from.



Bhante G working at the Washington Buddhist Vihāra

Recollections of Bhante G.

Ven. Bhikkhunī Sudhamma

Following are some recollections from living with Venerable Gunaratana at the Bhāvanā Society, during the years 1998 – 2002.

ON DEVAS

A quote that has been attributed to Bhante Gunaratana: “Devas [deities] cannot do anything for you. They only cheer you on. And then when you get somewhere they try to take all the credit!” Soon after arriving at Bhāvanā, I heard that Bhante G had said this, and the quote sounded credible to me. A year or two later, however, when I asked him whether he had indeed said this, he just chuckled.

ON ATTACHMENT

Bhante G commented, “The one death I most deeply feared was my mother’s. After that, I didn’t have to fear.” He went on to explain that he was never attached to anyone so strongly as his mother (not even his beloved brothers and sisters), nor did he believe he would ever become so attached to anyone again.

In other words, after his mother’s passing, he became free of the worry and sorrow over loved ones, that nag at almost everyone else in the world. He had no more of the attachment-love that would create piercing grief, nor was he interested in developing it towards anyone. Instead, he had become devoted to universal loving-friendliness: metta.

This comment from the Buddha comes to mind: “For him who has completed the journey, for him who is sorrowless, for him who from everything is wholly free, for him who has destroyed all Ties, the fever (of passion) exists not.” [Dh 90.]

NOT ANGRY

One time while working on a lengthy project with somebody, Bhante G repeatedly needed to extend the deadline and he pledged to stick to his latest deadline, But later, Bhante G needed to make yet another postponement. Unfortunately, I had the task of telephoning and delivering these message to the man, who by and by became irate.

Upon my reporting this mans anger to Bhante G, he said, in a gentle tone, “He is angry. But I am not angry.” To my surprise he flashed an innocent, sweet smile and concluded, “So, I think it is oooohh-kay.” (The man ended up quitting the project in a rage, and didn’t talk to Bhante for a long time. He did eventually seem to come around, but it took a few years.)

ANICCĀ (IMPERMANENCE)

One afternoon while washing dishes, I noticed colorful bubbles forming and disappearing at the top of a large container of dish washing liquid. One large soap bubble, three or four inches wide, emerged. Watching its colors twirl, marveling at the beauty, I patiently waited for the bubble to pop. Moments passed; it seemed as though it would never burst. Bhante G walked by the kitchen door and I called to him, “Bhante, look, this bubble...!” Just as he looked, it burst.

“It popped!” I said, surprised and disappointed. Bhante G leveled a knowing look at me and said, significantly, “You see?” and was gone.

WALKING

Bhante G finishes his lunch and is the first to leave the dining hall, while others are still eating. Shortly he slips from his bedroom, across a hallway and out the back door, moving quickly to escape possible hangers-on. Hat on his head, staff in hand, he is ready for his daily walk.

He reportedly walks five miles on each outing. One often sees him along the road, waving at every passing car—always offering the enthusiastic, friendly wave that has helped him to gain acceptance among the locals.

Not all local people initially accepted him. Venerable Gunaratana stands out as “different” in this backwoods area: the design and color of his clothing, his country of origin, his skin color, his shaven head, his stature, his accent, and his religion. Nonetheless, passing drivers return the wave even of someone so different, because the friendly wave-and-response exchange remains a deeply entrenched social gesture in the rural South. You would feel, as they’d say, “downright mean” not to wave back at Bhante G’s cheerful, outgoing greeting.

The local people’s responsive wave to Bhante G, a positive gesture made time and again, has created friendly feelings towards him. It has even forged lasting friendships.

Bhante G says that walking is his time to practice his metta. In other words, as he walks along the road, he radiates loving, friendly feelings towards all living beings. This practice often comes to mind when I take a walk.

BEING RIGHT

When it comes to the Dhamma, no flaw stands out in the message of Ven. Gunaratana. However, I sometimes held opinions that were out of harmony with his, when it came to administrative decisions for the monastery or the management of residents. Before embarking upon the holy life at age 35, I had been an attorney and a righteous feminist—an educated, independent American woman brimming with strong opinions.

On one occasion I could have demonstrated in a dozen ways the correctness of my viewpoint, and felt particularly frustrated. Angrily righteous, I stubbornly quarreled with our teacher. Later, on my knees, I approached Bhante G to make my apologies (not an uncommon sight). I apologized for my attitude, for having spoken out against his decision in front of everyone, and for having been rude and disrespectful. He received these apologies graciously. Yet I couldn’t help but add, “But I was right!”

His eyes flashed ever so briefly, then he looked past me and commented softly, “Maybe you had

better think about that.” Therefore, I did; lowering my hands, I sat back on my haunches, and pondered, as a new idea emerged. From every logical angle, my point of view was factually true, provable, and unassailable. So what could he mean...? Then it hit me, and I declared, “I cannot be ‘right’ so long as my mind is unwholesome!” Bhante G gave his sweetest approving smile and said, “Yes, that is correct.” I prostrated.

It would be nice if I could report that this revelation stopped me from ever arguing my viewpoints with anyone—particularly with the venerable teacher. Unfortunately, for someone with habitual men-



tal impediments like a thick wall, no permanent cure can be instantaneous. Yet this moment with Bhante G opened for me a new way of seeing things—a door which would, over time, slowly widen.

PURITY

The words *guna* (pure) and *ratana* (jewel) denote that the name Gunaratana means “Jewel of Purity.” It’s a very apt name, for his pure integrity inspires anyone who knows him. The Buddha said that a virtuous man has no fear from any quarter; like a king who has conquered all enemies and can sit without fear on his throne.

One time during his daily walk, Bhante G came across a strong-willed visiting monk strolling in the woods with a female devotee, hand-in-hand. The solitude and physical contact between these two people violated monastic rules. The sight must have come as a shock to Bhante G; however, as he came up to them and passed by, he aimed only one word at them: "Don't."

The laywoman later described the incident, and said that after Bhante G had left the scene, the monk blustered and protested his point of view to her. Nonetheless, one corrective word from an undeniably pure being has undeniable power. He said, "Don't." Therefore, despite both of them holding to their own opinions, they didn't.

LUMINOUS MIND

The late Ven. K. Sri Dhammananda, the Chief Buddhist Monk of Malaysia, with whom Bhante G resided for a number of years, visited the Bhāvanā Society in September of 1998. The two venerables talked together late into the night.

Later, wondering what two Great Masters discuss when alone, a disciple asked Bhante G the topic of their conversation. He answered that they discussed the meaning of the phrase spoken by the Buddha, "This mind, O monks, is luminous."

Bhante explained that the mind, though by nature luminous, remains covered, in unenlightened people, by the defilements. Were the defilements removed, this luminosity would shine forth. (Just by covering up these defilements, as in states of concentration, the luminosity can be known temporarily.) However, the fact of this natural luminosity is not the same as being purified inside. It is not correct to say that one is really "a Buddha" inside. One still must make the effort to purify the mind.

To help his student understand, Bhante G gave a metaphor. He said that it is like a cup of dirty water taken from a sewer: although one can correctly say that the nature of water is, in its essence, inherently pure, would you drink from that cup of sewage water? Despite the inherent purity of water, before drinking, you still need to purify it! Similarly, we must remove our defilements. It is incorrect to point to the existence of natural luminosity and say, "We are all Buddhas" and proceed as though one's work has been done.

A year or so later, the disciple gave a dhamma talk to fellow Bhāvanā Society residents in which she used this teaching on luminosity of mind. Conversing with Bhante G afterwards, the disciple got the impression that he felt surprised that she had remembered the details of their long-ago conversation.

One must wonder how many lovely teachings Bhante G has given that his listeners never managed to hear, although they were sitting right in front of him. Of all that he has taught, we probably absorb only the smallest fraction.

For Bhante Gunaratana on His Eightieth Birthday

Margot Born

It seems impossible to believe that I have known Bhante Gunaratana for almost thirty years!

We met as classmates in a beginning class of Buddhism; Buddhism 101, I think. He was the star of the class, but being so humble and small, I don't think he ever could have imagined his stardom. To me, he was a living example of the egolessness that was being taught by our Mahāyana-leaning professor.

Bhante G's presence in the class also inspired my already more-than-academic interest in Buddhism. As we read the Tibetan text, s'Gam Bopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, some of the Zen commentaries, the *Dhammapada*, and other writings, it was he, whose whole life was an example of the practice of Buddhism, who led me to not just study the texts, but to practice them.

You can imagine how thrilled I was when he invited me to the Vihāra, where he was the Abbot, to meditate. He was inviting me to a whole new world—a world in which my values were turned upside down. I was a product of the materialistic, ego-enhancing, ambitious culture inherited from the pilgrims; which held that success in life (roughly measured in material prosperity and self-esteem) was a sign from God of superior virtue. All the values that enslave us were turned around for me by just having a cup of tea with Bhante Gunaratana in the simple kitchen of the Buddhist Vihāra in Washington. I felt like a pioneer on the farthest frontiers of exploration of the self and the nature of things.

But the real pioneer in this saga was not me, but Bhante G. Arriving on remote shores so foreign to his culture and religion and nearly alone in our country, he put down small seeds of Buddhist practice and slowly worked to nurture them into growth. The Vihāra seemed to me a tiny, quiet haven of both Buddhism and Sri Lankan culture. But slowly, under Bhante G's guidance, I watched more kinds of people drift in to begin to practice. Eventually, a substantial hardcore group of Buddhists was formed from many nationalities and religions.

It was a shock to some of them when, in 1982, Bhante G announced that he wanted to leave to fulfill his life-long wish to start a forest retreat and monastery. Beginning with almost nothing, he and Matt Flickstein (one of those who had earlier drifted into the Vihāra), found a plot of land in West Virginia and named this woods The Bhāvanā Society. There was nothing there; and, in the beginning, very little support from the Washington community. In 1985 clearing of the land and construction on the first building was begun. In 1987 Bhante Rāhula arrived and helped bring the building to completion. Bhante G came to do his first winter retreat in very primitive conditions; on the foundations of what would slowly evolve, by the sweat of their brows, into our now comfortable rooms, our great library, our lovely meditation hall, our well-equipped kitchen, our village of kutis, and our toilets that

flush. Now it houses ten or so monks and nuns and can accommodate about forty lay people for retreats—for which there is no charge.

Even more important is the community that grew up around Bhante G and Bhāvanā and its huge influence on the spreading of the Dhamma, first in North America and gradually spreading far and wide: to South America, Europe, Australia, and back to Asia, where Bhante G had begun.

Bhante G is in constant demand all over the world. He is in almost constant motion as he spreads the Dhamma to all he can reach, with an urgency that embodies the Buddhist concept of the necessity to practice, because of the imminence of death. We have to do it now, because each moment may be our last chance to do what we are called to do

Finally, for me, it is Bhante G's presence more than any of his material and erudite accomplishments that I value. To sit in a room with him, meditating, talking, or working together on a project, is to absorb his contagious peace, happiness, and compassion. He doesn't need to say anything or do anything. He just is what he is: a simple monk leading the life of the Buddha.

Dear Bhante, may you live many more years in continuing good health, happiness, and peace!



A Reflection of Friendship

Albert Cambata

In the early autumn of 1974 I was given a very special gift. It was a gift of friendship; a friendship that has now spanned almost 33 years and has enriched my life in ways that are almost indescribable, but I will try to do that relationship some small measure of justice with these few words.

In the autumn of 1974 I was a lowly sophomore student at American University in Washington, D.C. One morning after my class in Sanskrit language, a fellow student and friend of mine told me that a meditation class was being taught to students on campus, and that it was being taught by a Buddhist monk. My friend asked me if I had any experience in meditation and whether I would be interested in attending. I replied that I had no formal introduction to meditation, although I had been born in India and had met some meditation teachers in India including the Mahārishi at his Ashram in Rishikesh. My friend thought that this was an auspicious sign; he could see that I was very eager to meet this Buddhist monk. He led me across to the meditation class later that same day.

Sitting across from Bhante Henepola Gunaratana Mahā Thera for the first time, was a moment frozen in the eternal Now of space-time. Many thoughts swirled around in my mind while Bhante G calmly gave instructions for the meditation that was about to begin. I could hardly hear his words, because of the multitude of thoughts and feelings that were flooding into my consciousness.

I had a powerful feeling of *deja vu* that I already knew this man sitting in front of me! But from where? That first meditation with Bhante was quite chaotic for me, because of all the unusual experiences. My mind was jumping from one thought to another. I had not yet achieved the stillness that is required for concentration, let alone the development of insight and wisdom. Of course, I didn't know these things at that time. I was just fascinated with Bhante G and the energy that surrounded him.

After the meditation was over, Bhante talked with the small group of meditators and gave us all a chance to ask him some questions about meditation and why it is such an important cornerstone within the Buddhist tradition. By this time my mind had calmed down enough for me to ask some reasonably intelligent questions and converse with this amazing individual. As the other meditation students gradually drifted off to other activities.

I stayed on to talk with Bhante G and gave him a ride back to the Vihāra where he lived and worked. As we drove along the winding roads of Rock Creek Park back to the Vihāra, we marveled at the beautiful symmetry of our lives and how the synchronicity of events had placed our parallel paths so close to each other in space-time in such a tantalizing fashion, finally to intersect in this moment. Bhante Gunaratana was born in Sri Lanka in 1927. When I was born in Bombay India in 1955, he was a young monk already stationed in Bombay only a few blocks away from where my family lived. In the 1960s he was living and teaching at a famous temple in Kuala Lumpur, at the same time I was living and going to school in Singapore. Sometimes I rode my motorcycle up to Kuala Lumpur for school

games and sight-seeing. We both chuckled at how close we must have been to each other in these different places in the world.

Within the Buddhist tradition it is well known that three great gifts were given to humanity and beyond: the Buddha himself, the Dhamma which is the totality of the Buddha's discourses and teachings, and the Sangha or monastic community of monks and nuns who carry forth the Buddha's instructive wisdom to all of us. It is well documented that during the Buddha's lifetime, a surprisingly large number of disciples, relatives, friends, and even some strangers achieved enlightenment because of their proximity over some time to the Buddha. How and why did this happen? There are probably a few different good answers to this question, but one inescapable reality seems to me to be that the quality of the Buddha's consciousness must have been so radiant that it had a direct cause-and-effect relationship with those around him. This is not to imply that we are not responsible for our own development. To the contrary, it has been postulated that some advanced beings incarnated at the time of the Buddha precisely because they wanted to be with him.

We derive many wonderful benefits from having the privilege of being near to an advanced person, because the Dhamma can be transmitted in ways beyond the spoken and written word. It is also transmitted through loving compassion.

Only a couple of years after meeting Bhante G in Washington, I joined my family business and found myself stationed back in Bombay. He wrote to me that he was coming to India for some work and so we met in Bombay and had some wonderful adventures together. We drove out to the Buddhist Kanheri caves as well as to the Hindu complex of caves and carvings at Elephanta island in Bombay harbor.

The profound spiritual insights and lessons that Bhante Gunaratana imparted to me along the path of our friendship were not confined to Buddhist scripture and thought alone. He sees the illumination and connectivity within all aspects of conditioned existence and in some small way, when we are traveling together, I am able to get fleeting glimpses of this truth through his eyes.

Ever since I made that sincere commitment, all those many years ago, to follow the path of inner development, through meditation and mindfulness, I have considered myself blessed to be able to call upon Bhante G as a friend and teacher. When the waters of the great river became dark and choppy, all I had to do was to call to the shore and there my guide in friendship would give me clear and faithful guidance to take me safely around the next bend. And when some new and mind-boggling experience would occur in the form of amazing sights or sounds, he would be there to share in my happiness with words and thoughts of compassion and wisdom.

Over the ensuing years I have been fortunate to have had some wonderful journeys with Bhante G; but perhaps the best kind of journey together is simply when we are seated together in deep meditation, each making silent but steady progress towards the great ocean that awaits us all.

Bhante G Reminiscence

Daniel Cory

Although I have known Bhante G for about 38 years, the number of hours that I have actually been in his presence probably could not fill two days! But this limited contact I have had with him has had a profound influence on my life, due to his very meaningful dhamma talks, newsletter articles, tape recordings, and books. His dhamma talks and wise council have guided me through some very difficult times in my personal life.

Bhante G's understanding of the daily stresses and strains confronting ordinary householders or lay people is extraordinary, considering that he spent almost his entire life as a monk. During his teaching, the practical interpretation and references of the suttas such as the *Mangala Sutta*, *Sigālovāda Sutta*, and *Parābhava Sutta* have offered me practical help in putting the stresses and responsibilities of daily life in perspective.

I first met Bhante G in about 1968, when he came to New York City to give dhamma talks. Having



Bhante G (lower right corner,) at a Wedding

lived in Thailand for two years, I sought out any Theravāda teachers that I could find, because at that time any courses or lectures I found had a Mahāyana orientation. So I made a special point of listening to Bhante G when he came to New York. I kept up with the Buddha dhamma through my subscription to the *Washington Buddhist* and I especially looked forward to reading articles by Bhante G.

On October 1, 1970 my wife Tuenchai (Toi), and I married; the auspicious date having been cho-

sen by her grandmother. As there was no Theravāda temple of any nationality in New York City, I telephoned Bhante G, asking for an appointment for a blessing ceremony. After a non-sectarian wedding and reception in New York, we drove to The Washington Buddhist Vihāra for his blessing.

After 1970 I kept in touch with Bhante G via the *Washington Buddhist* newsletter until 1982, when he called with the news of his idea for building a meditation center. We invited Bhante G and Matt Flickstein for lunch at our home in Brooklyn, where they explained their proposal. I was very pleased to be a founding member of the new Bhāvanā Society. Bhante G asked us many times to make the trip to West Virginia, so finally in 1992 I came for my first retreat. Since then I have been coming at least twice a year and Toi occasionally. In 2000 Toi and I celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary at the Bhāvanā Society.

I offer my sincere congratulations to Bhante G on his 80th Birthday and thank him for his wise counsel over the years.

Bhante H. Gunaratana—A Family Perspective

Upali Ekanayake

I am very happy to have this opportunity to share some treasured memories of my uncle, Bhante Henepola Gunaratana.

All throughout my young school years, I recall my uncle visiting our house and the nearby home of our grandparents. Although he himself was at that time still only a young monk, he always encouraged us to study and to plan and to make a good foundation for our future. We children would all gather around him during these visits and discuss what we wanted to be when we grew up and he would offer encouragement, reminding us always to study hard.

My mother, being the oldest in her generation, was always like a mother to Ven. Gunaratana and he loved her very much. My mother told me that she encouraged him to learn dhamma and to consider becoming a monk, even from his early childhood. With the family behind him, following Sinhalese tradition, and based upon his horoscope, he became a monk at a very early age and joined the monastery near our home. During the difficult first years my uncle ran away from the temple many times. He often ran to our home, which was situated between his monastery and our grandparents' home. Both my mother and father encouraged him each time to return to the monastery and try again. Eventually, of course, as he matured he developed his own determination to become a good monk.

We all adored him and recognized early on that he had special talents for scholarship and learning. My mother reminded me often that my uncle was the first in our extended family to become a monk. Later, after coming to America, he was the first in our family to receive a doctoral degree.

I know that part of the reason I have always felt very close to Ven. Gunaratana came about because my father passed away when I was very young. My uncle came to be a very strong and supportive figure in my life.

All of us loved listening to his stories. As he grew in his understanding of dhamma, he began traveling to teach. Early on he went to India, traveling to Mahārashtra by train to teach dhamma to the Untouchables, many of whom were at that time converting to Buddhism. He told us there was much suffering and the work was very hard. There were no special benefits for monks at that time in India.

I remember once while my uncle was still teaching in India, he received Prince Sihanouk, then the ruler of Cambodia, during a visit to Sanchi during an exhibition of the relics of the Venerables Sāriputta and Mahā-Moggallāna. Ven. Gunaratana sent us a beautiful picture of himself showing the relics to Prince Sihanouk. My grandfather held an open house to let everyone see this picture and to share his pride in what his son had accomplished.

After his five years in India, my uncle joined the Sangha at the Sri Lanka-supported viihāra in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where he worked for the following ten years. During that time, he made

numerous visits to Sri Lanka to visit family and friends. All during these years I continued my correspondence with him and continued to appreciate his guidance. During this time my uncle corresponded with me frequently. Through his letters and stories I learned a lot about Buddhism and the world outside Sri Lanka. In place of my father, I was fortunate to have my uncle Ven. Gunaratana as a mentor and guru.

I told Ven. Gunaratana that I planned to leave Sri Lanka to continue my studies and to find a career. "Don't come join me here in Malaysia. Wait until I am ready to go to America," he told me. "I wish to teach the Buddha-Dhamma in the West. When my plan begins to come together, so will yours." And as always, he added, "Upali, whatever you do, do it with mindfulness. Driving a car, making your life's plans ... whatever. Do it with mindfulness."

In the mid-60's Ven. Gunaratana returned to Sri Lanka on one occasion when I was studying animal husbandry at the training college in Polonnaruwa. Without even contacting me, he surprised me by showing up at my door just after my exams. He invited me to join him on a big tour of Sri Lanka, visiting our widespread family, senior monks in the far corners of the island, and making pilgrimage to the famous sites connected with the Buddha-Dhamma in Sri Lanka.

This was the first of many subsequent opportunities I had to travel closely with my uncle and to really come to know and appreciate him. We talked every day about meditation. During this tour he shared with me that he had a dream to start a meditation center in America. His hope then was to teach the core techniques of meditation and the essential values of the Buddha-Dhamma in the West. Over the coming years he worked very hard to make this dream a reality.

On a later trip to Sri Lanka, I accompanied the Ven. Gunaratana to the Sāsana Sevaka Society in Mahāragama outside Colombo. My uncle had a lengthy interview with the chief monk and then with the board of directors of the Society following which he told me he had been chosen as the next Secretary of the Washington Buddhist Vihāra. He came to Washington to take up this appointment at the end of the 1960s.

Now in America, first as President of the Washington Buddhist Vihāra and then founder/Abbott of the Bhāvanā Society and Forest Monastery in West Virginia I watched my uncle learn all the skills necessary to create such institutions in this country. He's become a virtual Buddhist CEO. And at the same time mastered all the humble skills of carpentry, plumbing, cooking, all of which he shared with me. (Of the first meal I offered him, he commented, "Very beautiful food - but inedible.")

In America my uncle had many opportunities to demonstrate his skillful grasp of the Buddha-Dhamma in everyday life situations. I recall one occasion at the Washington Buddhist Vihāra while Bhante Gunaratana was the head monk; he became aware that the money that worshipers dropped in the two open alms bowls in the shrine room kept disappearing. Bhante asked me to watch over these bowls at the end of the services and see if someone was stealing the donations. In fact, I soon did see at the conclusion of a Sunday morning service that one fellow, pretending to drop money in the bowl, actually reached in and scooped up all the bills into his pocket. I immediately pointed him out to Bhante. A few moments later, when I saw my uncle speaking with the man, then escorting him into the quiet bookstore, I thought to myself, "Now he's confronting him with the crime!" After spending an hour speaking to the man, Bhante signaled to me: "Make us some tea, please." I offered them tea and retired from the room thinking, "Bhante is really giving it to him now!" After quite a while, I saw

the man smile, and respectfully make his farewell to Ven. Gunaratana, leaving the temple. "The shrine room is a public space," Bhante turned and said to me. "We should replace the open offering bowl with a locked donation box." He never told me what he said to the thief, but I have always marveled at the grace and charm that he brought to the situation.

Over all these years I remain impressed by my uncle's personal discipline and commitment. Each day he rises at 4 am, drinks a glass of water, and begins his meditation. I observe his diligence, discipline, perseverance, organizational skills, and attention to detail. He still reminds me, "Never forget anyone who helps you or even just meets you." He still maintains a record of every letter he receives and when he answers it. He never fails to reply to anyone who takes the time to write him. Most recently, Bhante Gunaratana created a scholarship fund in Sri Lanka to assist poor children to get a good education. Located initially in our home village of Henepola, the scholarship fund has its own board of directors and volunteer staff - and it is my uncle's heartfelt wish that it will become a model for such educational support programs.

As my life's mentor and guru, Bhante G has constantly encouraged me by his example. He speaks numerous European and Asian languages. He is comfortable with world leaders - and has met presidents, prime ministers, religious leaders of all faiths. I have always been impressed by his amazing ability to make an immediate human connection with whomever he meets. He quickly puts the other party at ease, whether it is a visitor to the Monastery for the first time with a dhamma question or a senior political leader asking about Buddhism. He treats both with the same grace and openness.

Upali Ekanayake,

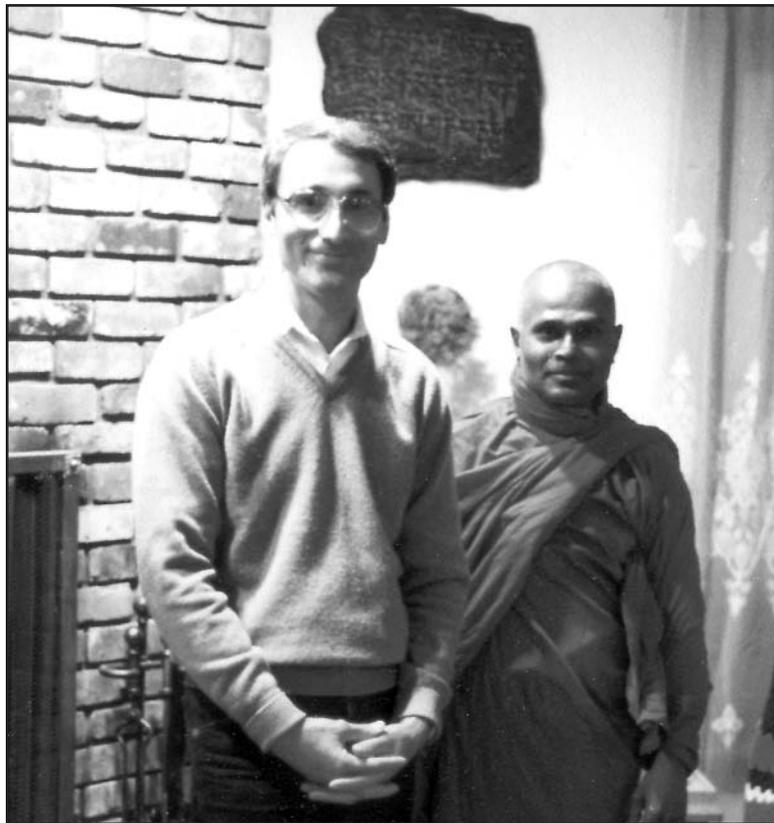
Bhante G's nephew

BHANTE GUNARATANA TESTIMONIAL

Matthew Flickstein

Bhante Gunaratana has been my teacher and good friend for the past twenty-nine years. His presence in my life has supported the dramatic changes in my personality, outer circumstances, and inner consciousness. His loving-kindness, compassion, gentle humor and clarity of mind has provided a model of what it is like to lead a life filled with inner peace, joy, wisdom and equanimity.

When I first began studying with Bhante, my mind was filled with stories about my life. Bhante always listened with great compassion. One day while we were riding in my car, I was relating a painful incident that happened to me in the past. After listening for a while, Bhante asked me if I was through. I asked him if he meant whether I was through with the story. “No,” he said. “Are you



Bhante G and Matt Flickstein

through with all the stories?” He explained that by dwelling on the past, my mind would not be available for the truth that could only be seen in the present moment. Bhante’s impeccable timing enabled me to see how so much of my mind was living in the past or projecting towards the future.

Bhante's lessons were often quite subtle and I had to work to understand the deeper meaning of what he was relating. He would stop his communication, for example, whenever he perceived that I was either excited by or resistant to what he was saying. As a result of this teaching he helped me cultivate a spacious and equanimous mind. By consistently asking me for the intention behind my actions, he supported the development of skillful actions which led to skillful results.

He has had endless patience with my Dharma and practice questions. When I would come to Bhante to share an insight, he would help me investigate the causes and conditions that were responsible for the arising of that understanding. His life is a living example of what is possible to achieve through consistent dedication to meditation practice and to the Dharma.

As a teacher, Bhante has always been committed to each of his students. When I began teaching, students were asking me if I would work with them outside of the retreat experience. I went to Bhante and asked how I should decide which students to work with. With a playful smile he replied, "That's an important question and here is what you do. Whenever a student asks you to work with him or her, you simply say 'yes.'"

Bhante's attitude of saying "yes" to life has had a far-reaching impact on every aspect of my life. I have seen how, by maintaining a mind focused on skillful intentions and a heart filled with loving-kindness, life can be filled with peace, joy and love. I am deeply grateful to Bhante Gunaratana and can never repay the many blessings I have experienced as a result of his presence in my life.

A Touchstone Teacher

Patrick Hamilton

I do not have pious insights into Bhante Gunaratana as an exponent of Theravāda Buddhism or as a leading instructor of Vipassana meditation. But for more than 37 years I have been honored to call him friend. This unique and precious friendship has guided me through my adult life.

Bhante Gunaratana has been my touchstone for the Dhamma. For me, he is the teaching's North Star to which I can always refer when I need grounding, guidance, and inspiration. Bhante's voice and gestures, his manner of movement through life's difficulties and his ability to handle joy and sorrow alike have been living dhamma lessons for me. His personal example has always been the most powerful demonstration of the correctness of Lord Buddha's teaching.

I came to my first study of Buddhism as a Middle School student in the early 1960's. My father was sick and soon died of an incurable disease. The Vietnam War was raging. The world seemed full of pain and confusion. But there were occasional references to Buddhism. On the evenings television news: A line of monks walking through the wreckage of a bombed village. Mothers and children gathered in the shadow a beautiful temple in Laos as soldiers searched their homes. I began to read everything I could find about Buddhism in our small rural Indiana town. By the 9th grade I had convinced myself that I was a Buddhist. Just that thought was comforting, although at that time I had never met another Buddhist.

I felt committed to learn more about this teaching which seemed to inspire equanimity and balance in people facing enormous challenges of life and death. I remember seeing TV footage of monks doing pindapata through a bombed South Vietnamese village and I wanted to learn how to face suffering and pain with that same grace and calmness.

Two Thai graduate students studying at the small college in my rural Indiana hometown taught me "Namo tassa ... " and the rudiments of meditation in 1969. The next spring they took me to Washington DC to meet a famous Thai monk who was touring North America. He was delightful and carried himself with great poise and had a charming smile – but he spoke no English and I no Thai. My friends said, "We will take you to the Washington Buddhist Vihāra. The monks there speak nice English. And if you don't like that, take the bus to the Smithsonian."

I was 21 years old when I met Ven. Gunaratana at the Vihāra that Saturday. He talked very gently to me, let me help him clean the Vihāra and read all afternoon in the Library. Later we made tea and sat and talked into the early evening. When I left that night to find my Thai friends I felt like I had participated in a day-long intensive seminar in Applied Buddhism. But years afterward when I looked back, I realized that it was Bhante Gunaratana's manner of handling my questions, his reliance on gentle common sense to guide me, and his openness which inspired me the most.

I went on to become a student of Bhante Gunaratana's and with his guidance pursued graduate

studies here and in Sri Lanka leading to a career in foreign relations specializing in the affairs of South Asia.

But my real training in the Buddha-Dhamma remains being Bhante Gunaratana's friend. Simply being with him, to watch and to listen. Cleaning the kitchen, dusting the shrine room, preparing the meditation hall for the next session, serving on the Bhāvanā Society's Board of Directors – all of these have been ways to be around Bhante, to see how he applies the insights of the Dhamma to the infinite



Bhante G with a friendly butterfly

questions of daily life, and to enjoy sharing his unique perspective on the world.

Whatever else I have learned or experienced of the Dhamma in my studies, my work, my life I bring back to this simple touchstone: Does it make sense in light of what I have learned from Bhante Gunaratana?

I realize how rare it is in life to be honored by such a friendship, to find a true Kalyana-mitta, and to have such a teacher and inspiration.

In Gratitude for Bhante G

Geoff Huggins

I am grateful for the wonderful resource—Bhāvanā Forest Monastery—that Bhante G has brought to the backwoods of West Virginia. Bhante G has shaped Bhāvanā into something more than just a monastery where monastics are trained and housed. He has shaped it into something more than just a retreat center where a revolving community of lay people come to seek instruction in and experience of the Dhamma. Both these functions and more have been provided by Bhante G and Bhāvanā. In the process, I appreciate that, in the process, he has never sought to make of Bhāvanā an institution that seeks to convert anyone into a Buddhist. I feel very fortunate that he was led to establish Bhāvanā only forty minutes from where I live.

When I ask myself what I am personally grateful to Bhante G and to Bhāvanā for, one word emerges: mindfulness. Over the years I have heard a wide variety of messages from Bhante G's dhamma talks and have been exposed to many valuable teachings during retreats that I have attended at Bhāvanā. These experiences have brought a definite increase in mindfulness to my life, for which I am very appreciative. I use mindfulness every day as a way to evaluate my adherence to the path. Has my suffering decreased? Are the results of my actions indicating any more wisdom? Am I any better at serving those around me? I have learned that this sacred work calls me to direct loving attention and deep curiosity towards everything and everybody in my life.

Thus, for me, the discipline boils down to striving for increased mindfulness. What I have learned from Bhante G is that when I earnestly seek to hone my mindfulness skills, all else will follow. All the virtues that I treasure—wisdom, concentration, the taming of my wild mind, the practice of metta, helping and serving the world I live in, honesty, humility—every one of them is made possible and is cultivated through the diligent practice of mindfulness; through that loving, moment-to-moment attentiveness to the world around me.

I clearly remember a message Bhante G gave to me and my fellow retreatants, near the end of one of my first retreats at Bhāvanā. He told us that, over the last several days together, we had had an opportunity of experiencing and sampling a little mindfulness. But what good would the experience do, he asked, if we left and then failed to take some of that mindfulness back home and incorporate it into our daily lives? That message has stuck with me. I wouldn't claim that I've had an envious amount of success at it, but I have come to hold the thought as a beacon that guides me, day by day. It remains at the center of my practice—on or off the pillow. It gives me the motivation to keep trying to rearrange my priorities into a more sacred order.

The Walking Monk

Jeanne Malmgren

For as long as I have known him (over 25 years), Bhante Gunaratana has been a walking monk. I don't mean either Pindapatta or walking meditation—though he certainly practices those, of course. I'm talking about a more mundane exercise; something that in the lay world is referred to as fitness walking. You know; the thing people do to trim their waistlines and tone their hearts—often while listening to their iPod or talking on a cell phone.

Bhante G, as you might imagine, prefers a simpler form of walking; and he is faithful to this practice. No matter where he is on any given day—from High View to Kuala Lumpur to Sao Paulo—he walks. Country roads, city sidewalks, the hard-packed dirt tracks of his native land: they all play host to Bhante G's daily constitutional. Aside from the Dhamma, walking is perhaps the one constant in his varied, busy life. He says it's the secret to his good health.

Bhante usually walks alone. I'm sure that it is a time of peace for him; a welcome respite when he can stretch his legs, fill his lungs, and temporarily be free from the responsibilities of running a monastery. But every once in awhile, on a day when he doesn't mind some company, he will invite someone to walk with him.

At least a few Bhāvanā Society visitors have, I suspect, heard the fateful words—usually uttered a few minutes after lunch—when Bhante appears in the driveway by the office, wearing his walking shoes and orange hat, clutching a long wooden walking stick: “Would you like to join me?” he says, a strange gleam in his eye and a disarming smile that lulls the unsuspecting layperson into a sense of security.

But, woe betide anyone who accepts the invitation to walk with Bhante and is not in near-Olympic physical condition. If you take on the challenge, I guarantee it will be the most memorable lesson you'll ever learn about the pretensions of the ego. If, that is, you survive!

One fall day in 1997, my husband Jim and I were flattered to hear the magical invitation. (I remember Bhante inviting us. Jim, always more realistic, says we invited ourselves. He's probably right.) Eagerly, we laced up our tennis shoes and fell into step with Bhante along Bhāvanā's driveway. I think Jim and I were anticipating a leisurely stroll, a sort of ambulatory dhamma talk, during which we'd soak up some of Bhante's wisdom and ask questions that would impress him with our depth of understanding. In a word: we were suffering from delusion.

As we reached the black asphalt of Back Creek Road, Bhante looked both ways, then chose his direction and set off. His pace was surprisingly brisk. He may be of short stature, but Bhante G has a long stride. Focused, firm, resolute—Right Effort of the feet. Brown, the monastery dog, trotted beside us for a few steps, then veered off into the woods, his nose to the ground, tail in the air. This happened over and over. Each time, Bhante would allow him some freedom but eventually call him back.

“Brrrown,” he would say, rolling the *r* in his beautiful English. “Come.” The dog came immediately.

Though Bhante’s rapid walking speed surprised us, we were able to keep up—until the first hill appeared. As the road tilted upward, Bhante kept walking just as resolutely as before. He didn’t slow down one bit. Within moments, Jim and I were both panting but trying to hide it. At that time, we were in our late 30s and fancied ourselves to be in fairly good shape. But now a small man in an orange robe—a 70-year-old man—was putting more and more distance between himself and us. Our hearts thumping, we struggled to keep up. As flatlander Floridians, clearly we were in over our heads.

“Bhante,” Jim called out, “How far do you usually walk?”

“About five or six miles,” Bhante answered, glancing back over his shoulder.

Uh-oh. My thigh muscles were burning. Jim and I exchanged panicked glances. But then we reached the top of Hill Number One—and gloriously, a rest stop. Rest stop? No such luck. Bhante was marching on ahead. We had no choice but to hurry after him.

And that’s pretty much how it went, for the next couple of hours. Hill after hill, we scrambled behind Bhante, as he strode easily along the curving rural roads that surround the Bhāvanā Society. The fall scenery was beautiful, but I couldn’t see much of it because of the sweat running into my eyes. I noticed Jim wasn’t asking any of the brilliant dhamma questions he had planned. At the top of each hill, Bhante waited for us—patient, smiling, equanimous. During the flatter portions when we managed to walk beside him, Bhante told us about the walking stick in his hand.

“This is my Stick of Loving-Friendliness,” he said. “I use it whenever an unfriendly dog comes after me.”

Occasionally a car would pass and Bhante would wave. He told us that in the earliest days when he lived at Bhāvanā Society the passing drivers never waved back. Evidently they weren’t happy to see this strange figure swathed in robes wandering through their neighborhood. But Bhante kept on waving and smiling. Finally, one day a man driving a truck lifted one finger from the steering wheel as he passed, a grudging acknowledgment of this new feature of the landscape.

The next day, the man lifted two fingers—a little friendlier. The day after that, when he drove by the Walking Monk, all his fingers went up in the air, even though his hand remained gripping the wheel.

“Eventually,” Bhante said, “He got so that he’d wave every time he saw me. We became friends.”

As if on cue, a battered pickup drove toward us. We fell into single file behind Bhante, to give the truck room to pass. In the driver’s seat, I could see a white-haired man wearing a plaid flannel shirt. When he caught sight of Bhante, his face lit up and he broke into a huge grin. He thrust his arm out the window and waved energetically. It looked as if this was the highlight of his day. I could hear Bhante ahead of me, chuckling softly.

Jim and I survived that walk, but barely. For days afterward, my legs and feet ached. It was, to say the least, a humbling experience, and a reminder of the master that Bhante is, in more ways than one.

Several years later, Bhante G came to visit us in Florida to lead a retreat for our sitting group. The last morning, before we left for the airport to return home, Bhante expressed the need to take his walk. We showed him the golf course that bordered our back yard. The concrete golf-cart path was like a wide sidewalk winding around the edge of two fairways. Nice and flat, one mile. Not exactly Bhante’s usual workout, but it would have to do.

It was early morning with no golfers yet on the course. Bhante had the walkway to himself. He set out at his usual brisk pace and we stood at our gate, watching. We knew he needed some time alone. When Bhante reached the far side of the golf course we could barely see him, a small figure striding along in the sunshine, his robes billowing behind him like an orange river. It was one of the most beautiful sights I've ever seen.

Long may he continue, into his 80s and beyond: the Walking Monk.



In Honor of Bhante Gunaratana for His 80th Birthday

Chris O'Keefe

The most notable way in which Bhante Gunaratana affected my life through the years is with the personal talks I've had with him. I first visited the Bhāvanā Society when I was 24 years old, filled with questions about philosophy, religion, and morality. I had heard that Bhante G was one of the top three scholars in the world on Buddhism and that intrigued me. I found him to be approachable and willing to field questions. I learned early on that Buddhism encourages investigation and so talking with Bhante G was really a match for me.

There were so many questions and so many themes that it is hard to summarize the full scope of what was accomplished with those talks. I am writing here because I know for myself that they made a positive difference in my life.

I would often start the discussion with some sort of confusion in my mind, some predicament or concern in which I wasn't confident about what step to take. Sometimes I just wanted a more wholesome way to view the trouble. In my experience, Bhante G's answers contained two elements: There was the content itself, perhaps referencing a Sutta of the Buddha, or giving down-to-earth advice about conduct during a dilemma (examples would be practicing patience, loving-kindness, and tolerance). The second element was the context and style of the answer. There was never a sense of forcing me to do anything. Rather, he was just giving advice and guidance. The sense I got was that following the advice would lead to more wholesome experiences, but it was up to me. Since peace of mind was just what I was looking for, I naturally got a lot of value out of these talks.

In all the years that have passed since I first met Bhante G, (and I'm in my 40s now), I never left a conversation with him having more confusion than when we started the conversation. This was a wonderful quality to the meetings, as well as the friendship that was building over time.

Tied in with all this was how Bhante G was a renunciate. If I had a problem with lust, for example, the answer was to remove the lust. You can't get this advice from too many Americans! It seemed that no matter what was going on in my life in terms of troubles, the action step—to my surprise at times—always seemed to be on my side of the fence. I don't recall any advice from Bhante G in which I had to get somebody else to think or act differently. Persuading people was never on the docket; purifying my mind was. Generally when faced with a difficulty, people do what they think is best. This was the spirit in which Bhante G gave advice to me—the advice was given and then he knew that I would do what I thought was best.

I am very grateful for Bhante G coming to America. There are very few people like him. He is a mentor and a friend. I believe that my life is a much better life because of meeting him.

This One's Different

Michael I. Roehm

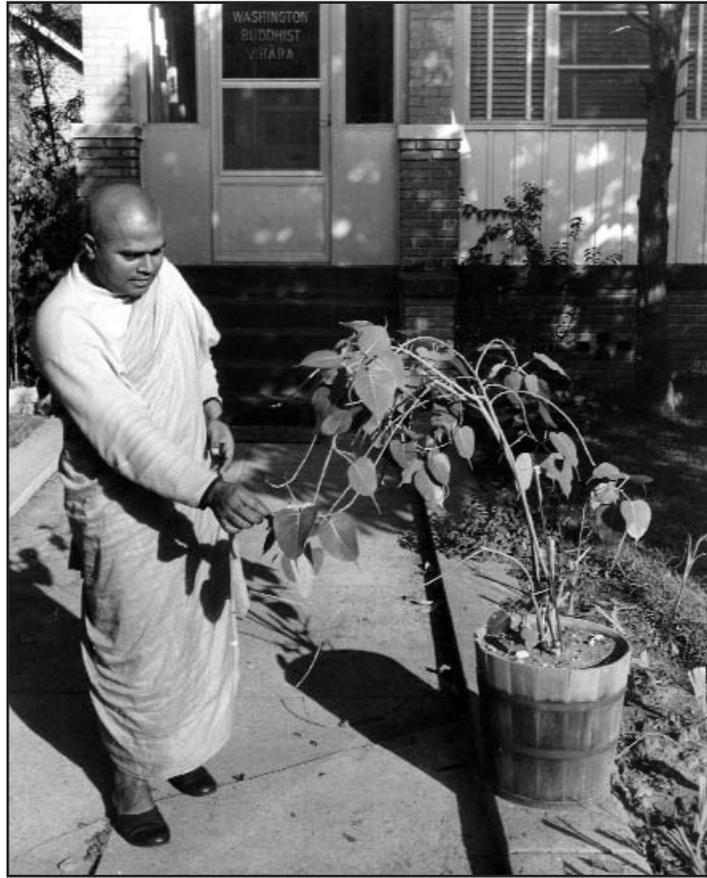
On Thursday, 26 September 1968, I took time off from work so that I could accompany Ven. Dickwela Piyanda, then the abbot or “chief incumbent” of the Washington Buddhist Vihāra, to Washington National Airport to pick up a monk who was coming to join the nascent, two-bhikkhu Sangha at the Vihāra. Both of the monks at the Vihāra had health problems, and there was a real need for a vigorous, younger bhikkhu. The new monk’s name was the Ven. Henepola Gunaratana Mahā Thera.

By 1968, I had already met quite a few Theravāda monks, mostly from Sri Lanka. No matter what their individual differences were, they all seemed to have certain common elements of behavioral style. For example, the affable and loquacious Ven. Piyadassi, the sweet and gentle Ven. Piyanda, and the kind and concerned Ven. Vinita all seemed to be similar when met at the airport: They came out of the gate in their distinctive robes with a “monk bag” hanging from their shoulder, and—at most—holding a carry-on bag. They then entered the meeting area with a certain cheerful ease.

In contrast, this new monk looked a bit different to my eyes: He wore thick, black-plastic-rimmed glasses, seemed to walk with more focus or purpose than ease, and carried a briefcase. A briefcase! “This one’s different,” I thought. “This one’s business.” I wasn’t thinking about dollars-and-cents business, but I was thinking of a man who seemed to be serious, focused, industrious, and organized. However, I had no idea then how very different he indeed would be, and that his difference would enable him to make major contributions to American Buddhism in general, to Theravāda Buddhism in particular, and to Insight Meditation. Although it took him about six months to become accustomed to American accents and idioms, he adapted to us immediately—and we to him.

First, “Bhante G,” as he is now called, was a modern “hands-on” bhikkhu, and that hands-on included manual labor. The Vihāra was in an old house that had been converted to the student affairs department of the Thai embassy. Bhante soon set out to fix it with whatever it took to do the job: lumber, hammers, nails, drywall, paint, etc. He was offered, and readily accepted, the instruction and help of two industrious volunteers: Harry Chamberlain and Jim Schaffer. It was not uncommon in those days to arrive at the Vihāra and receive a request from Bhante to take him to Hechinger’s, the major hardware store at that time. He soon got to know the staff there, and where the screws, nails and everything else was in the place. He constructed walls, put in ceilings, laid floors, painted walls, fixed plumbing, and a whole lot more. He was truly a “manual labor missionary,” as he has noted in his autobiography

Bhante G was the first bhikkhu at the Vihāra to have a modern sense of office operations; e.g., organizing files, maintaining correspondence, and developing a newsletter. In this effort he was especially helped by his Malaysian experience; Martha Sentnor (now Martha Dharmapali), who would



Bhante G. and Bodhi tree at Washington Vihāra

come down from New York City from time to time to assist him in the beginning.

While the Vihāra was already offering the traditional Sri Lankan services and programs, it had not yet developed much in the way of programs directed specifically at the American cultural context. This changed with Bhante. Two Yale Divinity School students, Ron and Patty Farr, were able to do a year's internship at the Vihāra. They helped Bhante organize and develop modern congregational programs that provided a sense of community to the Vihāra's members and friends.

These activities included the first pot-luck events at the Vihāra. On such occasions, sumptuous Sri Lankan, Burmese, Vietnamese, and other Asian foods mixed with American dishes were offered. This led to the beginning of the annual Asian Food Bazaar. There were regular talks by professors, such as Dr. Rodier of American University and scholars, such as Dr. Karen Gray. The numbers of Americans increased considerably; in a short time, the Vihāra became a busy Buddhist center. In fact, during those heady days, the Sri Lankan members joined with the Burmese, Vietnamese, Thai, Lao, Japanese, Americans, and others to form a single and wonderfully diverse congregation. It was the opposite of the "parallel congregations"(see Paul Numrich's *Old Wisdom in the New World*) found in many Theravāda temples in the US: an immigrant congregation participating in a temple in a way separate from how the American congregation attended the same temple. The Vihāra was a very multicultural place.

The most important program Bhante introduced was Buddhist Insight/Vipassana Meditation. Bhante traveled throughout the country and then the world to teach meditation. Wherever he went, the name of the Washington Buddhist Vihāra went with him.

In addition to all of this—which would have been quite a set of accomplishments for almost any bhikkhu—Bhante went even further and undertook an arduous schedule to earn a B.A., M.A., and then Ph.D. at American University. For this last degree, he wrote a doctoral dissertation that still remains the most authoritative scholarly work on the *jhanas*. It seemed that he never slept. His association with American University also enabled him to become the first Buddhist chaplain at a university in the United States.

Then came what I believe was his finest moment: He went to serve the Vietnamese refugees arriving at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, and he did this in the face of adamant opposition from various Asian members of the Vihāra. Once again, Bhante pushed the limits in the right direction.

In hindsight, it is clear that his years at the Vihāra were preparation for his greatest accomplishment: becoming founding abbot of the Bhāvanā Society and its forest monastery and meditation center.



Helping the refugees at Eglin AFB, Florida

I could go on, but Bhante G has already written about much of it in his autobiography. To conclude, Bhante was not just the “different” monk who arrived in 1968. He was, is, and will always remain, extraordinary. He has always learned from, adapted to, and enriched the people with whom he has come in contact. He has enriched many other people through his books, recordings, and students who carry on his work.

Bhante G.

Barbara Ross

I have known Bhante G since 1990, when he first visited Calgary. He was recommended to me by my friend Joseph Goldstein as someone to approach for guidance and support in developing myself as a dhamma teacher. Therefore, after a 10-day retreat he gave in Loon Lake, B.C., I asked him for his support in becoming a meditation teacher. He designed a wonderful Teacher's Training program, which served as a springboard for many aspiring teachers. He gave tirelessly to the group. Bhante has now developed a sutra study program, which will further help deepen our dhamma understanding.

When I am looking for support, right understanding and clarity in very difficult situations, I think to my self what would Bhante G do.

One of the first things I remember most, is how he draws people in – by emphasizing their good qualities, by showing them genuine care and support for who they are, which allows people to feel good about themselves. He brought out their goodness.

I have watched him apply this model at the monastery very successfully over a long period of time.

I see in my own work how important it is to make people feel good about themselves; then they are willing to do anything to help you. How much better my work environment flows as a result of this model. You are a dear friend, Bhante.

In every way he is a true servant of the Dhamma

I have hosted six retreats for Bhante G. Over the years in working with him, he has taught me what impeccable actions look like. By far you are the greatest gift in my life, Bhante.

In Calgary, Alberta Canada, we have a meditation center in his honor where he is our guiding teacher. Over the past four years, we have taught over 1000 yogis the Dhamma through Bhante G's books. This is my offering back to you. Thank you.

Your servant, Buddhapali. (Barbara Ross)

Reflections on Bhante Gunaratana

Walter Schwidetzky

I found my way to the Bhāvanā Society before I had found my way to Buddhism, during the first days of my spiritual practice. My focus was actually more on Hinduism at the time, but a friend of mine had heard of Bhāvanā, so out we went. It was probably in 1987. At that time, the only building up was the central building with the dining hall and kitchen. Looking back on it, I immediately felt a connection with Bhāvanā.

A couple of years later, I found my way to Buddhism and eventually became a regular at Bhāvanā. I have done many retreats there; some in group, some alone. I have pleasant memories of those early days. It used to be that Bhante G, the other monks and nuns, and all of the retreatants would fit into the shrine room. The shrine room at that time, however, was not the magnificent one Bhāvanā currently has, but was located in the space of the current library (only a little smaller). Things were very intimate.

One of my fondest memories was sitting in the old shrine room with Bhante G and other retreatants. The question came up whether one should stay in samsara until everyone became enlightened. Bhante G noted that there was a logical flaw in that reasoning. If everyone waits, no one ever gets enlightened! It is probably one of those things where you had to be there, but we all broke up laughing; Bhante G included. That obvious point had never occurred to many of us. I sometimes think that a sign of great genius is being able to recognize the obvious.

Bhante G played an enormously important role in the development of my practice. In addition to providing me with a place to practice and with sound general instructions, he was the first one to emphasize to me the importance of doing jhana practice, something I now see as indispensable. Without deep levels of concentration, there are certain movements of the mind we just cannot see. Bhante G was always the kindest and most compassionate of teachers, always gentle in his teaching. I hate to think of where my practice would be without him.

Dhamma Articles

by

Western Monks, Nuns

and

Prominent Lay Teachers

Beyond Being and Non-Being

Ven. Ajahn Amaro

(An excerpt from his book *Silent Rain*)

Born in England in 1956, Ven. Amaro Bhikkhu received his B.S. in Psychology and Physiology from the University of London. Spiritual searching led him to Thailand, where he went to Wat Pah Nanachat, which was established for Western disciples of Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah. He ordained as a bhikkhu in 1979. He returned to England and joined Ajahn Sumedho at the newly established Chithurst Monastery. Since June of 1996 he has lived at Abhayagiri Monastery in California, where he is co-abbot with Ajahn Pasanno.

When we talk about the goal of Buddhist practice, about enlightenment or Nibbāna, we use the term “realization” as being the most accurate way to approach it. Often one sees the term “getting” enlightened, or “becoming” enlightened; this is good and meaningful enough in ordinary speech but it also has connotations which are obstructive or misleading. Whenever we think of “getting” something or “becoming” something, it always implies that what there is right now is somehow lacking, there is “me” that is missing something and I have got to get some kind of experience or some kind of quality that is going to make me complete in the future and then, once I have got it, it is going to be mine and I can keep it. There are many characters who have “got” enlightened and then their enlightenment has wandered off and left them rather bereft and despairing for months or sometimes years.

So when we think and talk about enlightenment it is much better to use the word “realization”, because it is pointing to the fact that we are discovering what is here already; we are realizing, that is, “realizing” that which is already true, that which is the fabric and nature of our own being. Any thought of getting or becoming is what ties us to the incessant cycles of birth and death; this is what is called the *bhavacakka*, the cycle of becoming, because anything we get we can lose or we become anxious about being separated from. Ownership is suffering. Thinking in terms of realization, discovering the Truth, lends itself much less to the idea of ownership. The Dhamma, the ultimate reality of things, has no owner and this realization of Truth is the fulfillment of our life. You do not have to take this as a proclamation, but I would say that this is the goal, the fulfillment of our life. Everything else that happens in life that we achieve or create, bring forth into the world; these are all secondary to the realization of Truth, to this quality of seeing and being dhamma.

Knowing the reality of things does not seem like very much. Our worldly tendencies and our habits of seeing always tend to focus on the objects, beings, and places; the achievements, triumphs, and disasters of our lives as being the real, substantial, important aspects, and something as ephemeral or intangible as realizing Truth, on a conceptual level at least, seems a bit flimsy and simple-minded.

ed.

Buddhism gets criticized a lot by people who take the position of life affirmation. This has been the case right from the very beginning when the Buddha first started teaching—particularly because of being a religious tradition with a monastic order of celibate monks and nuns. This renunciant lifestyle gets quite a pounding from people who are not necessarily worldly or indulgent, but just those who see value in the fulfillment of life on the worldly plane: the qualities of a loving relationship, of having children, of creating music or beautiful things, planting gardens and trees, building houses, forming friendships, creating new networks of wholesome activity, learning, teaching, nursing, healing the sick, helping the dying—these are all tremendously appealing, important and positive things in life. There is something very deep, very instinctual in our hearts which does appreciate and celebrate this—that loves life, that wants to live, to laugh, to love—and this seems to be the very fabric and essence, the spice and purpose of life: to live life to the hilt, to the full.

In the last *Inquiring Mind*, a Buddhist newspaper put out in America, they had an article about Ajahn Sucitto and Ven. Vipassi teaching a retreat in Massachusetts. This article went to great lengths to make sure that people knew that both these monks had lived very “full” lives before they became monks; which is a polite way of saying you have done everything you could think of and then some before you became a monk. People are very scared of the idea that you would become a monk before you had really done everything, tried everything out. The idea is that life is to be lived, everything is to be tasted, to be experienced. Rajneesh was very keen on this kind of practice: doing absolutely everything to the limit and learning from that. The true learning experience in life is described as to take it all on, to swallow it whole and watch the results—so this does make what we do here at this monastery look a bit strange! Maybe I am sounding like an advertisement for Dionysian hedonism (brandy will be served in the kitchen after the evening meeting), but it is a very powerful streak in our minds; it strikes a powerful chord.

The other day I ran across something that D.T. Suzuki wrote in one of his books on Zen Buddhism. It went something like, “The spirit of freedom, which is the power behind Buddhism breaking through its monastic shell to ever more vigorously bring enlightenment to the masses, is the life impulse of the universe.” Then he says something like, “The spirit of Buddhism has always been intellectual, moral and spiritual freedom; thus the moral aristocracy and the disciplinary formalism of primitive Buddhism could not bind our freedom, our spirit for very long.” So we are right out of the picture! I am not criticizing D.T. Suzuki but just saying that there is a strong tendency in people’s minds to think, “Well, if you are living a very restrained, renunciant life, you really must be missing out on a lot; you are not respecting all that life offers. These bodies are fertile, they are designed to produce offspring and you have creative talents—we can do, we can speak, we can create—why not!” Because I draw pictures for birthday cards for my family and occasionally write poems, I find that this is one of the few things about my life that my family can relate to. My mother is always encouraging me to create more masterpieces.

I have pads and pads of drawing paper and crayons and pens and ink—an incredible stash of stationery to do my creations on. I regularly get a burdened feeling when I look at this pile of stuff in my desk-drawer. “Oh dear, I suppose I should create something.” I like doing that kind of thing but one sees that for people with a perceptually-based perspective on life, what you create becomes the most

important thing: “After all, you can draw such nice pictures, you can say such nice things, why not? You are robbing the world by not producing offspring, poems, pictures, etc., etc.”

This question had long puzzled me and struck me deeply when I first arrived at the monastery in Thailand. I was reminded of it this morning, since we have been having readings from *The Life of the Buddha* and we have just got to the time of the Enlightenment. Oftentimes as a Westerner, we think about enlightenment as meaning having a mind which is happy all the time, regardless of whatever is going on and whatever we choose to do. This is a very, very attractive proposition! After the Buddha’s enlightenment he sat for a week, rapt in meditation, experiencing the bliss of deliverance and, after that absorption into bliss, he emerged and then what did he do? He spent the whole night contemplating Dependent Origination, the law of dependent arising: ignorance conditioning the arising of desire, attachment, birth, death, suffering and so forth—contemplating its arising, contemplating its cessation, backwards, forwards, up, down; all night long.

Now, if you were enlightened and had just become completely, irreversibly free from suffering, it’s possible to imagine you might think, “What a relief! At last that’s all over—no more suffering. Marvelous, amazing.” And you might think, “Let’s go eat pancakes!” or “I wonder what that nice young lady who brought me the milk rice is doing tonight. Maybe I’ll pop round and see her.” Or, if you were of a less sensual character, with a bit more nobility: “Now I’ll go back to my kingdom, encourage my old father, give him a bit of support and then help take over the kingdom and run a really good little country for the rest of my life.”

But we can see that, far from having this reaction, with his enlightenment the Buddha experienced life from a completely new dimension. He was seeing things in a way that he had not seen before. He was seeing what the rest of the world could not see. It’s rather like when we come into a new situation—an institution, a school or a family, a monastery—we are a stranger and we suddenly find ourselves in the midst of all kinds of webs of relationships, power-trips, struggles, gripes, loves and hates and personality conflicts going on. We are an outsider for whom all this has no value and yet to all the people involved in that place it’s all terribly real and important. We are not a part of it, however; we are not caught up in the value system.

One can also see enlightenment as simply growing up; as an adult one stops being able to play with dolls and toys in the same way that one did when one was a child. It becomes impossible. It’s also like having solved a puzzle that everyone else is still deeply involved in trying to unravel: you can see the answer, whereas everyone else is anguishing and fretting and rushing about and discussing how to find it. Or that lovely feeling of understanding a clue in a crossword—when you have got it and the letters all fit in the right places, “Ah, I see!”

At the Enlightenment, the Buddha stepped out of the worldly perspective and could see from above the world—*lokuttara*. There is a wonderful passage in the scriptures that describes this insight of the Buddha and the way he saw things after his enlightenment: He saw that the worldly mind cherishes conditioned existence; it cherishes becoming. It opens itself to and welcomes conditioned existence, it welcomes becoming. The urge of the world, of worldly thinking, is always to become other: to get to the next thing, to progress, to develop, to have, to keep. It cherishes and relishes conditioned existence; but the problem is that what it relishes brings fear and what it fears is pain, because that which is the very basis of conditioned existence is also the basis of suffering.

This was the insight that he had with Dependent Origination: he saw how ignorance was the originator of all problems in life; how the reality that we give to our thoughts, feelings and emotions, to our memories and perceptions, is the true creator of all our difficulties. He also saw that if we believe in conditioned existence, if we believe in our suffering, we will possess it, we will own it, it will be ours. But with the ending of clinging, the ending of attachment, then suffering ceases.

This is perhaps a difficult insight to comprehend and really digest. In the same passage he says something like, "Liberation does not come through living conditioned existence but neither does it come through living non-existence. One who is liberated abandons craving for being, without relishing non-being ..." Now where is that? You do not find that one in the "A-to-Z"! "Liberation comes from abandoning craving for being, without relishing non-being."

The worldly mind can see only that either we are or we are not; something is or is not. But the Buddha is talking from a position which is neither this nor that, neither being nor non-being, neither existence nor non-existence. On hearing this sort of thing, maybe our mind starts to go into a flap, just goes blank or thinks, "What on earth is this about? I mean, come on, let's be serious, let's hear something useful, shall we!?" But from my perspective this is the most useful and powerful tool for insight that we have with which to understand and live our lives.

It is, however, something that is very intangible; conceptually it is not graspable, it evades our intellectual faculties. It is also the very reason why in his life the Buddha was constantly criticized for being a nihilist—because of not saying, "This is the Truth," and stressing some kind of metaphysical pattern or grand cosmology. Instead he kept talking in terms of Nibbāna, which just means "cooled" or "blown out", like the blowing out of a flame. Nibbāna can also be translated as "extinction" and to many people the concept seemed nihilistic. "Life has got to have a bit more to it than just extinction to look forward to!" But he refused to go along with the eternalists: people who were philosophically life-affirming. Yet he also refused to go along with the annihilationists: those who were philosophically life-denying; he kept pointing at the fact that the Truth is other than either of those two fixed positions.

There is a lovely story from the Theravāda tradition concerning a seeker called Kamanita. He, having heard of the Buddha's reputation, was passing through Tajagaha on his way to meet him at Jeta's Grove in Savatthi. At nightfall he put up in a potter's house; little did he know at the time that the monk that he was sharing his lodging with that night was the Buddha himself.

After a while, Kamanita started enthusiastically telling his fellow lodger how he was on his way to meet the Buddha. The Buddha sat there listening and didn't let on who he was. "Tell me about this great master and his teaching," he said. So Kamanita goes on for some time, telling the story of his own life and extolling all the wonders of the Buddha's Dhamma, and how he teaches the path of bliss and eternal happiness.

Finally Kamanita said, "Well, I've talked enough, you tell me about your life. What is your philosophy? Who is your teacher? What do you proclaim as the truth?" The Buddha started to speak, saying, "I will, in return for your narrative, unfold to you the doctrine of the Buddha." He described the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the origin of suffering, cessation of suffering and the Path; and he expounded on *aniccā*, impermanence, and *anattā*, selflessness. As he began, Kamanita was looking quite interested and taking it all in, but after a while he began to think, "This guy is a bit of a

sourpuss—this isn't the Master's teaching as I understand it. Well, never mind, he's got his right to think like he does."

As the Buddha continued, Kamanita got more and more uncomfortable. All that this monk was saying to him seemed to hang together logically and it felt disturbingly right, but seemingly it had a horrible negative life-denying streak to it: all about extinction and cessation, and with no promise of "eternal and blessed life" after death. His mind was still heavily programmed towards the idea of eternal happiness; so by the time the Buddha got on to anattā, Kamanita was decidedly agitated and did not know what to do. The monk's exposition was obviously flawless, but Kamanita's heart was fixed on the fact that he must be wrong, so he thought, "What he is saying is all wrong! This is bad philosophy. The Buddha is the great teacher; he teaches absolute bliss for eternity. I am going to get the teaching directly from him. I should forget this guy, he really does not know what he is talking about."

The Buddha finishes speaking and sees that Kamanita is a bit agitated. Finally, in a subdued tone Kamanita asks him, "Have you ever heard all this from the mouth of the perfect Buddha himself?"

At this point a smile plays around the Master's lips. "No, brother, I cannot say I have."

Greatly relieved to hear this, Kamanita reassures himself that they will be able to meet the Buddha in person soon and that this monk's mistaken and destructive conception of the Buddha's teaching will be set straight.

Kamanita never realized his mistake—not until much later anyway. But that's another story. The Buddha, when asked about him, said, "Foolish as an unreasonable child was the pilgrim Kamanita. He took offense at the Teaching..." In his lifetime his karmic obstructions were too dense to enable him to see what was right in front of him.

Ajahn Chah often said that this is a position that we find ourselves in: face to face with the Buddha, sharing a room together, spending hours and hours deep in conversation and never realizing who this is. The truth of life is staring us in the face, but because we have already got programmed with something else that we want and expect, we are missing out on the lessons that life is actually able to teach us.

What we need to understand then, is what this knowledge was that the Buddha was pointing to. Firstly, it's necessary to understand what we mean by the word existence—clinging to existence and clinging to being or non-being. The word "existence" actually means "to stand out"; that which exists stands out, it protrudes, it is something which comes out, like a branch coming out of a tree. What the Buddha is pointing to is that, as long as we are talking in terms of existence or even non-existence (which is as if, instead of going out the front door we have just gone out the back door), both are taking a fixed position about some solid thing—there is still a separate "thingness" there. What the Buddha is pointing to is that which does not come forth, that which is not standing out; i.e., a condition of nature, mental or physical. What the Buddha is pointing to here is the Unconditioned: that which does not stand out, that which is not created, that which is not born of dying.

This is perhaps a bit hard to grasp, but it is a very important point: as long as we are talking about something "existing" it does not mean that that is the only reality. An experience is an excursion out from the Unconditioned through a pattern of events, back to the Unconditioned; like water rising from rivers and going back to the sea. It is an excursion of existence. A lifetime is just an excursion, so is a thought—it is something which arises from the Unconditioned, from the space of the mind, and dis-

solves back into it again.

When something “exists” it has a false independence, a false individuality, because at that time, it seems to be of a different and separate substance to all other things. When we believe in separate existence, then we are giving solidity to that which is actually transparent, ephemeral; merely an element of the infinite patterns of consciousness in the mind. So the Buddha is pointing to the Unconditioned as the basis for reality. The Buddha’s enlightenment was awakening to this Unconditioned nature of the basis of life; this was the dimension, the position from which he was seeing.

In this respect then, those aspects of life like the material, manifest world that we celebrate and which are so important; they become the basis for the realization for the Unconditioned. The conditioned is needed in order to realize the Unconditioned. Through the agency of a human life and a human body, the Unconditioned can be realized. This process is a ripening or a transition, a transformation of the life spirit, the life force—the *jivita*. The conditioned, the green, is the infertile; but becomes the basis for that which ripens into the gold. Like a field of corn: the green of life ripens as the gold of wisdom, civilization and true knowledge. The *lokiya* becoming the basis for the realization for the *lokuttara*: these two always exist in relationship to each other and the transformation, the ripening of the one to allow the realization of the other is what, in Buddhism, is called stream entry.

This is also called “the change of lineage”—when we see through our attachment to the body, to the mind, to yourself and to the world. It’s known as a change of lineage because, rather than looking upon our physical parents as our origin and the source of our being, we see that the true origin of all is the Unconditioned mind. This is the source of all creation. As Thomas Merton puts it: “The living law that rules the universe is nothing but the secret gravitation that draws all things to God as to their center. Since all true art lays bare the action of this same law in the depths of our own nature, it makes us alive to the tremendous mystery of being, in which we ourselves, together with all other living and existing things, come forth from the depths of God and return again to Him.”

So rather than placing ultimate value in the products and activities of the manifest, existent world, we learn to see that the *saccadhamma*—the Ultimate Reality of our own nature—is the source of all true value. When the need arises, we act; but when there’s no need we are still, and whether there is activity or not, the essential nature of the *saccadhamma* remains the same. It doesn’t have to prove its worth by taking a certain form, or any form at all. The sea is still the sea—whether it’s rough or placid. Gold still has the nature of gold—whatever shape we make it. So, in this process of realization we are affirming the very source of life—the Uncreated, Unconditioned—rather than making value judgments about waves or their absence on the surface. The source of our life is that source of the whole universe—the heart of the universe is your heart. So, far from the Buddha-Dhamma being a life-denying, negative philosophy, it is actually the most earth-shaking, silent roar of YES!!! It is just avoiding making a fuss about the secondary details and attending to the essence instead. It is a philosophy of the ultimate aesthetic: “Truth is beauty—one who has arrived at Release truly knows what Beauty is.”

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Sati & Samādhi

Ven. Bhikkhu Anālayo

Ven. Bhikkhu Anālayo was born in Germany in 1962 and ordained as a novice in Sri Lanka in 1995. He was involved in running a meditation centre in the Kandy area with Godwin Samararatne, studied the Dhamma under the guidance of Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi, and wrote a Ph.D. thesis on Satipaṭṭhāna at the University of Peradeniya. At present he is engaged in a comparative research between the Pāli discourses and their parallels in the Chinese Āgamas. He recently received upasampada ordination in Sri Lanka.

Sati (mindfulness) and samādhi (concentration) may well be the two most central terms in early Buddhist meditation theory and practice. In my own attempts to come to a clearer understanding of the meaning and implications of these two terms—trying to appreciate the way they differ from each other and the way they interrelate with each other—things fell into place when I came across the following passage in venerable H. Gunaratana Mahāthera’s *Mindfulness in Plain English* [1991:165]: “Concentration is exclusive. It settles down on one item and ignores everything else. Mindfulness is inclusive. It stands back from the focus of attention and watches with a broad focus.”

As a way of expressing my respect for the venerable author and my gratitude for the understanding that I have been able to derive from the above passage, I would like to explore the above statement with the help of a few selected passages from the Pāli discourses, attempting to further illustrate this basic distinction between mindfulness and concentration defined so clearly by venerable H. Gunaratana Mahāthera.

CONCENTRATION IS EXCLUSIVE

The Pāli term samādhi is related to the verb samādahati, which means to “put together” or to “collect”. An illustration for the type of activity denoted by this verb can be found in a passage in the Vinaya, which describes how some monks “collected” wood to kindle a fire. [Vin IV 115]. Just as collecting different pieces of wood and assembling them in a heap will enable one to ignite a fire, similarly by “collecting” the mind, in the sense of composing, concentrating and unifying it, the fire of samādhi can be kindled.

The Pāli discourses use the term *samādhi* in a broad number of contexts, not restricting its use to *samatha* (tranquillity) meditation only. Thus walking meditation, for example, is considered a form of samādhi [AN III 30]. In most contexts, however, *samādhi* stands for the development of deeper stages of concentration, in the sense of the ability to focus on a single object to the exclusion of everything else, and it is in this sense that concentration is indeed “exclusive”.

Developed in this “exclusive” way, deeper stages of *samādhi* lead to a shift from the common struc-

ture of experience as a subject-object duality towards an experience of unity. Such experiences of unity are characteristic of the *jhānas*, deep states of mental concentration that lead to experiences of unity and bliss. The way to develop such experiences of unity and bliss can conveniently be described with the help of a series of terms that in the Pāli discourses function as near synonyms to the verb *samādhīyati*, to “concentrate”. This string of near synonyms, found for example in the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna-sutta*, runs: *cittam santiṭṭhati sannisīdati ekodi-hoti samādhīyati*, and thus enjoins us to “steady the mind”, to let the mind “settle” down, to make it “unified” and thereby to “concentrate” it [MN I 119].

The first in this string of near synonyms describes how a meditator “steadies the mind”. The verb *santiṭṭhati* literally means to “stand” or to “stand still”. This is in fact the first task that confronts us when we sit down to meditate: namely to learn how to “stand still” mentally, to stop the mind from running. The mind is so used to running from one sense-door to another in search of something exciting or pleasurable. Once we sit down to meditate, out of sheer habit the mind just keeps running in the same rut. As it no longer has the playground of the senses at its disposition, it will run all the more on the level of the mind door, rolling in fantasies and memories etc.

How to stand still in such a situation is treated in the same *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna-sutta*, which describes how a man who is running suddenly realizes what he is doing and decides just to walk, or even to stand still, to sit, or to lie down. The increasingly comfortable postures assumed by the man in this simile are the outcome of his becoming aware of what he was doing and then deciding to adopt a more comfortable activity or posture instead. In a similar way, once we are able to squarely look at the futility of mental running and let go of it, detach from it, the mind naturally begins to walk instead of running, and eventually even stands still, without any need to use force in an attempt to fight thoughts out of the mind.

Once the mind “stands still”, *santiṭṭhati*, the next step is to become aware that, though there is no longer movement, a remnant of activity is still present. Just as there is a remnant of effort required to maintain the standing posture, so there is a remnant of effort in trying to stand still on the mental level. What this situation requires, then, is to mentally “sit down”, *sannisīdati*, in the sense of letting go of that remnant of effort, of relaxing into the natural calmness of the mind that has arisen at this stage, and thereby letting go of the controlling part of the mind.

Only when the mind has let go of its control, when it quite literally “sits down”, will it be possible to progress to mental unity, to the experience of a mind that becomes unified, *ekodi-hoti*. Such a unitary experience implies that the “I” that wants and does, that wants to be concentrated and is active in keeping distractions away, that remembers a “better” meditation of the past or aims at some “attainment” to be gotten in the future, goes into abeyance. As long as this “I” is still active, deeper concentration will not happen, since the very presence of this sense of “I” will prevent a merger of the subject with the object, and thereby prevent the mind from becoming unified. In this way, the string of terms *santiṭṭhati*, *sannisīdati*, *ekodi-hoti* shows how the mind can gradually become “concentrated”, *samādhīyati*.

The unitary character of deeper concentration is at the same time its “exclusive” aspect, since it inevitably excludes awareness of circumstances and of their interrelations. It is in this respect that *samādhi* differs most prominently from *sati*, from the “inclusive” awareness of circumstances and interrelations achieved through the broad and open mental attitude that comes about through sustained

mindfulness practice.

MINDFULNESS IS INCLUSIVE

The “inclusive” quality of awareness of circumstances and interrelations inherent in *sati* finds a fitting illustration in an imagery found in the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta*. This discourse describes two situations in which a cowherd may find himself. The first of these two situations occurs at a time just before the crop is ripe, a time when the cowherd has to constantly use his stick to keep the cows from straying into the crops.

Once the harvest has been brought in, however, the cowherd can sit in the shadow of a tree, relax, and watch the cows from afar. The word used in the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta* to describe this relaxed mode of observing the cows from a distance is *sati* [MN I 117]. The use of this word in this part of the simile is significant, since *sati* does not occur in the earlier situation, when the cowherd was busy preventing the cows from straying into the crop. At the present stage, there is no need any more for such more forceful intervention, since the breadth of the cowherd’s vision from a relaxed distance “includes” all the cows and he is able to perform his duty with natural ease.

This imagery suggests *sati* to stand for a relaxed but open attitude, a watchful observation from a position of inner or outer distance, a distance which is not involved and thereby able to better “include” all the required aspects of the situation. This is not the only imagery used in the discourse to illustrate characteristic qualities of mindfulness. Another simile, found in a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, compares *sati* to a careful charioteer [SN V 6]. Though taken from the thought world of ancient India, this imagery would be easily applicable to modern days. In order to be able to steer through any form of traffic, be it ancient Indian ox-carts, buffaloes and horses, or modern day cars and trucks, an “inclusive” form of awareness is of crucial importance. The breadth of attention that results from such inclusive awareness enables us to take into account various facets of the situation. Failure to maintain such inclusive mindfulness, due to an “exclusive” focus on something particular, runs the risk of leading to an accident.

The ability to survey a situation and take into account its various facets through such inclusive awareness finds yet another illustration in a simile used in the collection of verses by awakened monks. This simile compares the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* to climbing onto an elevated platform or tower [Th 765]. Just as by climbing onto such an elevated platform or tower it will be possible to survey the whole landscape beneath and get a comprehensive over-all perspective, so too by developing mindfulness it will become possible to comprehensively become aware of a situation and thereby include all its different aspects in the range of our attention.

The same “inclusive” characteristic of mindfulness also underlies the standard definition of *sati* given in the Pāli discourses, according to which one who is mindful will be able to remember what has been done or said even long ago. [MN I 356]. At first sight, to relate *sati* to remembering something from the past may seem puzzling, since to practice mindfulness meditation is very much a question of staying in the present moment instead of dwelling on memories from the past. Yet, the point made in the standard definition of *sati* is not that mindfulness should be equated with memory, but rather that once mindfulness is present, memory will function well.

This relation of mindfulness to memory has two aspects. One of these is that in order to be able to

remember a particular situation, mindfulness needs to be present at the moment when such a situation takes place. Only what is clearly taken in with mindfulness can later be remembered. Such taking in requires a certain breadth of mind, a mental attitude that is “inclusive” instead of “exclusive”, since the more information has been included in the range of awareness, the better the particular event will later be remembered.

In order to remember, mindfulness is required again. It is in regard to this second aspect of remembering that the “inclusive” quality of mindfulness and its relation to breadth of mind become particularly apparent, as can be seen on those occasions when we try to remember something but, the more we try, the less we are able to recall a particular fact or name. Once, however, the issue is set aside for a little while and the mind lets go of the “exclusive” focus on the fact or name to be remembered, being allowed to return to a more natural state of relaxed receptivity and “inclusive” awareness, the information we were looking for will on its own spring to mind. The natural breadth and inclusive openness of the mind on such occasion is a typical characteristic of mindfulness.

Thus, taken on their own, concentration and mindfulness can be set apart as two mental qualities of which the former is predominantly “exclusive”, while the latter is rather “inclusive”. Using a photographic analogy, to develop concentration is somewhat like using a zoom lens, while to practice mindfulness is more like using a wide-angle lens.

This difference does not imply, however, that concentration and mindfulness are incompatible; in fact quite often the two perform complementary functions. Thus during *jhāna* attainment, both are present together, when mindfulness becomes mainly presence of mind, losing its natural breadth due to the strong focusing power of concentration.

The difference, and at the same time interrelation, between *sati* and *samādhi* can be seen, for example, in the *Bhikkhunīvāsaka-sutta* [SN V 156]. According to this discourse, when sluggishness arises during mindfulness training the mode of practice should be changed to developing a *samatha* (tranquillity) object of meditation, in order to cultivate internal joy and serenity. The discourse reckons such a change of the meditation practice to be a shift to a “directed” form of meditation, *paṇīdhāya bhāvanā*. Once the mind has been calmed in this way, the practice of mindfulness can be resumed, thereby returning to an “undirected” mode of meditation, *apaṇīdhāya bhāvanā*. The distinction drawn in the *Bhikkhunīvāsaka-sutta* between “directed” and “undirected” forms of meditation makes it clear that these two modes of meditation are different. At the same time, however, the topic of this discourse is the skilful interrelation of these two qualities, which clearly demonstrates that, whatever the degree of their difference, *sati* and *samādhi* interrelate and support each other.

The development of *samādhi* will eventually issue in the experience of the *jhānas*, just as the development of *sati* will lead to the arising of wisdom. And just as *sati* and *samādhi* interrelate and support each other, so too *jhāna* and wisdom depend on each other. This relationship finds its poetical expression in a verse in the *Dhammapada*, a verse the venerable H. Gunaratana Mahāthera recites at the end of a meditation session, so that the same verse may be a fitting conclusion to my little essay. According to this verse, *jhāna* and wisdom depend on each other and require each other to such an extent that those who develop both are on the path to liberation [Dhp 372].

“There is no *jhāna*-meditation without wisdom, there is no wisdom without meditating; those who have *jhāna*-meditation and wisdom, are close to *Nibbāna*.”

Growing Old Gracefully

Ven. Ajahn Candasiri

(From a talk given to the monastic community and guests in the temple at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in December 2005.)

Ven. Ajahn Candasiri was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1947. She became interested in Buddhist teachings in 1977, after meeting Ven. Ajahn Sumedho soon after his arrival in London. In 1979 she visited Chithurst Monastery and on 28th October, she was ordained at Chithurst as one of the first novice nuns—receiving the eight precepts along with three other women. She took the Ten Precepts in 1983. Since then she has been part of the monastic community, either there or at Amaravati, and very much involved with the evolving Nuns' (Siladhara) Sangha.'

I hope everybody is warm enough!

I just returned a few days ago from about three and a half weeks away from the community, in Canada, where I visited Toronto, Peterborough, Kingston and Ottawa. It was a combination of seeing relatives—my elderly aunt and uncle, several cousins and their families—and also having a chance to share dhamma with various Buddhist groups there.

I'm realising that when people don't have regular contact with dhamma teachings, when they don't have a local monastery, they really seem to value having contact with someone who is a monk or nun. These people really were very interested, very eager. They had lots of questions and seemed very enthusiastic about practice.

OLD AGE

One of the things that struck me most forcefully during my visit was a question that someone asked in one of the meditation workshops. She said that she is noticing that as she gets older, she tends to forget things—that her mind is no longer so bright and clear. She asked, "How do you practice with this? I know that it's not going to get any better; I can feel that my mind is going."

After she had asked this question there was an awesome hush in the room. I think that quite a few of the people there were aware that they weren't remembering things quite so well. Even though there were people from a wide range of ages, the fact of aging was very real for all of them. It's clear that we can't stop the aging process but how can we practice with it? Is there anything we can do to make it all less difficult for ourselves and others?

What was really striking was the shared realisation of the inevitability of old age, sickness and death; this is something that all of us are facing, in varying degrees, right now. We can't do anything about it. Some people will completely lose their minds fairly early on. Others of us may grow into our

seventies, eighties or nineties, and the mind may still be quite bright—but certainly the body will change. How can Buddhist practice support a sense of well-being during this process?

WELL-BEING

It was a particularly interesting question because the theme that I had chosen for the workshop was “Well-being”: maintaining well-being.

I have come to see that well-being is a necessary foundation for practice. That’s the reason I asked if you were warm enough. I was concerned that if you were worrying about being freezing cold, with our temple heating system broken down, you wouldn’t be able to attend properly to what I wanted to say. It is said that you can’t teach people when they’re hungry, you have to feed them first. There has to be a reasonable degree of well-being to really contemplate dhamma—otherwise the bodily and mental stress become too much of a distraction.

A QUALITY OF PRESENCE

Whenever I am asked a question, rather than thinking and struggling to find a suitable response, I tend to go quiet and see what arises. So when the person asked the question about aging, I turned my attention inwards, listened, and felt what was behind her question. I realized that the only response I could give was to say, “mindfulness”: that the way to prepare for and to manage the process of growing old is to cultivate a quality of presence and a sense of ease and well-being.

I’ve noticed that when the mind is a bit forgetful, or if I have some physical discomfort or pain, the habitual reaction is a tensing up, a feeling of anxiety or panic: “Oh dear, what’s happening here?” There is a kind of mental freezing—but that actually makes things worse. It doesn’t help me, and it doesn’t help the people I’m in contact with, because they become tense and anxious and worried as well. Whereas, if I can just relax and acknowledge what’s happening, then I’m not adding to the difficulty that I might be experiencing. I’m not adding to the concern that other people may feel. It’s as though I’m taking responsibility for what is happening for myself moment by moment—acknowledging, “OK, this is how it is right now.”

ACKNOWLEDGING MISTAKES

Whether it has to do with our aging process or with some mistake we’ve made in the monastery, with something we’ve forgotten to do or something we’ve got wrong, if we can be mindful—present and aware of what’s happened—and just acknowledge that, then there is a chance to correct the mistake, to make amends.

Some of you need to be in contact with many people. Those of you who work in the kitchen meet many people who come on weekends. They tell you their names and a little bit about themselves. But then when you meet them three weeks or a month later, you may not remember their name or what it was they told you about themselves. This is because you have met so many people. It is not easy to remember so many names, or to put names to faces.

I find that in those situations I have a number of choices. I can try bluffing or pretending that I can remember who they are. But usually what works best is just to acknowledge, to admit, “I really can’t

remember having met you before.” Then they may tell me a little bit about themselves, and it begins to come back. Sometimes I can remember them, but I have no idea what their name is or what they do. So then I have to say, “Well, I can remember you, but I’m afraid I can’t remember what your name is.” I find that actually people are very forgiving if I am straight with them and acknowledge, “I can’t remember who you are.” Most people can accept that.

What people seem to respond to—more than our remembering everything about them—is the quality of our presence. I remember many years ago being in conversation with somebody, realizing that what was most important for me in relation to this person was not that I needed to spend a lot of time in conversation with them, or that I wanted them to do anything in particular for me; what I was looking for was simply a quality of presence. When one is able to fully acknowledge someone’s presence, then what is needed can happen in just a few seconds. There is the sense that somebody is right there, present and attending to you; there is a sense of connection.

So that was some of what I said to the lady who asked about growing old and forgetful. I encouraged her just to try to make a habit of mindfulness, a habit of presence, so that even when she forgets something or makes a mistake, she can acknowledge that. It needn’t be a big deal.

If people are very upset, just staying present can be the most helpful response to their concern or irritation. People *don’t* always understand.... One of the beauties of living in an international community is that we are in contact with people from many backgrounds, with different expectations, skills and gifts. It’s a chance for us to develop great patience, kindness and acceptance of one another.

CULTIVATING PATIENCE

This leads to the second thing that came to mind when I was speaking to this lady. It was the importance of cultivating not only the habit of presence, but also of kindness, patience, appreciation, contentment and forgiveness. These are the qualities that I have found helpful throughout my monastic life and training. I suspect that if I can keep perfecting these, then when I am a really old lady, not just moderately old (as I am now) they will be a most valuable resource.

It is good to cultivate these qualities while we are still young, before we become too old, because as we get older we tend to be more fixed in our ways. Our ingrained habits become more intractable, less easy to work with. So it’s important, first of all, to recognise our habitual tendencies.

It was very helpful for some of us who had the opportunity to look after Sister Uppala. She lived in our community for about seven or eight years—until she died at the age of ninety. Whenever I was around her, I got an idea of just how patient one must be as one gets older, because everything becomes more difficult and time-consuming. She couldn’t see or hear so well, couldn’t move around so easily. Life became more and more difficult, so she was dependent on many people helping her. She certainly tested *our* patience, but you could also see the extent to which her situation required great patience from her side too; because we couldn’t always understand what was needed, didn’t always arrive on time, didn’t always get things right. It’s hard, having to rely on other people who may not always get things right. So I am suggesting that we make this a matter of priority, to cultivate patience.

Winter is a good time for cultivating patience. It takes effort to just get warmly enough dressed to move about from building to building. One time at Chithurst, I counted. It was something like twenty garments to go out and do walking meditation: two pairs of socks, long johns, two hats, two pairs

of gloves, a pullover, scarves, a number of other bits and pieces—just to keep warm. Then you get all that on and realize you've forgotten something, so you have to unlace your boots to go back into your kuti! It's all a chance to cultivate patience—a willingness to be present with the different things we need to attend to. It's a very useful reflection as a counterbalance to restlessness and agitation.

ONE THING AT A TIME

In the monastery some of you have many duties, many things that you have to attend to. This was another of the things that people would ask about when I was in Canada: How can we bring mindfulness into everyday life, when we have so many things to attend to, so many demands on our time and energy? I was remembering advice that was given one time here at Amaravati, when we were preparing for some important event. Ajahn Sucitto said, "Well there's a tremendous amount to do—so we must go very slowly, very carefully." I've always remembered that, because it reminds me of the need to attend to just one thing at a time.

When we have many things to do, we have a tendency to carry them all in our mind. It's like having twenty people to see. Rather than just being with each person and attending only to them, we allow the pressure of all twenty to queue up—to crowd into our mind—and make us feel agitated. Whereas I've found that if I can attend to things carefully one at a time, I can have a huge amount of energy, and I don't feel frazzled and agitated by the end of the day.

This is another useful reflection for us here in the monastery. Can we cultivate patience in our daily life, just doing one thing, then the next thing, then the next thing—rather than allowing them all to queue up in our minds, putting a sense of pressure into our activity?

CALM, COLLECTED ENERGY

This requires a willingness to be present, to be mindful—a willingness, also an interest in being calm. I say this because it can actually be quite exciting to have many things to do. We can get quite a high out of it. I know I can, and I imagine it's the same for some of you. There is a kind of energy and a momentum that can arise, so we end up doing a great number of things on this high kind of energy—which is different from the collected energy that comes when we're mindful.

This restlessness and *becoming* energy arises when we're moving towards something in the future; it is like a succession of rebirths. The energy of rebirth is pulling us into the next thing. There is an aspect of humanity, of our human existence that loves this—that wants to be reborn, to exist. We call this desire to exist, which leads to a continuous taking of rebirth, *bhavatanha*. However, those of you who have begun to be attentive to this as it happens in daily life may have seen that it is actually quite a dangerous energy. I've noticed myself that if I follow it, it can easily lead to exhaustion and burnout. It's not sustainable, and it can lead to a feeling of irritability that can be extremely unfortunate when we are living in community. We can do or say things that can really upset one another, obviously without meaning to—things just come blurting out on the spur of the moment when we're caught up in this restless energy of becoming. So these things that we have to do can give us a sense of self importance, but it's not a peaceful state—and it can lead to unfortunate consequences.

So it's really important to notice when that is happening for us. It's not that we don't do the things

that we've undertaken, but the manner in which we do them can change. We recognize the excited energy that wants to be reborn, but we actually decide that peacefulness is more to be treasured. Being peaceful is even more precious than becoming and having a mission. So we take a moment just to breathe:

Breathing in for the Buddha, breathing out for the Buddha,
Breathing in for the Dhamma, breathing out for the Dhamma,
Breathing in for the Sangha, breathing out for the Sangha,

establishing ourselves in the Refuge of the Triple Gem. We breathe the awareness into the body, and attend to whatever it is that we have to do—whether it's a conversation we're having or some duty, like hanging up the tea towels.

I hung up the tea towels today. Until then I hadn't been aware of this duty that someone has to do each day. There were a great many tea towels—I couldn't believe how many! So I thought, "I'll just hang up a few of them." Then I hung up a few more, and presently they all were hung up. I hoped that the person who usually has to do this is able to enjoy doing them one at a time, rather than: "I've got to do this, and I've got to do that, and I'm *never* going to get it all done!"

Many years ago, before I was a nun, I was part of a meditation group—a Christian meditation group. We had invited a very impressive Orthodox priest to visit the group one evening to give a short reflection. He said, "If I have fifty letters to write..." (that blew me away right there: the thought of *fifty* letters to write!) "I write the first one, then I write the second one... and, in time, by the grace of God, all fifty letters are written." As Buddhists, we'd say that if we just do one thing at a time, attending fully to what we're doing then in due course the job can be completed.

KEEPING THE HEART SWEET

Of course, it may be that we've actually taken on more than we can complete. This too requires a mindful response and a willingness to take responsibility. If we have a large number of things to do, instead of acknowledging what is happening, that we've taken on more than we can reasonably handle, we may find ourselves blaming somebody else or blaming "the system." So we blow up at someone: "I can't do all this! Can't you see I've got far too much to do?" It may be that the person who asked you wasn't aware that you had too much to do—that they weren't intending to torture you. They simply hadn't realized. This is something else that it is useful to be attentive to: to notice irritation, anger, and ill-will as they arise. This can also be part of our aging strategy (just to keep with the theme of how we can prepare for old age): learning how to recognize irritability and ill-will, before it comes tumbling out and hurts somebody; trying to keep the heart sweet. Everybody wants to look after a sweet old man or a sweet old lady—but looking after a sour old lady is a different proposition! So as a matter of enlightened self interest, we should look at how we can cultivate a sweet heart—sweetness of heart.

Obviously one of the ways we can do this is to be attentive and to notice when the heart is not sweet, when it is sour. This happens to everybody. I don't imagine there's anyone here who doesn't sometimes get sour and nasty inside. I know many of you have become very skilled at not allowing it to pour out, but I'm sure that even for those of you who have really cultivated an attitude of kindness

and sweet, beautiful speech—I'm quite sure there are still moments of irritability and criticism; of yourself, or of somebody else. This is something we need to really take an interest in. I talk about it a lot, because it's so unpleasant to have a nasty thought, a mean thought, to feel critical and judgemental.

RIGHT INTENTION—PATIENT BEARING

Until we really understand what the Buddha is pointing to we may think that Right Intention means that we shouldn't have unpleasant thoughts. We may think that Right Intention is not having any thoughts of ill-will, and always having sweet thoughts. But the intention that the Buddha encouraged is the intention of mindfulness, of awareness and the willingness to patiently bear with irritability, anger, ill-will—as it arises. This is the intention to allow it to cease in consciousness—knowing that, like everything else, it's impermanent, changing and definitely not what you are. If you have an angry thought, you are not an angry person. If you have a grumpy thought, you are not a grumpy person. If you have a mean, deluded, jealous, despairing thought, these are not what you are as a permanent, enduring entity. You don't have to worry about them, they are not part of what you are. They're simply passing visitors—unpleasant visitors, admittedly—but not anything that we need to grasp hold of. We don't even have to struggle to get rid of them. All we have to do is to notice that they're there, with an attitude of immense patience and immense kindness.

So, rather than hating ourselves for hating somebody else, when we find hatred or aversion arising in relation to another person, we need only say, "OK, this is what's happening right now. I can bear this, I don't have to fight it or struggle with it. It's not that I'm a horrible person; this is simply what has arisen. It's OK." When we can be present with our malevolence, our negativity; when we can be patient with it, this really leads us naturally to sweetness of heart. Recognising these things in our own heart and learning how to not judge ourselves, we become much less judgemental of others. It happens quite naturally. We don't have to force it. All we need to do is to attend carefully to our own hearts.

I call this, "staying in touch."

BEING PRESENT TO WHAT ARISES IN MEDITATION

In our approach to meditation, sometimes we may want to jump ahead and get to the bliss. We want to get the jhanas, we want to get enlightened. This is understandable, because I'm told that these things are all very pleasurable—very desirable. The Buddha talked about these as being an allowable happiness, allowable pleasure—the kind of pleasure that does not have harmful consequences. However, in order to experience any of these things, we need to cultivate a quality of presence. We need to find a place of well-being and ease in the present.

So in talking about meditation I find it helpful to think about cultivating a sense of presence—just being fully present with ourselves as we are right now. We can use the breath as a focus for the mind, but rather than struggling with the fact that we may not be perfectly present with each and every breath—and then giving up, because we think that we can't do this practice—it can be more helpful to ask, "How is it right now? What's happening right now? Can I enjoy breathing in? Can I enjoy breath-

ing out? Can I just notice what's happening in my mind?" If you've had a very busy day, doing lots of different things, it may be that the mind is quite agitated. There is probably a lot of thinking, planning and fantasizing about all the things that you're going to do; or you want to get into some pleasant state. All sorts of things can be going on. Whereas, cultivating a quality of presence is just noticing, "How is it? What's happening right here, right now?"

PRIORITIES

So we make this the priority of our life: cultivating a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of presence, a sense of acceptance, a sense of acknowledgement: "This is how it is, this is how I'm feeling right now, this is what's happening for me right now." Knowing that this present moment is our Refuge: Being the Knowing, being Buddha, attuning to the awareness of what's happening now, of dhamma—the Truth of this moment, and aligning ourselves to Sangha—that which aspires to live in accordance with Truth. We make the cultivation of the Triple Refuge the priority of our life, rather than relying on this body, relying on this mind.

PREPARING FOR THE FINAL RELINQUISHMENT

No matter how skilled we become at cooking or giving dhamma talks, or even meditation itself; no matter how brilliant we are at chanting—able to remember all the chants by heart; no matter how accomplished we become at anything—sooner or later we're going to lose it. I'm not saying we shouldn't do these things, but we need to keep in mind that no matter how good we are at any of them, in due course we're going to have to experience the diminishment of these faculties. Little by little, things are going to change—until the final relinquishment of this mortal existence. We don't have any choice about that, but we do have a choice as to how we approach it. If we cultivate mindfulness, patience, sweetness of heart, then when the time comes, these will be most valuable resources.

So these are things we can be doing here in this monastery: we can make Amaravati a place of preparation. Ajahn Chah used to say that you come to the monastery to die; in some sense, that's what we have come here for—not that it's going to happen immediately, but we can practise dying to each moment, letting go of each moment. In this way we prepare for the final big one, the final letting go.

I offer this as a reflection, an encouragement. May we all always celebrate this opportunity that we have to practice in this place, and really treasure the situation that we have here. Those of you who don't live here, please come often and make use of this opportunity too. Those of you who have to go far away from the monastery, you can just bring it into your heart. This is what I did in Canada. When I felt lonely I remembered this place and the community here—my brothers and sisters in the holy life. This is how we see that we can have Amaravati with us wherever we go, wherever we are, whoever we're with: we have Amaravati with us, right here in our hearts.

Chocolate Frosting and Garbage

Ven. Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron©

Born in 1950, Ven. Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron grew up near Los Angeles. She graduated from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1971. In 1975, she attended a meditation course given by Ven. Lama Yeshe and received the sramanerika (novice) ordination, and in 1986, went to Taiwan to take the bhikshuni (full) ordination. She studied and practiced Buddhism of the Tibetan tradition for many years in India and Nepal. She has now founded Sravasti Abbey, a monastery in Washington State. She has written numerous books on Buddhist teachings.

We hear the great masters say, “Practicing Buddhism is good. It will bring you happiness in this and future lives,” and we think, “Umm... This sounds interesting.” But when we try to do it, sometimes we get confused. There are so many kinds of practice to do. “Should I prostrate? Should I make offerings? Maybe meditation is better? But chanting is easier, perhaps I should do that instead.” We compare our practice to that of others. “My friend just made 100,000 prostrations in one month. But my knees hurt and I can’t do any!” we think with jealousy. Sometimes doubt comes into our mind and we wonder, “Other religions teach about morality, love and compassion. Why should I limit myself to Buddhism?” We go around in circles, and in the process, lose sight of the real meaning of what we are trying to do.

To resolve this, we need to understand what following the Buddha’s teachings means. Let’s look beyond clinging to the words “I’m a Buddhist.” Let’s look beyond the external appearance of being a religious person. What is it that we want from our lives? Isn’t finding some kind of lasting happiness and helping others the essence of what most human beings seek?

One does not have to call him/herself a Buddhist in order to practice the Dharma and receive benefit from it. Interestingly, in Tibetan, there is no word “Buddhism”. This is noteworthy, for sometimes we get so caught up in the names of religions that we forget their meaning, and busy ourselves defending our religion and criticizing others’. This is a useless venture. In fact the term “Dharma” includes any teaching that, if practiced correctly, leads people to temporal or ultimate happiness. It doesn’t exclude teachings given by other religious leaders—provided that these teachings lead us to the attainment of temporal or ultimate happiness.

Examples are readily available: moral discipline such as abandoning killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct and intoxicants is taught in many other religions, as is love and compassion for others. This is the Dharma, and it is beneficial for us to practice such advice, whether we call ourselves Buddhist, or Hindu, or Christian, or whatever. This is not to say that all religions are the same in every respect, because they aren’t. However, the parts in each of them that lead us to temporal and ultimate happiness should be practiced by everyone, no matter which religion we identify with.

It is extremely important not to get bogged down in words. Sometimes people ask me, “Are you

Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Hindu or Muslim? Are you Mahāyana or Theravāda? Do you follow Tibetan Buddhism or Chinese Buddhism? Are you Gelu, Kargyu, Sakya or Nyingma?" To this complexity of concepts, I reply, "I am a human being searching for a path to discover truth and happiness and to make my life beneficial for others." That's the beginning and end of it. It so happens that I have found a path that suits my inclination and disposition in such and such a religion, and such and such a tradition. However, there is no use in clinging onto the terms, "I am a Buddhist of the Tibetan variety and practice the Gelu tradition." We already have made enough simple words into concrete concepts. Isn't this grasping at fixed and limited categories what we are trying to eliminate from our minds? If we cling to such labels in a close-minded way, then we give ourselves no choice but to quarrel with and criticize others who happen to have different labels. There are already enough problems in the world. What is the use of creating more by having bigoted religious views and conceitedly defaming others?

A kind heart is one of the principal things we are trying to develop. If we run around childishly telling others, "I'm this religion, and you're that religion. But mine is better," it is like turning chocolate frosting into garbage: what was delicious becomes useless. Instead, we would be much wiser to look inside ourselves and apply the antidotes to intolerance, pride, and attachment. The true criterion of whether we are a religious or spiritual person is whether we have a kind heart toward others and a wise approach to life. These qualities are internal and cannot be seen with our eyes. They are gained by honestly looking at our own thoughts, words and actions—discriminating which ones to encourage and which ones to abandon, and then engaging in the practices to develop compassion and wisdom in order to transform ourselves.

While we are trying to practice the Dharma, let's not get entrenched in superficial appearances. There is a story of one Tibetan man who wanted to practice Dharma, so he spent days circumambulating holy relic monuments. Soon his teacher came by and said, "What you're doing is very nice, but wouldn't it be better to practice the Dharma?" The man scratched his head in wonder and the next day began to do prostrations. He did hundreds of thousands of prostrations, and when he reported the total to his teacher, his teacher responded, "That's very nice, but wouldn't it be better to practice the Dharma?" Puzzled, the man now thought to recite the Buddhist scriptures aloud. But when his teacher came by, he again commented, "Very good, but wouldn't it be better to practice the Dharma?" Thoroughly bewildered, the exasperated man queried his spiritual master, "But what does that mean? I thought I have been practicing the Dharma." The teacher responded concisely, "The practice of Dharma is to change your attitude towards life and give up attachment to worldly concerns."

The real Dharma practice is not something we can see with our eyes. Real practice is changing our mind, not just changing our behavior so that we appear holy, blessed, and others say, "Wow, what a fantastic person!" We have already spent our lives putting on various acts in an effort to convince ourselves and others that we are indeed what in fact we aren't at all. We hardly need to create another facade, this time of a super-holy person. What we do need to do is change our mind, our way of viewing, interpreting and reacting to the world around and within us.

The first step in doing this is being honest with ourselves. Taking an accurate look at our life, we are unafraid and unashamed to acknowledge, "Everything is not completely right in my life. No matter how good the situation around me is, no matter how much money or how many friends or how

great a reputation I have, still I'm not satisfied. Also, I have very little control over my moods and emotions, and can't prevent getting sick, aging and eventually dying."

Then we check up why and how we are in this predicament. What are the causes of it? By looking at our own life, we come to understand that our experiences are closely linked with our mind. When we interpret a situation in one way and get angry about it, we are unhappy and make the people around us miserable; when we view the same situation from another perspective, it no longer appears intolerable and we act wisely and with a peaceful mind. When we are proud, it's no wonder that others act haughtily toward us. On the other hand, a person with an altruistic attitude automatically attracts friends. Our experiences are based on our own attitudes and actions.

Can our current situation be changed? Of course! Since it is dependent on causes—our attitudes and actions—if we take responsibility to train ourselves to think and act in a more accurate and altruistic way, then the current perplexed dissatisfaction can be ceased and a joyful and beneficial situation ensue. It is up to us. We can change.

The initial step in this change is giving up attachment to worldly concerns. In other words, we stop fooling ourselves and trying to fool others. We understand that the problem isn't that we cannot get what we want or once we do get it, it fades away or breaks. Rather, the problem is that we cling to it with over-estimating expectations in the first place. Various activities like prostrating, making offerings, chanting, meditating and so on are techniques to help us overcome our preconceptions of attachment, anger, jealousy, pride and close-mindedness. These practices are not ends in themselves, and they are of little benefit if done with the same attachment for reputation, friends and possessions that we had before.

Once, Bengungyel, a meditator doing retreat in a cave, was expecting his benefactor to visit. As he set up offerings on his altar that morning, he did so with more care and in a much elaborate and impressive way than usual, hoping that his benefactor would think what a great practitioner he was and would give him more offerings. Later, when he realized his own corrupt motivation, he jumped up in disgust, grabbed handfuls of ashes from the ashbin and flung them over the altar while he shouted, "I throw this in the face of attachment to worldly concerns."

In another part of Tibet, Padampa Sangyey, a master with clairvoyant powers, viewed all that had happened in the cave. With delight, he declared to those around him, "Bengungyel has just made the purest offering in all Tibet!"

The essence of the Dharma practice isn't our external performance, but our internal motivation. Real Dharma is not huge temples, pompous ceremonies, elaborate dress and intricate rituals. These things are tools that can help our mind if they are used properly, with correct motivation. We can't judge another person's motivation, nor should we waste our time trying to evaluate others' actions. We can only look at our own mind, thereby determining whether our actions, words and thoughts are beneficial or not. For that reason we must be ever attentive not to let our minds come under the influence of selfishness, attachment, anger, etc. As it says in the Eight Verses of Thought Transformation, "Vigilant, the moment a disturbing attitude appears, endangering myself and others, I will confront and avert it without delay." In this way, our Dharma practice becomes pure and is effective—not only in leading us to temporal and ultimate happiness, but also in enabling us to make our lives beneficial for others.

Thus, if we get confused about which tradition to follow or what practice to do, let's remember the meaning of practicing Dharma. To cling with concrete conceptions to a certain religion or tradition is to build up our close-minded grasping. To become enamored with rituals without endeavoring to learn and contemplate their meaning is simply to play-act a religious role. To engage in external practices like prostrating, making offerings, chanting and so forth, with a motivation that is attached to receiving a good reputation, meeting a boyfriend or girlfriend, being praised or receiving offerings, is like putting chocolate frosting into garbage: it looks good on the outside, but it's unhealthy.

Instead, if everyday we center ourselves by remembering the value of being a human being, if we recall our beautiful human potential and have a deep and sincere longing to make it blossom, then we'll endeavor to be true to ourselves and to others by transforming our motivations, and consequently, transforming our actions. In addition to remembering the value and purpose of life, if we contemplate the transience of our existence and of the objects and people that we are attached to, then we'll want to practice in a pure way. Sincere and pure practice that leads to so many beneficial results, is done by applying the antidotes that the Buddha prescribed when afflictive attitudes arise in our minds: when anger comes, we practice patience and tolerance; for attachment, we recall transience; when jealousy arises, we counter it with sincere rejoicing in others' qualities and happiness; for pride, we remember that just as no water can stay on a pointed mountain peak, no qualities can develop in a mind inflated by pride; for close-mindedness, we let ourselves listen and reflect on a new view.

Looking holy and important on the outside brings no real happiness either now or in the future. However, if we have a kind heart and a pure motivation free of selfish, ulterior motives, we are indeed a real practitioner. Then our lives become meaningful, joyful and beneficial for others.

Balancing Samādhi and Pañña

Ven. Bhikkhu Dhammadipa

Ven. Bhikkhu Dhammadipa was born in 1949 in Prague, Czechoslovakia. He majored in Oriental studies at the Universities of Prague, Paris, Berlin, and Nalanda in India. He Ordained as a bhikkhu in Sri Lanka 1987, studying under the guidance of Ven. Mathara Nanarama Mahāthera and Ven. Acinna (Pa-Auk) Sayadaw in Myanmar. He has taught languages and Abhidharma in various institutions of Buddhist learning in Taiwan and China. He also teaches Buddhism and meditation in different parts of the world.

*N’atthi jhanam apaññassa,
Pañña n’atthi ajhayanto.
Yam’hi jhanam ca pañña ca,
Sa ve nibbānassa santike. (DHP 372)*

**There is no concentration without wisdom,
There is no wisdom without concentration.
In whom there is both concentration and wisdom,
He (or she) is close to Nibbāna.**

Anyone who has associated with Bhante G even for a short period of time, is likely to have heard him reciting this verse after the morning and evening meditation sessions at the Bhāvanā Society. During my short visit at Bhāvanā, being a monk whose very nature is curiosity about things, I wanted to ask Bhante G to explain the meaning of this verse for the benefit of all present; however there was no good occasion to do so. As the expression of my deep respect and gratitude for Bhante, I shall try to write a few interpretations on the meaning of this verse myself, as a tribute for Bhante G’s 80th birthday, with my best wishes attached to it.

No matter whether a lay man or a monk, anyone who truly wishes to benefit from the liberating message of Lord Buddha’s teachings cannot avoid studying in detail the two aspects of Buddhist wisdom: the wisdom of appeasement (samatha) and the wisdom of insight (vipassana). These two modes of wisdom are cultivated by hearing (study), reflection, and meditation practice, until they become like the two wings of a bird: leading the mind on towards liberation from all fetters. This is the focus of our practice; the ultimate aim of the Dhamma, the study of Buddhism.

For a Buddhist the ultimate appeasement comes from insight, but the practice of a relative appeasement, that means tranquility towards worldly objects, is a means to the attainment of the ultimate freedom through insight.

To make us understand this principle, the Mahāvedallasutta (M.N. 43), describes the wisdom of samādhi (samatha, jhana, and samādhi can be taken as synonyms here) as understanding objects func-

tionally and without delusion, and wisdom of insight as understanding objects by penetrating their special and common characteristics.

Thus the meditation of appeasement in the Buddhist sense implies the practice of non delusion (amoha), in regard to the factors of mind enabling absorption in the meditation object (kammattana). It also implies an understanding of their functions, due to which the mind attains relative freedom from impurities. Let us see how it works, in the context of the verses written above:

THERE IS NO CONCENTRATION WITHOUT WISDOM.

Wisdom, in the sense of unmistakable penetration, is present in correct samādhi as right view and right intention due to a penetrative understanding of the function of objects and factors of absorption (jhananga). Only a perfect understanding of these two, of the objects and factors of absorption, leads to a mastery of the jhanas in these five ways: (1) immediate turning to objects of concentration, (2) immediate entry to concentration, (3) freedom as to the duration of absorption, (4) immediate leaving of the meditation objects, and (5) following investigation of the factors of absorption.

In the narrow technical sense as often used in the Abhidhamma, jhana means the practice of the four rupa (fine form) jhanas and the four arupa (immaterial) jhanas. These are called the eight samāpattis, which is also part of the Noble Eightfold Path as correct samādhi. However, in a wider sense, jhana also means meditation in the sense of a close contemplation of wisely-chosen objects with a mind freed from obstacles. Only a mind which is concentrated in samādhi can contemplate objects as they really are, without a subjective interpretation; and this absence of subjectivity is the essence of true wisdom.

In this sense, jhana as meditation is the way to wisdom and includes wisdom already, because without a wholesome concentration, wisdom as objective discrimination cannot take place. Therefore, when one meditates in the Buddhist sense, one is getting rid of subjectivity by a correct concentration and thus becomes close to the objective nature of all phenomena, to the true dhamma.

Such an understanding of jhanas makes samādhi a factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. It ripens as the result of the practice of right mindfulness, in one practicing right effort, together with right livelihood, action, speech, intention and view. The wrong concentration is abandoned only in one who practices right samādhi with right view and intention, and only this concentration leads to right knowledge and right deliverance; the aim of the Buddhist path.

In the suttas, the practice of concentration is called the bliss of renunciation, bliss of seclusion, bliss of peace, and finally, of bliss of enlightenment, because the practice of right samādhi, accompanied by right view leads to the supramundane path. In this sense the practice of meditation as liberating wisdom is explained as surmounting lower bliss of lower stages of meditation to attain the higher stages, until one attains the ultimate bliss of liberation from all fetters.

The abandoning of fetters often coincides with the surmounting of all worldly objects in entering into the samādhi of cessation of perception and feeling (sannavedayitanirodhasamāpatti). This samādhi arises as a result of a correct gradual practice of the four rupa jhanas and the four arupa jhanas, fortified with right view and right intention. It implies a deep insight into the true nature of reality.

Thus, in the Buddhist sense, the practice of appeasement meditation is firmly integrated into the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. This implies the understanding of the Four Noble Truths with

the liberating insight into the nature of reality, and surmounting of attachment to all objects. It implies an understanding of a desirable bliss of renunciation, which is inseparably linked to wisdom of a developed mind, not shaken by any unpleasant feelings. (Mahāsaccakasutta, M.N. 36.) The body and mind has to merge fully into this wisdom of bliss of renunciation, in order not to be seduced by sensual attachments.

The second aspect of wisdom of meditation implies development of body (of mental factors), due to which the mind attains enough stability and peace not to be shaken by any pleasant sensation and thus remains always unmoved. Here the practice of the jhanas in the sense of right concentration, has to merge with the practice of insight, to bring to mind one taste only: the taste of liberation from all fetters.

THERE IS NO WISDOM WITHOUT CONCENTRATION

The arising of wisdom penetrates the five aggregates of clinging (form, feeling, perception, volition and consciousness) in accordance with their true nature. This is only possible by pondering them closely in the concentrated state of samādhi, with a mind free from the distraction of the five hindrances (sense desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness/worry, and doubt).

This concentrated mind, free from the five hindrances, is endowed with the five jhana factors: applied and sustained thought, joy, bliss and one-pointedness. The presence of jhana factors does not allow the arising of obstacles to obscure the close-up examination of the five aggregates.

This mind of meditation is also endowed with other virtues, such as the five faculties, the seven factors of enlightenment (bojjhargas), especially with equanimity, which allows the state of close examination to be continuous. Such a concentrated mind exists both in the meditation of appeasement (samatha), in the meditation connected with deeper insight (vipassana), and in meditation coupling together both concentration and vipassana wisdom. It exists only when the mind is free from obstacles and with unblemished clarity of objects.

Active defilements (kilesa) make the close examination of objects impossible. The wisdom of appeasement and insight can only ripen in samādhi, existing either in absorption into a single object (samathakammattana) or vipassana object (vipassanakammattana). Here the vipassana objects means any one or all of the five aggregates (khandas), which are the objects of concentrated insight, observing without obstacles the arising and passing of all physical and mental phenomena in the world. Though this concentrated mind of insight investigates closely the worldly objects in terms of their special and common characteristics, it remains unshaken by this barrage of worldly objects. Thus is the mind in samādhi.

In this sense we speak of concentration (jhana) in terms of abiding in a mind unshaken by active defilements in the eight samapattis (the four rupa and the four arupa jhanas) or in the samādhi of insight. Such an abiding is wisdom of meditation, which when ripened, becomes the wisdom of one taste: the taste of liberation. This wisdom implies a continuous concentrated meditative state, a continuous equanimity to all objects of perception, in the sense that mind remains unshaken by objects and by factors of mind.

Without meditating in this way, the wisdom of liberation cannot ripen; the wisdom of appeasement and insight cannot bring to completion their liberating function. Meditation is a process of ripen-

ing of wisdom by a continuous practice of close investigation in the samādhi of appeasement and samādhi of insight.

**IN WHOM THERE IS BOTH CONCENTRATION AND WISDOM,
HE OR SHE IS CLOSE TO NIBBĀNA.**

Wisdom ripens in the process of hearing the teachings; contemplating on them and finally completely penetrating them, becoming one with their meaning, through meditation. In this process all forms of identification with self, be it gross, mind-made, or formless, become transcended by wisdom arising from meditation. Wisdom transcending the self and all the phenomena of the world is the ultimate wisdom, and the path to this wisdom is the relative wisdom of appeasement (concentration) and of insight.

Both these wisdoms are based on meditation, thus without meditating, wisdom cannot ripen to become the liberating, ultimate wisdom. One who has cultivated the relative wisdom acquired by hearing, contemplation, and meditation and meditates so as to become one with them, he is approaching the aim of Nibbāna. Thus by wisdom and by meditating, he is bending his mind towards the aim of liberation; becoming closer and closer with its true meaning. He is close to Nibbāna, because he is on the correct path.

Only by following the correct path of meditating and cultivating the wisdom of appeasement and insight can one reach or realize the desired destination, the Path (Magga) and Fruition (Phala), which is the Supramundane Noble Eightfold Path. Being on the correct Supramundane Path means to be close to Nibbāna.

Even if one has wisdom and meditates, without understanding the correct path, he still will not be in the vicinity of Nibbāna. Being close to Nibbāna for a Buddhist yogi implies a correct practice of meditation of appeasement and insight resulting in the direct realization of the Supramundane Noble Eightfold Path.

Why Do Ceremonial?

Rev. Meian Elbert

Rev. Meian Elbert was ordained in 1977 by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, founder of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, a Western monastic order within the Soto Zen tradition. Since ordination Rev. Elbert has lived at Shasta Abbey, a monastery of the Order in Northern California. She received Dharma Transmission in 1979 and was named as a Master of the Order in 1989. She currently serves as the Vice Abbess of Shasta Abbey and is also the Director of Ceremonial.

In all major Buddhist traditions there is a certain amount of ceremonial activities. In some it is the main focus of daily practice; in others it is minimal, but it is always there in one form or another. Here in the West many Buddhists don't see the point of doing ceremonies. For some people it is a strong reminder, whether positive or negative, of their former religion. It may be seen as irrelevant and outdated, as superstition, or as cultural baggage that can be left behind. One may wonder: why waste time with ceremonies when we could be meditating or listening to a Dharma talk? When I looked in some of the popular Western Buddhist magazines for articles on ceremonial, I found none.

Most people actually do like a certain amount of ceremonial practices, though they may not think of it that way. People enjoy weddings, they will go to some trouble to attend the funeral of someone they care about, and many people will bury a beloved pet in the back yard with a little ceremony of their own. National events are often marked with ceremonies.

Why do people like these kinds of ceremonies? Ceremonial practice is a very direct and powerful way of expressing something. Weddings express the commitment between two people in a way that just filling in a form would not. At a funeral or memorial service, the very formality of the occasion allows people to open up and grieve. Any ceremony worth its salt has an impact on those who participate—whether it is a special festival for a momentous occasion or simply a regular service that is done every day with care and mindfulness.

In Buddhism, the most important ceremonial thing we do is to bow; whether we are simply bending at the waist with our palms together, or making a full prostration. "As long as bowing lasts, Buddhism will last." In looking at bowing we can see all the elements of ceremony; why it helps us, and how we can understand and practice it.

First of all, we can only understand bowing by doing it. We can talk about it and ask why people do it, but in the end, the only thing that makes any sense is just to bow. We understand it with our body and our heart, not with our mind. The more we do it, the better we understand it. And this is true of any ceremonial practice: it has an effect on us that is beyond any words to describe, just as meditation does, and this effect is often subtle and cumulative.

At different times we are expressing different things when we bow, whether collectively or individually. Sometimes we are full of joy and gratitude for the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha and we see

how much they help us in our lives, and we just want to bow. At other times we may be worried or in distress, and we are asking for help. Bowing is a way of doing that very directly, beyond words, beyond asking for some particular resolution or outcome. It is a way of letting go, of offering up our problem or our suffering, and simply asking for help. Yet at other times, we may be bowing in repentance of our karmic mistakes—whether it is something from the past that haunts us, a character fault that we are trying to correct, or a big mistake we just made today that hurt somebody. To bow at such a time brings comfort: we honestly recognize our mistake, say we're sorry, and resolve to change.

At this point, one may ask, "Who are we bowing to? Who are we asking for help? To whom are we saying we're sorry? What is going on?"

Different Buddhists in different traditions—and even within the same tradition—may see the answer to this question in different ways. For some there is a "who," for some others there is more of a "what." In any case, there is definitely Something to bow to. As the Buddha said,

"Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. Monks, if that unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be apparent no escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded. But since, monks, there is an unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded, therefore the escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded is apparent." ¹

This is what Great Master Bankei calls "the unborn," and what many people call "Buddha nature." Some people call it "thusness", "suchness", "our original face", "that which is", the Dharmakaya, or one of a host of other names. In some Buddhist traditions they talk about what it is, and in others they talk about what it isn't. One thing is clear, however: whatever it is, it's a lot bigger than we are.

Buddhist ceremonial practice helps us to open up to this "something that is bigger than we are." We bow to it, we open our hearts to it, we turn towards it, we entrust ourselves to it. All the different aspects of ceremonial practice help with this: bowing, offering incense, processing, chanting or singing the scriptures, and the music itself, if we have music. Each of these aspects is an offering that we are making, something we are giving. Intuitively we know that this helps both ourselves and other beings. Ceremonial practice transcends the intellect, just as bowing does, and it works on a deeper level than our brain. Like meditation, it is a way of opening up to the unknown, of letting go of our little self that thinks it knows and that wants to be in charge. It helps us to deepen our faith and reverence for "that which is greater than we are."

Every ceremony is doing something; whether we are offering merit to other beings, doing a memorial, blessing a house, expressing gratitude, or doing our daily morning service. We make offerings, usually of incense, with candles, flowers and fruit on the altar; we make bows and recite scriptures; we include the essential purpose of the ceremony (such as blessing the house or offering merit for the dead); and we offer the merit of all this to somebody else, we don't keep it for ourselves. This is the basic form.

A ceremonial act is not magic. It is not some formula that you have to get right or it won't work, because that would just be superstition. That is what the Buddha rejected, having been brought up in a society in which strict adherence to ritual was considered very important. Sometimes you can't do the ceremony in a formal way, but you can do the essential part in a very simple way; such as blessing a dead animal by the roadside or giving the Precepts to a dying person. The important thing is that

you do it as sincerely and wholeheartedly as you can. Sometimes we don't get it quite right, we might miss something out or do it in the wrong order, and then we have to be flexible and make it work. It is our attitude that makes the ceremony.

One of the most important aspects of ceremonial practice is that it expresses the harmony of the Sangha. We all do the ceremony together, and that gives it a lot more strength, in the same way that meditating together helps us. Reciting the scriptures together, making the offerings together, bowing together—all of this is much stronger and bigger than each of us alone is. If we are chanting or singing, we try to do it in harmony, so that it will sound beautiful. In our actions we have to work together in harmony, each with our part to play. We do it together, not insisting on our own way or our own pace. If someone makes a mistake or does something unexpected, we need to be flexible and attentive, not blaming or insisting, and make it work. It is a wonderful practice for letting go of our own view, our own self, and being willing to follow. Thus we practice harmony of body, speech, and mind.

A ceremony is meditation in action. It is a bridge between sitting meditation and daily life. Indeed, it often comes between the two: you sit, you have a ceremony, and then you go to work. In many ways it is just like condensed, vivid, daily life without a lot of the distractions. We are moving, we are doing something with other people, we have our own part to play, and we are trying to be mindful; sincerely doing our best. When we cultivate the mind of reverence and gratitude that is the essence of ceremonial, this mind begins to pervade our daily life, just as the mind of meditation does. Everything can be seen as a kind of ceremony, from cooking a meal to driving to work. We try to be mindful and keep the Precepts; we want to treat other people with kindness and respect; we try to treat the things we use with care and gentleness, not roughness or indifference; and when we find ourselves rushing and grabbing in a hurry we are more likely to notice and say, "Wait a minute, that's not the way to do it."

Another way in which ceremonial activity is like a condensed daily life is that our own particular form of "the self" can arise mightily during a ceremony, especially when we are not used to it. We may feel we should be filled with joy and gratitude and in fact sometimes we may feel resentful, or bored, or just indifferent. We may be tired, or distracted, or impatient, or we may experience massive resistance. If we have an active part to play in a ceremony, we may get all worried and confused, if we are thinking about what happens next instead of concentrating on what we are doing now; or we may be self-conscious and think everyone is looking at us and criticizing us. We may think "I'm rather good at this," and next moment miss our cue, or think "I'm terrible at this," and make it more difficult for ourselves. This is exactly like daily life. Because it is a ceremony, it is easier to notice these things and let them go, than when we are at work, for example. Very often our fatigue will lift, our irritation will dissipate, and our resistance will soften or disappear. We may start with grumpiness and end with joy. This is one of the ways in which we work on the aspects of ourselves that cause us suffering. The ceremony itself helps us to gain a perspective of compassion and acceptance, and to renew our faith and willingness.

Ceremonial activities have effects that are beyond our capacity to understand. The offering of merit, for example, is a very powerful force for good that works in ways we cannot comprehend. Any ceremony that is done with a sincere heart helps all beings as well as ourselves. When we ask for help from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we allow their aspects of compassion, wisdom, and goodness to manifest and blossom in ourselves. It is because a ceremony is an act of faith, of generosity and giv-

ing, and because we are doing it together that it has such effects.

Above all, ceremonial practice is a very human activity. We are just human beings, doing something together, making it work together, and stretching upward to greet That Which Is greater—not because we are separate from It, but because It is greater than we are, and greater than we can imagine. We cannot control It or figure It out. All we can do is venerate It. We open our hearts to It, entrust ourselves to It, and do the very best we can, in faith. We are expressing the harmony of the Sangha Treasure, and the harmony of ourselves with That Which Is, because we are part of It and It is the whole of us.

THE VERSE WHEN BOWING IN DEEPEST GRATITUDE

The one who bows and the One who is bowed to are by their Nature tranquil, devoid of all desire,

For Thou and I, We are not two.

May all us sentient beings together free ourselves from our suffering and delusions,

As we give rise to our supreme intention to realize the Truth.²

¹*Udana: Verses of Uplift* in *The Minor Anthologies of the Pāli Canon*, Part II, trans. F.L. Woodward, M.A. (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 98.

²A *gatha* of the Soto Zen tradition, translated by Rev. Hubert Nearman

Overcoming the Impediments to Spiritual Development Through Mindfulness

Matthew Flickstein

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After we have meditated, cultivated our mindfulness, and sustained a determined effort in our practice for a period of time, we may begin to feel dissatisfied with our level of spiritual development. We may have reached a plateau in our spiritual understanding, and feel unable to make further progress. There are many reasons why our spiritual growth might be blocked. In this article we will discuss nine of the most common possibilities. We will also explore how the further development of mindfulness can help generate the insights necessary to eliminate these impediments to our spiritual understanding.

NUMBER 1: UNRESOLVED PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES

To develop spiritual clarity, we need to observe how the mind ceaselessly changes according to specific causes and conditions. If we have unresolved psychological issues, we tend to identify with the mind's story line and are unable to observe how the mind truly functions as an ongoing process. The four primary psychological issues that tend to keep us locked into the content level of the mind are anger or resentment, unresolved grief, communication incompletions, and fear of the future.

Anger or resentment over what has happened to us in the past is one of the most serious impediments to spiritual growth. We may feel justified in feeling resentment because of abuses we have experienced, but our anger only creates inner turmoil, unskillful behaviors, and future circumstances that will prevent further spiritual development.

When we have unresolved grief, we continue to react emotionally whenever the memory of a particular loss enters our mind. We may still be grieving over the loss of a person, a possession, or a specific opportunity. Our unresolved grief keeps us focused on the past and unable to see things as they are in the present moment.

A communication incompleteness is the lack of honesty or full disclosure in our significant relationships. It prevents a deep sense of trust and intimacy from arising and creates agitation and confusion

in our minds.

Fear of the future is actually not the fear of the unknown, but the fear of the loss of the known. This fear causes the mind to consider time and again how our decisions may be putting at risk those things to which we are attached. It prevents us from being open to the truth that unfolds in each new moment.

NUMBER 2: ATTEMPTING TO RESOLVE OUR PROBLEMS WHILE MEDITATING

The process of insight meditation involves watching the body, feelings, mind and mental objects rise and fall from moment to moment in order to realize their impermanent and selfless nature. If we attempt to solve our problems while sitting for meditation, we will not recognize the true characteristics of experience. We will only generate psychological insights, which may be personally valuable, but will not help us to achieve spiritual clarity.

NUMBER 3: NOT LIVING AN ETHICAL LIFE

If we are not adhering to the precepts and are engaging in unskillful actions, speech, or thoughts, we may experience guilt or remorse when we meditate. These unpleasant feelings will prevent us from concentrating our mind, and will act as an impediment to the arising of insight.

NUMBER 4: DENIAL OF DEATH

If we ask ourselves the question, “Will I die?,” the answer will certainly be, “Yes.” However, the subtext of that answer is typically, “But not for a while yet!” An important consequence of not acknowledging the potential immediacy of our death is to postpone spending extended periods of time on retreats where circumstances are most conducive to deep practice and spiritual growth.

NUMBER 5: FOCUSING OUR ATTENTION ON INTELLECTUAL LEARNING

No matter how much reading we do, if we have not personally experienced what we have read, the information gained will not lead to liberation. Beliefs will never provide a true sense of security when circumstances become difficult due to unexpected and unwelcome changes. In the same way that reading a menu will not satiate our hunger, reading spiritual material will not quench our spiritual longing.

NUMBER 6: INSUFFICIENT CONCENTRATION

One of the main purposes of concentration is to suppress the mental hindrances. Suppressing the hindrances enables the mind to focus on its own processes, which leads to the recognition of the true nature of experience. If we have not reached a sufficient level of concentration—in which the mind is stable and steady—our spiritual development will be thwarted.

NUMBER 7: ACTIVELY SEARCHING FOR INSIGHTS

A significant impediment to spiritual clarity is believing that the mind can intentionally generate insights if it tries hard enough to do so. It is the mind that wants to know something beyond its conceptual grasp that acts as the barrier to seeing things more clearly. Whether the mind is attempting to recreate a prior spiritual experience, or trying to achieve an experience it has heard about, the activity of the mind becomes self-defeating. As we simply develop the causes and conditions that will remove the obscurations to wisdom, insights will spontaneously arise on their own.

NUMBER 8: NOT DEVELOPING A RELATIONSHIP WITH A TEACHER

The Buddha became enlightened through his own efforts at a time when the path to spiritual liberation had been forgotten. Self-enlightenment is one of the unique attributes of a Buddha. The rest of us need the guidance of a teacher to illuminate the path and to keep us moving in the right direction. A teacher can also serve as a model of inner-peace, selfless action, and boundless love—showing what is possible for us to attain.

NUMBER 9: OUR INTENTION IS NOT FOCUSED ON SPIRITUAL LIBERATION

There are many reasons why individuals begin to meditate: to manage their stress, to satisfy their intellectual curiosity, to open their hearts, and so forth. It is important to realize that our intentions are directly related to the level and quality of our achievements. Therefore, focusing our efforts on the ultimate goal of liberation is essential to its attainment. It is also important to remember that the possibility of spiritual liberation is present at each moment and that nothing is actually “gained” when it is achieved.

Working with these impediments to spiritual development can be compared to the three ways in which one can deal with a poisonous plant. We can put a rock on the plant so it is ground back into the soil; we can pull the plant out by its roots; or we can use the poisonous plant homeopathically for a cure.

Similarly, we can suppress these impediments grinding them back into the mind, but that will still leave their roots in tact. We can try to eliminate them from our mind by looking for their causes, but that will only lead to intermittent successes. Finally, we can take advantage of these impediments by learning to observe them with mindfulness, which will lead to profound insights and deep equanimity.

Mindfulness is a form of attention that has the capacity to clearly observe what is happening to us and within us during each moment of experience. It is referred to as “bare attention” since it observes whatever is occurring—bare of judgment, decision, and commentary. In other words, mindfulness is the direct observation of our experience without any of the distortions that normally arise from our conditioned cognitive processes.

When we observe our experience “bare of judgment,” we avoid making conclusions as to the rightness or wrongness of what we are experiencing. Whenever we formulate these types of conclusions, we actually perpetuate the very patterns of mind or behaviors that we wish to eliminate. When we judge our mental processes or actions to be good, positive, or fortunate, we tend to grasp at them.

This reinforces the impediments to our spiritual growth. If we judge the contents of our mind or our actions to be bad, negative, or unfortunate, we tend to resist them. Although these patterns will be suppressed, they will persist on an unconscious basis. Every time we judge our mental processes or behaviors, we actually invest them with additional power to influence us. It is important, however, to cultivate discernment. This type of wise discrimination acknowledges the cause and effect relationship between our thoughts and actions. It also examines how our mental processes and activities directly impact the quality of our lives.

Paying attention “bare of decision” means that during the time that we are observing our patterns of mind or behaviors, we avoid planning or determining any future courses of action. If we become identified with the planning or creative process, we will miss the opportunity to observe the true nature of our impediments to spiritual growth, which can only be seen in the here and now.

Keeping our attention “bare of mental commentary” means that we observe what is taking place in our minds without engaging in an internal dialogue. The mind has an opinion on everything, and we typically listen to the mind’s comments because we believe that the conceptual mind may have something profound to say. However, the thoughts that emerge from our established ways of thinking will not generate insights necessary to eliminate the patterns of mind that act as impediments to our spiritual growth.

By cultivating “bare attention,” the basis for the development of mindfulness, true insights regarding the nature of spiritual impediments will arise. On one level we will recognize how our destructive patterns are unconsciously maintained. More subtly, we will realize how these patterns are impermanent and how they arise due to specific causes and conditions. This later realization automatically begins the process of deconstructing the impediments and eliminating their power to influence our spiritual growth.

As we continue to travel the “Path of Purification,” subtler obstacles may arise. However, with the development of mindfulness, the guidance of the Buddha’s teachings, and the support of good friends, every obstacle can ultimately be surmounted.

The Buddha's Sacred Journey

Joseph Goldstein

Joseph Goldstein first became interested in Buddhism as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand in 1965. He has been leading insight and loving-kindness meditation retreats worldwide since 1974. He is a cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, where he is one of the resident guiding teachers. He is the author of *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom*, *The Experience of Insight*, and co-author of *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom* and *Insight Meditation: A Correspondence Course*. His newest book is *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism*.

When we explore the story of the Buddha's sacred journey, there are many levels of meaning and significance that we can consider. The first is perhaps the easiest and most familiar: that is, the Buddha as an historical individual. All the different traditions of Buddhism recount in similar ways the details of his life. He was born in the fifth century B.C. as Siddhartha Gotama, a prince in northern India. His mother died soon after his birth and he was raised by his Aunt, Mahāpajapati, who later became instrumental in the formation of the order of nuns. He grew up surrounded by luxuries and was well schooled in the arts and sciences of those times. He married at age twenty-nine, and soon had a son of his own. Many of the later teaching discourses tell stories of his life as this young prince.

On another level, we can also understand the Buddha as a universal archetype of the fully awakened mind; indeed, as the potential of that enlightenment in us all. When we understand the Buddha as a human archetype of awakening, we see his life not simply as the difficulties, strivings and realizations of a particular individual, but we also see all the circumstances of his life as the unfolding of a great mythological journey, a sacred journey. Mythological here does not mean unreal, illusory, or imaginary; rather, the power of myth lies in its ability to bring individual experience into a universal context.

The third meaning of the Buddha is that of ultimate reality. There's a story of one monk who was so entranced by the Buddha's physical form that he would always sit up close, gazing at his physical beauty. After some time the Buddha reprimanded him saying, "You could look at this body, this form, for a hundred years, and you would not see the Buddha. Those who see, who understand the Truth see the Buddha." This has tremendous significance for us, because when we realize that those who see the Dharma (Dharma is a Sanskrit word meaning truth, the way things are) see the Buddha, we realize that Buddha-mind, the Buddha, is not outside of ourselves. It is the ultimate nature of our own minds, expressing itself as wisdom, love and compassion. That being so, where do we look for the Buddha, except within?

When we understand the Buddha on all of these levels—historical person, universal archetype, and the ultimate reality of experience—we can see the journey of his life revealing the same aspirations that are in our own lives 2,500 years later. This helps us put our own life experience, the things

that we go through, in a much larger and profound context. When we're connecting the Buddha's journey with our own, we begin to find a deeper meaning in our own lives, in our own choices.

When we contemplate the lives or the experiences of some of the world's great explorers in any field—whether it's the explorers of uncharted territories on the earth, or explorers in science and the arts—we see that what makes somebody an explorer is that they are at the forward edge of what is known, the forward edge of discovery.

In the US there was a famous journey called the Lewis and Clark expedition, which was an early expedition of white Americans traveling across the continent to the Pacific. The material from their journals reveals them enduring all manner of hardships, crossing more than a thousand miles of the Great Plains and trying to traverse the Rocky Mountains in winter, not really knowing where they were going. At different times various Native American individuals and tribes gave them invaluable guidance and support. We often appreciate the excitement of a journey of discovery, but forget about the countless difficulties, frustrations, problems, annoyances, and inconveniences that are all an integral part of that journey.

Meditation practice, which is the journey of inner exploration, is just the same. The ups and downs that we face in practice, the countless times of feeling good and then feeling bad or being concentrated and then restless—this endless cycle of experience—all of it is part of a much bigger unfolding. In meditation we explore the frontier of our minds.

Joseph Campbell, a great student and scholar of world myths and cultures, described the journey of exploration and awakening in a very insightful way. He described this sacred mythology in a book called *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and he used the Buddha's life as the example of this unfolding journey. He interweaves the particular experiences of the Buddha's life with the universal principles that they embody.

According to Campbell, the first stage of the journey of awakening is known as "The Call to Destiny," or in the Buddhist tradition, "The Call to Awakening." This arises when something happens in our lives that shakes us up; something happens that makes us question our conventional view, our conventional understanding of ourselves. When we realize that ordinary understanding, the worldly understanding of things, doesn't finally satisfy us. The Call to Awakening makes us question what our lives are about. The conventional understanding of ourselves is largely contained in one verb, and that is the verb "to have." The whole world is understood through this verb. I *have* possessions, I *have* a body, I *have* relationships, I *have* a mind, and our language keeps supporting this view that somehow we are living in the reality of having things.

Erik Fromm, the famous psychologist, said we live with the understanding that "I am what I have." When we look at our experience and our ordinary way of viewing things, we find this to be true. But there's a problem with this, a very serious problem: whatever we have we will lose. Anything that is held in the world of having will be lost—whether it's external possessions, relationships, or even things we most identify with, such as our bodies and minds. Consequently, in this world of having, there is always an underlying sense of unease, anxiety, or incompleteness.

In the early life of the Bodhisattva, as the Buddha was called until his enlightenment, this world of having was very strong. He was born as a prince into a loving family, surrounded by sense pleasures. He mastered all kinds of worldly knowledge and worldly skills. He had a wonderful relationship; he

had everything his world could provide. In this journey that Joseph Campbell describes, the Bodhisattva's father, the king, embodied all of the worldly values of having. His father wanted the Bodhisattva to continue in the family tradition—to grow up, keep having things and, one day, and become king. These are the same values that are so prevalent in our own society. How much of our own culture, our own understanding, is about having?

For Prince Siddhartha, the Call to Awakening arose when he confronted some basic facts of life. He began to deeply question the values of “having” when he came face to face with what are called the Heavenly Messengers. What are these Heavenly Messengers? They are the realities of disease, of old age, and of death. It is said that the Bodhisattva reflected, “Why should I, being subject to decay and death, also seek that which is subject to decay and death?” It's a very basic question confronting us all. Why should we, being subject to decay and death, endlessly go on seeking endlessly those things that are also going to disappear, to change, to decay and die? Why do we keep staying on this wheel of becoming? It raises questions for each one of us, just as it did for him: What is the real value in our lives? What is truly of value?

There are three great contemplations on death that can help awaken in us this Call to Awakening. The call comes when we make the transition from an intellectual appreciation of the Dharma (where we're thinking, even believing, that “yes this Dharma is good”) to that sense of a compelling, spiritual urgency.

The first contemplation is reflecting on the inevitability of death. It's so amazing how the mind can know and understand that everybody dies, and yet how rarely we internalize that understanding and know deeply and fully that this will also happen to us. It's always *other* people who seem to be dying. You'd think we'd get it! But it takes reflecting on and really seeing it that brings it home.

The second reflection is on the uncertainty of time of death. Even if we somehow have made it real for ourselves, it's certainly not tonight, and no, probably not tomorrow. But in fact, we don't know when death will come. Can we imagine ourselves, right now, on our deathbeds? What would that be like? Are we ready now to face the inevitable end of life?

The third reflection that awakens spiritual ardency, that supports or helps arouse this Call to Awakening, is the understanding that at the time of death it is only our Dharma practice, only the cultivation of our hearts and minds, that will be of any value to us. Anything else we've done in terms of accumulation or accomplishment or gain or fame is meaningless at the time of death. What's of value are the qualities of understanding, of wisdom, of compassion, of love, of equanimity. Because these are the things that will be of value at the time of death, we need to arouse a sense of urgency to practice them now.

The energy and effort of countless lifetimes of practice gave rise to these questions in the Bodhisattva: What is the nature of birth and death? What is it that's born? What is it that dies? What are we doing with our lives? What choices are we making? It's the questioning of what this whole process of life is about. Although many of us have these passing thoughts, they often get lost as we reimmerse ourselves in the busyness of our lives.

What is the nature of birth and death? What is it that is not born and so never dies? The Call to Awakening—that stage of the journey that awakens us to other possibilities and brings us to read and study about the spiritual path—can happen in many ways. I remember when I was a freshman in col-

lege, burning with the question of whether God exists. At a certain point it was such a compelling and crucial issue for me that I decided to give myself a week to figure it out: "In one week I'm going to know!" Unfortunately, now I can't remember how I resolved that great question.

After college, I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand, and this Call to Awakening kept percolating in my mind. I remember seeking, with a kind of desperation, to know who was on the inside of this person going through all the motions of life. I had that strong urge to find out, to connect. It's helpful for each one of us to reflect on those times in our lives, when we begin to question our ordinary way of understanding things, when we begin to explore new dimensions and perspectives.

The second stage of the journey after the Call to Awakening is called the Great Renunciation. In order to awaken to the hidden possibilities of life, to the hidden possibilities of understanding, we need to be willing to give up our conventional ways of viewing things. Things are often not what they seem to be, and if we stay satisfied with superficial perceptions, we often end up living in ignorance and illusion. There's a recent and striking example of this. Scientists were taking pictures of space in an area around the Big Dipper with the new Hubble Telescope. It was in a part of the sky where, previous to this study, they didn't think much was to be found. Then they looked through this powerful telescope and discovered billions of new galaxies. Do you think there's a possibility we might be missing other things as well?

We find the same situation when we turn our attention to the microscopic level. There is a book on new discoveries in quantum physics that says, "In very round terms, the quantum world operates on a scale as much smaller than a sugar cube as a sugar cube is compared with the entire observable universe." Similarly, when we apply the power of an open mind and keen investigation to consciousness itself, vast and hitherto unknown realities are revealed.

The Great Renunciation is really the renunciation of the paradigm of having as being our deepest value. This allows us to then turn our attention much more to the nature of the mind itself—to the quality of being, rather than to that of having. We begin to see that the quality of our being has much more to do with our happiness than anything we might have or possess. And most importantly, we begin to see that how we are is up to us. There's actually this potential to open the heart and awaken the mind.

Renunciation is the ability to let go of those things that no longer serve us. It's not only about giving up external things: Can we also let go of the habits of endless discursive thought, or of the various afflictive emotions? As long as we don't renounce that "having," we get lost, we get immersed in various mind worlds. Can we actually renounce this habit of *having*, of claiming everything as a possession, as I and mine, and settle back, seeing all experience simply arising and passing? Renouncing discursive thoughts. Renouncing our distractions. The Great Renunciation is the second stage of the journey.

The Bodhisattva left the palace, left his family, left his interests, left the busyness of the world, and went off to study with different teachers. He studied all the *jhanas*, all the levels of absorption. Unsatisfied with these levels of concentration, he then did six years of very austere ascetic practices in an effort to attain liberation. But after all that time he saw that self-mortification was not the way to enlightenment. He gave up those practices, took some nourishment for the body, and prepared himself for the third great event in the sacred journey.

That third event is called the Great Struggle. The Bodhisattva sat under the Bodhi tree confronting Mara, who is the personification of all the forces of illusion, of ignorance. Joseph Campbell describes this in powerful mytho-poetic language:

The Bodhisattva placed himself with a firm resolve beneath the Bodhi tree, and straightaway was approached by Kama-Mara, the god of desire and death. The dangerous god appeared mounted on an elephant carrying weapons in his thousand hands. He was surrounded by his army, which extended twelve leagues before him, twelve to the right, twelve to the left, and to the rear as far as the confines of the world; it was nine leagues high. The protecting deities of the universe took flight, but the Future Buddha remained unmoved beneath the tree. And the god then assailed him, seeking to break his concentration.

Whirlwind, rocks, thunder and flame, smoking weapons with keen edges, burning coals, hot ashes, boiling mud, blistering sands and fourfold darkness Mara hurled against the Bodhisattva. But the missiles were all transformed into celestial flowers and ointments by the power of Gautama's ten perfections. Mara then deployed the force of desire and lust, but the mind of the Great Being was not distracted. The god finally challenged the Bodhisattva's right to be sitting where he was, and he flung his razor-sharp discus angrily and bid the towering host of the army to let fly at the Bodhisattva with mountain crags. But the Future Buddha only moved his hand to touch the ground with his fingertips and thus bid the goddess Earth bear witness to his right to be sitting where he was. The goddess Earth did so with a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand roars, so that the elephant of Mara fell upon its knees in obeisance to the Future Buddha. The army was immediately dispersed, and the gods of all the worlds scattered garlands.

Every time we sit in meditation practice, it's as if we are sitting under the Bodhi tree. As we sit with desire and fear, doubt and restlessness, anger and hatred and boredom, we are confronting all the same forces of Mara, of illusion, as the Bodhisattva encountered under the Bodhi tree. It's the same Great Struggle. What's so important to realize is that our own struggles have a much greater meaning than just the immediate experience of them; they are part of the much larger unfolding of the sacred journey of awakening.

Thomas Merton wrote something quite apt and beautiful about the nature of this Great Struggle, this stage of the journey. Merton wrote that "prayer and love are learned in the hour when prayer becomes impossible and the heart has turned to stone." This is true of meditation as well. This is really the meaning of courageous effort. It's that willingness to open to it all, to explore all the hidden and difficult aspects of our experience.

Care is needed. Effort, when it is wrongly understood, can get confused with expectation, with ambition, with tension, and maybe with pride or discouragement. But the quality of effort can be understood very differently: that is, effort as a "courageous heart." It's that heart or that courage that doesn't give up in the face of difficulties. Sometimes we may need to retreat a bit to find balance, but courage in practice is that quality of heart that is always seeking to understand. At this stage of the journey, the Great Struggle, the question for us is whether we can generate this courage, this courageous heart—not from some external model of how we should be, but from within ourselves, from our own interest, from our own willingness, from our own passion to understand? It's this courage that allows us to keep playing at the edge of exploration, the edge of discovery, even when it's uncomfort-

able, when we don't want to be there. When we're at the edge of what is known, that's when new possibilities open up.

One of my teachers was a woman named Dipa Ma, a person who embodied this quality of effort and courage. She was a tiny woman with a huge heart. One of the last times I saw her she turned to me and said, "I think you should sit for two days." She didn't mean that I should do a two-day retreat; she meant sit down and get up two days later. She herself had often done that, and one time she sat for four days! When she suggested this to me, "Sit for two days," I just started laughing because it seemed totally beyond what I could even imagine. She turned to me and said, "Don't be lazy." I never did do that two-day sit, but it was amazing to even consider that possibility: the possibility of not being confined by our limitations.

The last stage of the sacred journey is called the Great Awakening. For the Bodhisattva on the eve of his enlightenment, during the three watches of the night, three different kinds of openings occurred. In the first watch, he saw all of his innumerable past lives and the insubstantiality of them—the endlessness of being born in a particular situation, having all kinds of experiences, growing old, dying and being reborn, over and over again.

Just think how our perspective would change if we had that vision of seeing the endlessness of life and death and rebirth. Even if we can't see into our past lives, we can get a taste of that perspective when we look at our past experiences in this life. All the things we have seen, and felt, and thought: Where are they now? However intense or wonderful or difficult they might have been, they have all passed away. This flow of change is happening moment to moment. There is nothing we can hold on to.

During the second watch of the night, it is said that he penetrated or opened to the understanding of the law of karma. He saw the destinies of beings—that because of certain actions, beings are reborn either in various happy planes of existence or in planes of suffering. And compassion arose in the Bodhisattva from seeing everyone's desire to be happy and yet, out of ignorance, often doing the very things that cause suffering. Can we see this in our own lives as well?

It is said that in the third watch of the night, he opened to the Four Noble Truths: the precise understanding of suffering, its cause, the experience of freedom, and the way to that freedom. At daybreak, just as the morning star appeared, the Bodhisattva awakened to full enlightenment. Imagine the moment: According to the teachings, his first words were:

I traveled through the rounds of countless births, seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Sorrowful is birth again and again and again. O house builder you have now been seen. You shall build no house again. Your rafters [the defilements] have been broken. Your ridgepole [ignorance] shattered. Mind has attained to unconditioned freedom, achieved is the end of craving.

After spending seven weeks in the vicinity of the Bodhi Tree, enjoying the fruit of his great attainment, he traveled to the Deer Park in Sarnath, a small village outside of Benares—where he met the five ascetics with whom he had followed the various ascetic practices. He gave the first teaching after his awakening to them. This first discourse is called "Setting the Wheel of the Dharma in Motion." In it, he taught about the Four Noble Truths—thus laying the foundation for the remaining forty-five years of his life and teaching.

In quite a short time, he had sixty enlightened disciples, Arhants who had fully realized the

Dharma. He said to these sixty disciples, “Go forth, O Bhikkhus, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, the benefit, the happiness of people and devas. Teach the Dharma, excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end. Proclaim the noble life all together perfect and pure. Work for the good of others, you who have done your duty.”

We each start the spiritual path on our individual journey, our individual Call to Awakening. But as the practice unfolds, there is a shift of understanding, when we realize that we are not practicing for ourselves alone. This is the arising of what is called *bodhicitta*. Bodhicitta is the motivation and aspiration that our life and our Dharma journey be for the benefit, for the awakening, of all beings. Our practice then comes out of compassion—compassion for our own suffering and compassion for the suffering of others. We begin to do our practice out of a feeling of interconnectedness with other beings. Bodhicitta can become a very great inspiration for our own efforts. In every moment that we free ourselves from the prison of self, from the fetters of attachment and craving, from this feeling of I and mine, in every moment—even if it’s just for a moment—that we can do this, the very nature of awareness manifests its natural love and compassion.

The Call to Awakening rouses us from the sleep of conventional understanding. The Great Renunciation helps us to go beyond our habitual view of things. The Great Struggle connects us with that courageous heart that is actually willing to face ourselves—to face the deepest tendencies and conditioning in our minds. And the Great Awakening brings to perfection the qualities of wisdom and compassion. This is the great Sacred Journey of the Buddha’s Enlightenment, and it is this same journey that can become our own.

The last words of the Buddha sum up all his lifetimes of practice and the forty-five years of teaching after his enlightenment. He is about to die. These are the words that he leaves to us at the very end of his life: “With the light of perfect wisdom, illuminate the darkness of ignorance. Subject to decay are all conditioned things. Practice with heedfulness.” These are words of great compassion.

The Dhamma In All Times

Ven. Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano

Ven. Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano was born in Louisville, Kentucky. In 1987 he was ordained as a monk in Bangkok at Wat Mahādhatu. He has also spent time in Sri Lanka and was associated with Bhante Gunaratana while living near the Washington Buddhist Vihāra. He is the author of several books, including *Landscapes of Wonder* and *Longing for Certainty*.

This is an extraordinary moment—or so it seems to us—when we conscious beings look outward with a speculative eye toward all the bright jumble of the modern world and find it breathtakingly unique and important. How could it be otherwise, since we live now and naturally regard what surrounds us as especially significant? The present moment that we in our generation experience appears full of spectacular opportunity and possibility, so much so that it is difficult for us to realize our actual place as individuals amid the sufferings of birth and death. We easily believe that people in the past lived in social or cultural environments that shaped and limited their understanding of life, but we assume that we, existing in the self-evidently splendid present, are uniquely independent and not at all conditioned by our own environment.

Around us the engines of technology work impressively, supplying us with a profusion of goods, transportation, and entertainment. We effortlessly exchange messages around the world. We admire our society's increasing harvests of knowledge, or information, at any rate, and suppose that some bounty is contained therein for us. Our ideas about the proper conduct of life, or the ideas of our generation to which we have assented, seem so right, so admirable, so irrefutable, that we wonder pityingly how humanity could ever have missed them. It would seem that we need only take a few small measures to set things right in those last troublesome recesses of our minds.

Those few measures, however, so eagerly sought in youth, become more problematic as time passes and failure inexplicably frustrates us. The shadowed regions of life remain shadowed, or grow even darker, until we find ourselves at last searching, definitely or indefinitely, for some kind of spiritual understanding that surpasses the merely temporal. If, then, we have the happiness to discover the teaching of the Buddha, we obtain the means by which to get out of confusion and darkness; but unless we abandon our careless trust in sheer modernity as the standard of truth, we are likely to misunderstand even that which could be of most help to us.

Buddhism has become popular in recent years because its doctrines are so clear and reasonable and independent of purely cultural circumstances and because many people of our day have become disenchanted with materialism and yearn for a rational system of ideas that can deal intelligently with contemporary problems and still give deep purpose and dignity to human life. The keenness, purity, and humanity in the teaching of the Buddha have brought many of us to call ourselves his followers, to seek to practice Buddhism as our chosen religion, and even to try to establish Buddhism in the West

as an indigenous faith. To this extent we have reason to be glad. But much more understanding and effort are necessary for us to live rightly as Buddhists, particularly because we have not necessarily abandoned our fascination with what is current or the presumption of our superiority to the past.

It is useful to note, to begin with, that the historical Buddha did not teach a doctrine that he had devised or invented himself; rather he claimed to have rediscovered the same timeless dhamma discovered by other fully enlightened Buddhas long before him. There was, he saw, a path that led straight to the overcoming of suffering and the attainment of ultimate deliverance, and his mission during his teaching career was to set people on that path and to encourage them to reach the end. Even at that point in history when he first began to teach, the Dhamma was really novel only in the sense that it had long been lost and was now being proclaimed again. It was, as the Buddha revealed it to his delighted disciples, the same beautiful, timeless, unimprovable essence of truth it had always been.

Nowadays the Dhamma seems fresh to us too, because we, like the Buddha's first disciples, meet it in our own experience and feel its exhilarating power. It is not any kind of pale and tentative theory but a specific, vigorous teaching of action—startlingly original in its description of the cause and the treatment of the suffering that we have never been able to understand or eliminate. It may be that we have not considered deeply why this should be so, why the Dhamma quickly stimulates or inspires us, but surely all of us who have spent some time investigating and testing the Dhamma sense both its timeless majesty and its present power.

In the Buddha, who expounded the Dhamma to the world, we find a teacher who gives us hope, by showing us that we can develop our minds sufficiently to overcome our problems. He treats us as intelligent beings capable of bearing hard truths and working through them to a happier life and, beyond that, to complete emancipation from all suffering. He does not tell us that our suffering is illusory or sure to disappear by itself. He neither scorns us nor flatters us but rather with calm good will, lays out a picture of how the universe works and explains how we have gotten ourselves into trouble and how, by paying attention to the operative laws of the universe, we can get ourselves to safety.

The Buddha's view of the realm of birth and death is thoroughly realistic, not influenced by either desire or despair. All of us have probably been hoping, against painful experience, that some way could be found to see this troubling universe at last as good, right, comfortable, and satisfactory. This is partly what we have sought in the theories and philosophies we have entertained over the years. But the Buddha, we discover, is not at all hesitant about facing sorrowful truths; he does not disguise reality for the sake of our temporary and illusory comfort. The Buddha is, however, supremely compassionate, and that compassion of his underlies his description of the endlessly changing universe in which living beings wander on and on through many degrees of suffering.

Before we can gain any kind of real, abiding peace, we need to know the real character of the world and the real forces that move all living beings, including us. This plain knowledge is what the Buddha gives us. He does not just tell us that we should behave in such-and-such a way and all will be well. Rather, he explains the nature of the cycle of birth and death so that we will be inspired to undertake wholesome action to help ourselves. He explains how particular causes bring about both the good and the bad situations that we experience in this present life and in all lives. He wants his followers not only to behave as he advises but also to understand the truths of existence that make it necessary for them to behave that way.

The Buddha's efforts to make his followers understand—illustrated in the stories in the Pāli Canon—are part of the reason that we feel enthusiastic when we first study his teaching. In effect he bids us to stand up and use our human strength; and even though we might not at first grasp the reasons behind his method, this challenging call is what we respond to instinctively. We have suffered enough failures and misfortunes to make us think we can only blunder on through ever-failing pleasures and wait for somebody to solve our problems; yet the Buddha uses his eloquence to let us see how we can rightly perceive and rightly act in our own behalf. He invites us, as it were, to study the fundamental activities of the mind, as if, amazingly, he thought we were capable of that. Naturally we feel exhilaration at being trusted so far.

One of the most basic of the Buddha's teachings about the causes of our fortune and misfortune is simply that there *are* causes; that is, that this tremendous universe in all its material and mental aspects is conditioned and moved by causes. Events do not happen spontaneously and irrationally; rather they are brought about by definite causes and contributing factors that may be of great complexity but yet are entirely natural and consistent in their effects. The processes operating in the universe can be examined and learned from. The Buddha points out these processes and invites us to learn. When, with the Buddha's aid, we begin to perceive amid the multitude of sensations certain regular, intelligible patterns, we can begin to understand that our lives, too, are not without meaning.

Since we can repeatedly notice effects following from causes we can, with sufficient training and effort, predict generally what will happen when certain sorts of causes are in place. The Buddha tells us what will happen to us if we commit certain sorts of actions, but he also urges us to observe, to consider, and to acquire insight for ourselves. If, then, convinced by the Buddha's logic and our own observation, we start to manage our behavior according to wholesome principles of dhamma, we will feel the happiness of preparing our own good fortune, even if only in a small way at first.

Through his teaching on causality, the Buddha helps us to break down one great fear: that of the randomness, lack of meaning, and irrationality of our existence. The world remains, certainly, a mass of changing phenomena; yet within the scope of our own experience we begin to notice the consistency and promise of cause and effect, and that is an encouraging, exhilarating step.

But if the universe is *not* just random and spontaneous, and instead is governed by causality, by the interrelationship of causes and effects, does that mean we are set on a mechanical, helpless march, determined by irresistible conditions? This fear, too, the Buddha allays. Conditions do indeed produce our fortune, but they are not entirely extraneous and alien and unchangeable. Even though many unwanted circumstances may press upon us now, we remain free to produce new volitional action, and that action, which we perform by our own will, naturally will influence the development of our fortune in this life and in the future.

The Dhamma taught by the Buddha is thus, even in its elemental principles, a doctrine of reason and hope. Because our lives are subject to processes of cause and effect, reasoning is possible, and we can indeed make sense of what happens to us. And because our lives are not rigidly fated and determined but instead are dynamically molded by our volitional action, we can realistically be optimistic and hope for increasing happiness.

The Buddha's teachings on what to do and what not to do are based on his understanding of cause and effect. In order to avoid misfortune, pain, and suffering it is necessary to stop producing their nat-

ural, essential causes. In order to realize peace of mind, insight, and good fortune it is necessary to produce, gather up, and reinforce the natural, essential causes of those happy states. There is nothing irrational about it.

Once we have learned the basics of the Dhamma and acquired at least a measure of faith in it, we might think that our progress will henceforth be swift and without trouble. This, however, rarely happens. As we study and practice the original teaching we learn valuable truths, but this learning settles on top of a great mass of personal opinions, habits, cherished beliefs, and predilections of all kinds. Moreover, we are people of a particular time and culture; we have common customs and assumptions and expectations which do not necessarily agree with the teaching of the Buddha. In our early enthusiasm, perhaps we assume a little too readily that this wondrous way to peace and liberation will naturally harmonize with all our long-standing views and tastes.

Serious study and attention will, however, reveal certain conflicts. The modern society we have been accustomed to—and which in many respects we enjoy—effectively spreads the subtle notion that life is entirely at our disposal, that we can with no ill consequences impose on nature whatever vision of morality, goodness, and truth we like: it suffices simply if we determine it so. This notion conflicts with the Buddhist view that absolute processes of cause and effect condition the universe, that good and evil are entirely distinct, and that no way of looking at the world can alter its underlying laws or assure us of happiness.

Modern society, moreover, sees nothing wrong with an eager, single-minded pursuit of sensual pleasure. Indeed, it smiles on extravagance, luxury, and frivolous enjoyment as the natural goals of the healthy modern person. Yet to the Buddha the endless pursuit of sensual pleasure is foolish, degrading, and painful.

Modern society adopts convenience, expediency, and immediate self-interest as guidelines to action, whereas the Buddha urges timeless standards of discipline, moral striving, honor, and self-restraint. Society is intensely concerned with something called happiness but sees that state as attainable through the unhindered exercise of desire, not as the result of any definite program of faith and spiritual discipline. There is little appetite for recognizing suffering as a pervasive fact of reality that must be dealt with on a fundamental level in order to achieve a meaningful state of happiness.

To the extent that modern society regards a religious life at all, it is only as a non-demanding, soothing accompaniment to the main business of finding satisfaction and pleasure in the present moment; and the idea of voluntarily giving up anything for the sake of future well-being is seldom considered. The Buddha, on the other hand, looks farther than the enjoyment of the present moment, toward long-standing peace, toward a life of depth, dignity, and serenity; and on that account he recommends an actual renunciation of obstructive and degrading things.

All of us have probably absorbed some of the common views of our time, and thus when we are faced with the Buddha's quite contrasting views, we might try, at first, to treat the Dhamma just as an inspiring collection of ideas, as something exalted to contemplate, without necessarily letting it affect our habits very much. What we aspire to or imagine might remain strangely separate from how we actually behave. No doubt we would like to possess tranquility, understanding, and even enlightenment, but whether we will set about building up the causes for those blessings, and surmounting the intervening obstructions, is quite uncertain. Sooner or later we sense the conflict between the way of

the Buddha and the fashions of our own time, and then we must decide to which we want to give our allegiance.

There is no question that we in this whirling, intricate modern world live in styles far different from those even of recent centuries, to say nothing of the Buddha's historical period so long ago. When we quietly examine our minds, however, we cannot establish that we as mortal individuals possess any more intelligence or moral certainty or philosophical vision than people of past generations. The brilliant noise of our time is just noise; and what is current and superficial is soon past—of no consequence and no use in the search for peace. All the spectacle of the modern world drops away helplessly as we approach in solitude the immensities of loss, pain, and death; and it is then that the Dhamma appears to us most sustaining.

For a long time, perhaps, we have cherished the wish to find deliverance from suffering without actually abandoning any of our favorite opinions—only adapting them a little, if need be. When we explore the teaching of the Buddha and begin to realize how it contrasts with the careless drifting of modern society, we might still hope we can somehow compromise or else gracefully look past those aspects of the Dhamma that trouble us. But to the extent we try to do that, we leave behind that which gave us our original, true burst of hope and sink slowly back into the service of mere desire. Indeed, the Dhamma requires faith and work and the conquest of fear, but all such good efforts tend naturally, by means of cause and effect, to our benefit. Should we sink to some tolerable level of comfort, or should we rise to something nobler?

If we stand hesitating on the margins of the Dhamma, wondering whether we should commit ourselves to it fully, we might usefully consider what exactly it is we would hope to find in a satisfactory religion or philosophy. Is it simply a clear moral code? Surely not just that. Is it a means of getting along comfortably and without undue worry in daily life? Perhaps in part. Do we want a logical, convincing explanation of birth and old age and death? Most certainly; but still we require more. Do we yearn for a goal beyond the limited and the measurable, for some noble, transcendental purpose? Ah, now we are coming closer to our deepest and truest need.

Apart from its other blessings, perhaps what has most exhilarated us in the Dhamma is the idea of a path that leads not just to temporary, worldly well-being, but to higher purity, even at length to enlightenment, to liberation from all the pains of birth and death. To be traveling on that path, no longer whiling away the indifferent seasons till death comes, to be working, however slowly, for such a goal—that is how we could approach at last the noble life of our imagination and hope.

Although the Dhamma reaches us today as the historical legacy of the Buddha, it has never depended on passing tastes or vogues or any topical ephemera of history, and thus it is never invalidated by the fluctuations of human belief and custom over the centuries. The Dhamma is not theory to add to or revise; it is truth to discover and revere with joy. Civilizations have arisen and dissolved, and generations have thrived and faltered and passed away, and still the Dhamma shines again undiminished whenever any person pays heed to it and learns.

The Buddha understood the working of cause and effect, of action and result, that makes all worlds and fortunes what they are. He understood, too, the ways of the human mind and what will best protect and guide it. All that was of timeless benefit for spiritual liberation he taught. This is why, when we hear his teaching, we get a sense of freshness and transcendental possibility that we never

find in any of the superficial enthusiasms of the haggard, grasping modern world.

Under all the excitement of our time, under all the frenzy of the passing moment, birth and death continue; and suffering, ever-dreaded, throbs through the minds of mortal creatures. Whenever we retire to our rooms to contemplate we find again within us that old ache of ignorance and craving. The air of our own desires stifles us. We weary of the trivial and the transitory. What can relieve us of our sadness better than the Dhamma? Through his words remembered and laid down, the Buddha instructs us and all generations, and when we listen sincerely his meaning gives balm and light in the present world.

Sublime Abiding Places for the Heart

Ven. Ajahn Pasanno

(Adapted from a May 1999 workshop at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery with the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies.)

Ven. Ajahn Pasanno took ordination in Thailand in 1974 with Ven. Phra Khru Nanasirivatana as preceptor. During his first year as a monk he was taken by his teacher to meet Ajahn Chah, with whom he asked to be allowed to stay and train. One of the early residents of Wat Pah Nanachat, Ven. Pasanno became its abbot in his ninth year. Ven. Pasanno moved to California on New Year's Eve of 1997 to share the abbotship of Abhayagiri.

The brahmavihāras are the qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. What is often not sufficiently emphasized is that the brahmavihāras are fundamental to the Buddha's teaching and practice.

The word brahmavihāra is translated in many different ways: divine abidings, divine abodes, sublime attitudes. "Brahma" means great, holy, supreme, sublime, exalted, and divine. "Vihāra" is a place, an abode, and also an attitude of mind. When put together, brahmavihāra means the psychological abiding place of the spiritually developed, of those who are exemplary.

These qualities of the mind and heart are qualities that the Buddha himself cultivated and abided in. In a discourse (A 1.182), the Buddha addresses a brahmin thus: "Herein brahmin, I am dependent on a certain village. Setting mindfulness in front of me, I abide suffusing one quarter of the world with a heart possessed of loving-kindness, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth; the whole world I suffuse with a heart grown great with loving-kindness, free of enmity, and untroubled. Likewise with a heart possessed with compassion, possessed with sympathy and gladness, possessed with equanimity. If I walk up and down, my walking is sublime; my standing, my sitting is sublime. This is what I mean when I say it is a sublime abiding place. So even the Buddha, a completely enlightened being, still directed his attention to these four brahmavihāras.

There is a discourse (M 55) given to Jivaka, the Buddha's physician, where the Buddha addresses the duty of a monk living in dependence on a lay community: "Herein Jivaka, a religious seeker depending on alms lives in a certain village or town. He abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, likewise the second..." and so forth. Namely, it is a duty of such a bhikkhu to live cultivating the brahmavihāras towards the lay community.

Someone cultivating these qualities of the brahmavihāras becomes sensitive to the suffering they create for themselves and for others. They are qualities that develop the heart. By cultivating and abiding in them, one leans towards that which would bring happiness to others and to oneself. This is a fundamental truth. As your heart becomes sensitive and open, you realize that suffering is painful and

you do not want to abide in it.

In another discourse (A 5.294), the Buddha again points to the development of the heart and to the fact that these wholesome qualities create a fullness of the heart. He says: “Monks, those noble disciples, thus freed from covetousness, freed from malevolence, not bewildered, but self-possessed and concentrated, with hearts possessed of amity [also translated as loving-kindness, friendliness, and so on] abide radiating one quarter and then the second, the third and the fourth with loving-kindness; pervading the whole world with a heart immeasurable, grown great, and boundless, free from enmity and untroubled.” After going through the rest of the brahmavihāras, the Buddha says that they come to know that “...formerly this heart of mine was confined, it was not made to grow, but now my heart is boundless, well made to grow. Moreover my heart was limited to a certain range, but now it is not confined, it stays not in that range.” “Well made to grow” is translated from the Pāli word with the same root as *bhāvanā*, meaning meditation or mental development. It means therefore that these qualities enable the development of the mind.

Also as a result of this practice, feelings and thoughts that formerly were limited and constricted become boundless. The results permeate all aspects of one’s life. Similarly, when one does something in a small-minded way, the results are limited. That’s the way it works. The Buddha ends the discourse thus: “The heart’s release by loving-kindness is conducive to non-returning for the monk with insight but who has not yet penetrated to the truth.” The stages of enlightenment are stream-entry, once-returner, non-returner, and arahant. Here the Buddha says that even for those who are still practicing and training, the cultivation of the brahmavihāras is conducive to attaining higher levels of the Path.

THE BRAHMAVIHĀRAS: THEIR NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS

As one continues to practice and study Buddhism, it is very useful to familiarize oneself with some of the Pāli terms. With Buddhism, there is a range of technical terms in Pāli for the qualities of the heart that are helpful to know.

Metta, for instance, is often translated in English as “loving-kindness.” Although two words are used, they still don’t quite get it right, so other words are used, such as amity or friendliness, in an effort to convey its meaning. *Metta* is characterized as being connected to happiness or welfare. Its function is to generate welfare or well being. It is manifested as the removal of annoyance. Its proximate cause is seeing the loveliness of beings, or their good qualities and that which is pleasing in others.

Metta succeeds when it causes ill will to subside and fails when it brings about affection. Using the word *metta* is more useful as it does not have the connotations of affection and attachment that the word loving-kindness has. *Metta* is a selfless wishing of happiness and well-being for others.

The brahmavihāras have so-called near and far enemies: obstructions to their correct development. The near enemy of *metta* is greed or attachment, since happiness and well being could become coveted. That leads to pain and sorrow and could even turn into a defilement if not correctly understood. When we experience something pleasing, we tend to want it, but to really practice *metta* is to wish for the well-being of others and not to try to possess them. The same goes for cultivating *metta* towards oneself, to try not to cling to feelings of joy and well-being generated by the practice of meditation. So, the near enemy to *metta* is when the heart moves too close to something and then it shifts from being

loving-kindness to greed and grasping.

The far enemy of metta is anger. Bearing anger, ill will, or aversion is, of course, inimical to loving-kindness, but it is far enough away to recognize such feelings. Being more insidious, the near enemies are more dangerous. When you are angry, you try to deal with it or try to remove it, but when you are delighting in something, your mind tends not to be clear enough to see that you have come too close to the object. In terms of cultivating loving-kindness, you have to know and be aware of these aspects that are related to and define the quality of metta, and to use them as boundaries to work within.

Karuna is the quality of compassion. It is characterized by the wish to help alleviate suffering in others. Its function resides in the inability to tolerate suffering, so it motivates the desire to help when others suffer. Compassion does not allow complacency in the face of suffering. One is moved into action. Compassion manifests as non-cruelty, and its proximate cause is seeing the pain and helplessness in those disadvantaged or overtaken by some misfortune. Then the heart responds with the wish to help.

The far enemy of compassion is cruelty, and compassion succeeds when it makes such feelings subside. The word cruelty sounds very strong, but the wish to harm, to hurt, to be cruel can come out in many ways. One could be quite cruel in one's speech without in fact beating up someone. Making a cutting comment or put-down is being cruel. When there is compassion, the tendency to lash out subsides.

Compassion fails when it causes sorrow. When faced with suffering, if one is overwhelmed by grief or heaviness of heart, then that is not being compassionate. The quality of compassion is then tainted and not functioning properly. When the heart is drawn towards boundlessness, it is not dragged down by suffering. Instead, it is uplifted, which is important to recognize. The heart could be weighed down by sorrow and grief in response to a tragic event or situation, and one could think that that is being compassionate. But that is not compassion, even though the etymology of the word (in English) is "to suffer with." That is not the way the Buddha defined compassion. If one's mind is affected by grief, then one is not able to respond in a clear and open-hearted manner. This is also important to recognize. That is why sorrow and grief are characterized as the near enemy of compassion. Both responses can spring from seeing suffering in others, but grief has a depressive effect, while compassion has a positive and uplifting quality.

Mudita is translated as "gladness" in the *Divine Abidings* chant, but the term commonly used is sympathetic joy. *Mudita* is characterized as a gladdening at others' success, a delighting in the goodness, and well being of others. Its function is being unenvious; not being jealous of the good fortune of others. Most of us, I think, find loving-kindness and compassion beneficial and good to practice. When it comes to sympathetic joy, we do not think too much about it and tend to dismiss it as either abstruse or unreal. When you start watching your mind, however, you see the pettiness over and over again. The unwillingness to rejoice when someone does something good is seen in the snappy remark or the clever little synopsis of a person or situation, which are a part of our daily interrelations with people, but which tend to be based in negativity or cynicism. Such responses do not come from a place of gladness but very much from a sense of self. One attempts to lift oneself up by putting down someone else.

By cultivating *mudita*, the sense of self is undermined. There is a letting go of the attachment or

fixation to self. This enables us to delight in the well being and good fortune of those around us. A great deal of joy is generated when one is able to tap into this quality. Mudita is manifested as non-aversion, and its proximate cause is seeing the success of others. It succeeds when it causes a sense of coolness of the heart, an acceptance. It fails when it causes merriment, a frivolous delighting in things that agitate the mind, which is not a pure-hearted delight.

Equanimity in Pāli is called *upekkha*. It is characterized as that quality which brings about a sense of neutrality or an evenness of heart towards all beings. Its function is in maintaining a steadiness of mind and not allowing differences—whether physical, intellectual, spiritual, or whatever—to detract or influence our perception of those with whom we come in contact. Its proximate cause is understanding the nature of karma—recognition that our actions bear results which affect us and, in effect, that we create our own future world or experiences.

Another factor to recognize regarding karma is that we are not able to take on the results of others' actions and deeds. Equanimity is therefore understanding how the basic laws of nature work, the recognition that our lives are governed by the way we conduct our lives. Where the suffering of others is concerned, we recognize that by making ourselves suffer, we do not decrease or take away the suffering of others. We can work to alleviate another's suffering or delight in another's good fortune, but there is a point where one has to exercise equanimity, being aware of one's own well being. To try to take on someone else's life and carry it around is not equanimity. Equanimity is not taking on more than what is actually necessary or beneficial.

Equanimity succeeds when it is aware of the movement of the mind—the wanting and not wanting, approval and disapproval—and one is able to establish an evenness of mind, a clarity that sees things for what they are. Equanimity fails when it causes indifference, not caring. Indifference could arise due to a lack of attention or clarity, or to being unwilling to deal with a situation because too much effort is required. Indifference is the near enemy of equanimity. True equanimity does not hinder compassion or action, but rather enhances it by developing the discernment that knows how and when to engage. The far enemy is aversion and greed: the liking and disliking, approving and disapproving that occurs within our minds. Equanimity is the quality not shaken by the movement of the worldly dhammas or the ways of the world.

A FOUNDATION FOR ONE'S PRACTICE

Cultivating the brahmavihāras means bringing these qualities—metta, karuna, mudita, and upekkha—into consciousness. It is like exercising muscles that have not been used. As you develop these qualities, you have to consider whether your mind is getting clearer or more confused. The correct practice of the brahmavihāras always leads to increased clarity and joy. That is the nature of these qualities of mind.

The whole point of the Buddha's teachings is to cultivate mental qualities in order to gain happiness of mind. And the brahmavihāras—a prime source for creating happiness—can thus lay the foundation for the entire practice. Most of the terms the Buddha uses regarding the developing of practice are those that describe states of well being. We see this in a sequence he sets out to illustrate the development of the mind.

Anavajjasukha is the state of mind resulting from abiding by the moral precepts—the happiness of

blamelessness or harmlessness, the happiness of non-remorse.

Abhyasekhasukha is the happiness that ensues from training in sense restraint—the composure one finds when one is not bent on gratification or excitement of the senses.

Pamojja means the delight that results from being free of the five hindrances that hinder meditation (sensual desire, ill will, sleepiness or drowsiness, restlessness, and skeptical doubt). *Pamojja* also refers to the happiness that meditative states of tranquility can bring—an unalloyed kind of happiness. It also includes the delight that arises from skilful reflection on the true nature of things. *Pamojja* leads to *piti* (joy). *Piti* leads to *passadhi* (the state of tranquility). When there is tranquility, *sukha* (happiness) arises, and because of *sukha*, *samādhi* arises. *Samādhi* is the firm meditative state of mind. The Buddha says in many discourses that the happy mind is easily concentrated.

We see that happiness brings about *samādhi*, whereas usually we approach it the other way around. We often think, “If only I could get my meditation together, then I would be happy.” Whereas it should be: “How do I gain true happiness so that my heart could be at ease?” It is a very important truth that the Buddha points to in this sequence of shades of happiness culminating in *samādhi*. The result of *samādhi* is summed up in the recurring phrase “seeing things as they truly are.” This is a description of a mental state where the mind steps back from the sense of self. This state prepares the mind to be truly still and unshakeable. When that happens, the mind moves into *nibbida*. Sometimes this word is translated as boredom or disgust or revulsion, but that does not really get it. It means a cooling of the heart and turning away from things, leading to *vimutti* (freedom). Happiness plays a great role in the development of the whole sequence, and the brahmavihāras, which generate happiness, can serve as a powerful foundation for one’s practice.

Similarly, the Four Noble Truths, while often characterized as a means to investigate suffering, also result in the cultivation of happiness. The qualities of happiness and joy are necessary for mental development. This is seen in many aspects of the Buddha’s teaching. The Buddha very explicitly uses the Four Noble Truths as a tool. Over and over again he says, “I teach only two things, suffering and the cessation of suffering.” Some could say this is a miserable teaching, dwelling on suffering. But when you investigate the teaching, you see why the Buddha sets it out like that. Suffering is a very tangible quality. We can investigate it. It is something that we know and do not want. The whole range of sentient existence is subject to suffering, and the wish to escape from it is universal.

Many positive qualities are brought into being and are involved when one is engaged in cultivating the boundless qualities of the brahmavihāras. They lead to a sense of ease, security, and fearlessness. The Pāli word for fearlessness is *abhaya*. In Thai, it also has the connotation of forgiveness. Developing the brahmavihāras engenders forgiveness—particularly in the practice of loving-kindness and compassion. To open one’s heart to these qualities, one needs to be forgiving. The holding of past grievances—the constant refrain of, “he did this; she did that; I did this; I can’t forgive myself” is swept away. There is no room in the divine abodes for holding grudges and enmity towards oneself or others.

Generosity, or *dana*, is another natural result of the desire to promote happiness and alleviate suffering. Three kinds of *dana* are mentioned: the giving of material things such as food or money, the giving of dhamma, and the giving of forgiveness or fearlessness. Often we do not pay much attention to the little things, such as our perceptions of ourselves and others. We have to learn to really forgive

so as to open our hearts to these boundless qualities.

The brahmavihāras are a means of uplifting the mind, for brightening and bringing it joy. However, if the practice causes confusion, then something is wrong with the practice. You have to review it and look for the reason. This is where investigation comes in.

The “near enemies” and “far enemies” are terms to aid you when reviewing your practice. They are guidelines to reflect back on the mind. The Buddha instructs us to examine our minds to see the real nature of the qualities and feelings. For instance, is it loving-kindness or affection? This questioning is fundamental in the Buddha’s teaching. It can be so skillful and useful to keep using the reflective capacity of the mind to penetrate and understand how the mind works. He gives us the basis for investigation: the Four Noble Truths are one skillful investigative tool.

Whichever practice one is cultivating (developing mindfulness, the brahmavihāras, or any other meditation), ask: “Is there suffering or freedom from suffering that results from my practice? How does it work for me?” That is always the bottom line in the Buddha’s teaching. “Am I happier, or am I experiencing suffering? Is my mind clearer or more confused? Is it peaceful or agitated?” These are the guidelines. All of these qualities (the brahmavihāras, dana, and so forth) are thus important tools of investigation in reflecting and understanding what remains to be done in the task of purifying the mind. This teaching of the brahmavihāras was something the Buddha taught everyone, regardless of societal divisions.

The success of this practice depends on how you direct your mind, how you experience and engage with the world—on your ability to assess the benefit or the lack of benefit of this practice and then make use of it for yourself. Don’t wait for these qualities to develop on their own. You have to investigate your practice, recognize the results that you experience, and then take whatever remedial measures are necessary. This practice empowers us to change and develop ourselves.

Buddhist practice is sometimes criticized as being ineffectual and quiescent—that basically the Buddha’s teaching is to sit in a quiet meditation room and placidly think thoughts of loving-kindness. But that’s not at all the Buddha’s teaching, nor indeed his example. The cultivation of the brahmavihāras conditions action, as the intentions and qualities of the heart and mind inevitably color how one engages in the world. So the brahmavihāras advocate action in situations that require such intervention. This is an important aspect of these qualities. In one of the suttas (A 3.194), Ananda is silent when a dying monk stubbornly and erroneously contradicts the more learned Sāriputta on a point of doctrine. Sāriputta was called the right-hand disciple of the Buddha and second only to him in wisdom. When the matter is brought to the Buddha’s attention, he corrects and admonishes the dying monk. He also says to Ananda, “Ananda will you look on when an elder monk [Sāriputta] is being bothered? Will you not have compassion when an elder monk is being bothered?” The quality of compassion demands us to respond when faced with unskillful deeds. One should not let such acts go by without a response.

BRAHMAVIHĀRAS, RIGHT SPEECH, AND RIGHT ACTION

What kind of action do the brahmavihāras engender? In the Eightfold Path, which frees us from suffering, thought precedes its expression. Right View and Right Thought are the first two aspects of the Path which continues with Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Right Thought is always

delineated as including non-ill will (i.e., loving-kindness) and non-harming (i.e., compassion). The intentions that form the brahmavihāras are fundamentally the basis for Right Thought. In turn, Right Thought directly lays the foundation for modes of virtuous conduct.

There is a set of teachings called the *sangahavatthu*. These virtues are described as the basis of sympathy, acts of generosity, principles of service, and that which favors group harmony and integration. The first of these virtues is generosity. The second is kind speech. The third is useful conduct or service, and the last is impartiality or evenness in dealing with others. One can imagine how these qualities, if truly implemented in one's interactions with others, would generate harmony and well-being.

This is an interesting aspect of the brahmavihāras since the mental qualities of Right View and Right Thought facilitate and foster Right Action. Right Action nurtures the Path, and the Path supports and strengthens the mental qualities. The Path contributes to the growth of the spiritual qualities of these brahmavihāras in body, speech, and mind. It may seem complicated at first glance, but what is striking to me is the interaction and interconnections among these wholesome qualities.

Similarly, the brahmavihāras are integrally related to a classification of the Buddha's teachings called the *saraniya dhammas*, translated as "states of conciliation" or "the virtues necessary for fraternal living." They are the dhammas or qualities necessary for human beings to get along with one another. The first three are loving-kindness of bodily, verbal, and mental action. These are the actual foundations for these virtues. The fourth is *sadharanaboghi*, the virtue of sharing with one's friends and associates the results of one's proper actions. When there is a sharing of the fruits of one's actions, there would also tend to be a sharing of thoughts and feelings with others.

Silasamanyatta is the next virtue—keeping to standards of conduct with one's associates. When this virtue is observed, there is a consistency and harmony, because of the maintenance of the standards of conduct and virtue with those you associate with. Sometimes, there can be much pain and conflict if one is part of a unit, such as a family or work situation, and there is suspicion or very different standards of moral conduct. *Ditthisamanyatta* is the last virtue in this group. It is the possessing of a similarity of views.

One of the reasons life in a monastery or a religious community is conducive to spiritual practice is the degree of trust that is engendered in keeping to the same or similar standards of conduct or virtue. Also, there generally is a similarity of views. In living together, you may not actually like each other but at least you can trust each other. That is a big thing. In monasteries, you get disparate characters thrown together. One of the common personality traits is a certain stubbornness. You would not be in a monastery if you were not able to go against the expectations and wishes of family, society, and even at times your own personal preferences. But the similarity of conduct and purpose is a foundation for conciliation and harmony. There is an evenness and consistency of conduct and commitment within the group, since common goals and a common integrity are present. It is not something forced but is a virtue that is encouraged in order to live together harmoniously. So these *saraniya dhammas* are foundations for harmonious living whatever the size of the unit living together.

The Healing and Transforming Power of the Dhamma

Ven. Bhikkhu Y. Rāhula

Ven. Bhikkhu Rāhula was born in California in 1948. He had been in the U.S. Army for three years during the Vietnam War. He was ordained as a novice monk at Gothana Thapovanaya under Ven. K. Vangeesa Mahā Thera in Sri Lanka in 1975, and received the name Yogavacara Rāhula. He obtained upasampada ordination in Los Angeles in 1979 at Wat Thai. His preceptor was Ven. NiLuwe Jinaratana Mahā Thera. In 1987 he began helping Bhante H. Gunaratana develop the Bhāvanā Forest Monastery in West Virginia. He is the author of several books, including *One Night's Shelter*, *The Way to Peace and Happiness*, and *Traversing the Great Himalaya*.

It could be said that the whole focus of the Buddha's teaching is about healing and transformation. His teachings are outlined in the Four Noble Truths: (1) suffering exists, (2) the cause of suffering, (3) the cessation of suffering, and (4) the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

The Buddha has been called the great doctor who clearly defined the symptoms of suffering: "Birth, sickness, disease, decay and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain grief and despair are suffering; not getting what you want and getting what you don't want is suffering; in short, the five groups of grasping are suffering."

In this definition the Buddha has included both the body and the mind as being subject to suffering. This is true because they are impermanent and conditioned phenomena; we cannot really control them. When we cling to them and they change, conflict and disappointment arises. Thus, their nature is *aniccā* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), and *anattā* (no-self).

Just as a doctor diagnoses the symptoms of an illness, the Buddha discovered and diagnosed the cause of suffering to be ignorance, craving and hatred. In the above outline, only craving is mentioned as the source of suffering, but ignorance is also considered to be the tap-root source of craving. Furthermore, hatred arises from attachment and craving. Thus these are the big three, the trinity of suffering: ignorance, craving and hatred. These are the three roots of "dis-ease", according to the Buddha.

As is the case with most diseases, if the cause or conditions of the disease are removed, then healing begins and the symptoms and the suffering disappear. The Buddha discovered that a person can directly realize the gradual and complete ending of all suffering by eradicating the roots of ignorance, craving, and hatred. This is the process of healing, of curing. The total healing and surmounting of suffering is the ultimate peace, happiness, and liberation of Nibbāna. The Buddha spells it out: "This is peace, this is the sublime; namely, the stand-still of all kamma formation, the uprooting of all substrata of existence, the fading away of craving, detachment, extinction (of ignorance craving and hatred), Nibbāna." (A. III, 4. 32.)

Western medicine treats only specific symptoms of illnesses—after diagnosing them as either

physical or mental. People in the West either go to a physician for physical ailments or to a psychologist or psychiatrist for mental disorders. When the symptoms of illness abate, the person is considered more or less cured. When a person dies it is said that he is free from both kinds of suffering, forever. However, in the Buddha's teachings the problem of disease and suffering goes much deeper than the concerns of just this life. It's not simply a matter of treating the body and the mind as incurring two separate or unrelated types of sickness. The body and the mind are viewed, for the most part, as an indivisible body/mind organism, with each part influencing the other. The approach to healing and curing suffering is seen and applied in a much more integrated and holistic way. The goal of dhamma medicine is not just to cure the cause and alleviate the symptoms and suffering of only a particular illness in this life. The long term goal is to heal and eradicate the deepest underlying virus of ignorance and craving, which goes on regenerating suffering from moment to moment and life to life. These were the first words uttered by the Buddha after his enlightenment:

Through many a birth I've wandered in samsara, seeking but not finding the builder of this house (the body); sorrowful is repeated birth and death. O house-builder (ignorance) thou art seen, thou shall build no house again. All thy rafters (attachments) are broken, thy ridgepole (I-conceit) is shattered; my mind has attained the Unconditioned, achieved is the end of Craving. (Dhp 153-154.)

The medicine that the Buddha prescribed and administered to cure the dis-ease is the Noble Eightfold Path. This is more generally called the practice of dhamma (Dharma in Sanskrit). The Buddha did not actually teach Buddhism. He taught the Dhamma. In addition to referring to the teachings of the Buddha, the word dhamma describes the universal laws of nature. It is these natural laws that govern the functioning and operation of the body and mind in the conditioned world.

One of the most important natural laws which directly underlies the practice of dhamma is the law of kamma. This is usually defined as the principle of cause and effect. Whatever is done intentionally by body, speech, and mind will cause some kind of consequence or effect. This is summed up nicely in the first two verses of the Dhammapada:

Mind is the forerunner of all conditions; mind is their master, mind is their maker. If one acts or speaks with an impure state of mind, then suffering will follow like the cartwheel follows the foot of the ox.

In the same way, if one acts or speaks with a pure state of mind, then happiness will follow as your shadow follows you. (Dhp 1-2.)

If our mental intentions are motivated by greed, hatred, or ego-centeredness, then the results of our actions will be conflict and suffering of some sort—in our own body and mind and also perhaps with those around us. If, however, those intentions are generated by wisdom, non-attachment, compassion, or selflessness the effects will be more ease, good fortune and peace of mind. Many of these effects can be quite subtle and not readily noticeable. Some of these purposeful actions can produce multiple effects which can sometimes manifest well into the future.

Three other natural laws are called the three characteristics:

All elements of the body, mind and this world are impermanent, always undergoing change: birth, decay and death (*aniccā*).

Because of this impermanence, they cannot bring consistent happiness; they bring suffering and therefore are unsatisfactory (*dukkha*).

This impermanence and suffering goes on under its own power, without an underlying owner, controller or “self” that is directing the process (*anattā*).

These laws are the pivotal universal principles upon which the Buddha focused his teachings. They directly concern the process of our conditioned existence. We can either create and perpetuate more conflict and pain for ourselves and others, or we can create the conditions for healing, harmonious living, health, happiness, and peace. If we do not live in alignment with these principles—if we act against them—then endless conflicts and problems will regenerate over and over. If we have right understanding and mindfulness with regard to them, however, we can then live in effortless ease; eliminating our dis-ease.

The medicine that cures suffering is essentially the Noble Eightfold Path. In brief, these are enumerated or listed as:

Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood , Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

These are the eight spokes of the “Wheel of Dhamma.” Each factor of the Eightfold Path is like a separate medicine to counteract and heal the stress and pain caused by “wrong” understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

I would like to describe next the three umbrella groups comprising the Eightfold Path. These are termed in Pāli: *pañña* (wisdom), *sila* (skillful conduct), and *samādhi* (concentration/mental composure). These larger groupings form the three principle phases inherent in the purifying, healing, and transforming process of the Dhamma. They are called the three higher trainings. They deal with retraining our bodily actions, speech, and mind to be more in conformity or harmony with the laws of nature.

The Buddha did not encourage people to believe in or to do things blindly. So the path begins with right understanding. Wisdom has three levels: (1) intellectual understanding, (2) reflective or contemplative understanding, and (3) the deepest level of intuitive wisdom or direct penetration of Truth. What initially motivates a person, especially Westerners, to begin the conscious practice of the Dhamma or meditation is usually acquiring some amount of academic or intellectual knowledge of the Buddha’s teachings. Thus one may read or hear about the Four Noble Truths, the law of kamma, impermanence, purifying the mind, or meditation. One learns that many of the problems and pain we experience come as the result of our continual unmindful and uncontrolled thoughts, actions, and speech in our daily life. These largely reflexive and unwholesome actions are mostly motivated by our attachments, aversions, and ego-centeredness. They are deeply ingrained and programmed habits that we have been accumulating and repeating over and over again. We find that even though the source of our body actions and speech come from the mind, it is easier to begin by restraining the body and verbal speech than to curb and retrain our impulsive thoughts.

So these kinds of reflections and understanding get people started practicing and undertaking *sila* (skillful conduct). The skillful conduct group of the Eightfold Path comprises the three factors of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Sila refers to guiding and managing our living and interac-

tions with others by use of the five precepts. The basic five Buddhist precepts or training rules are: (1) abstain from killing other living beings (including animals, insects, etc.), (2) abstain from stealing, (3) abstain from sexual misconduct, (4) abstain from telling lies and other hurtful speech, and (5) abstain from intoxicating drinks and drugs that cause heedlessness.

Sila is considered to be the initial step on the path that provides the means for healing our conflict with the outer world. If you look closely, we can easily see how much turmoil and pain these negative habits bring to ourselves and our family, as well as the greater world. To use the analogy of starting a garden: consciously observing the precepts is like putting a fence around the garden to keep the rabbits, deer, and other animals from eating the tender budding flowers or vegetables. The average untrained person's mind is mostly driven by automatic, even neurotic habits. So we literally have to protect ourselves from ourselves. It is similar to a mother having constantly to watch or protect her child from hurting itself. The very young child does not know, or is not aware, that what it is about to do may cause itself harm. So until we retrain and strengthen our mind with deeper mindfulness and meditation, consciously following the guidelines of the precepts helps the process of refining and calming outward-focused activities. It helps reduce unnecessary guilt, worry, anxiety, stress, and fear in our daily lives. It paves the way for the deeper healing and transformation of the nervous system and mind.

The problem, however, is that most of our habits are powered by desire, aversion, and the ego; which are very deeply embedded in the nervous system. These mostly unconscious habitual patterns go all the way down to the cellular, even molecular level. Molecular biologists or geneticists are now telling us that some habits and tendencies are in our genes. That is why many habits, impulses, and thought patterns are so very difficult to control or change. People often will try to change some of their bad habits from the outside, by forced control or manipulation. For example, people try to stop drinking, smoking, abusing food, or other things by trying the latest gadgets, fads, or other methods to weaken, prevent, and overcome these sorts of strong, unhealthy urges. Or people tell themselves, "I won't do it again, I won't do it again." These are famous last words. All of these efforts to change, however sincere, are usually only partly successful. Sometimes they completely fail and can even have negative effects. The energy of a specific ego-driven desire or aversion may be altered or changed, even perhaps eliminated on the surface. But then the overall source energy can find new outlets or channels for manifesting, as it is "in our blood."

This is why practicing sila by controlling our exterior movements is not enough. It's like putting a bandage on a wound; it stops the external symptom of bleeding, but the real healing must come from inside. Living by the precepts can minimize and heal some of the painful effects our external life. However, the mind can still harbor those desires, aversions, pride, and delusion that keep prolonging our mental dis-ease. The potential for overstepping the perimeter of the precepts—the energy waiting to undermine our invisible protective fence—is always lurking in the shadows, waiting for a slip in mindfulness. Sila is like opening the door, but now you must go inside.

The next deeper level of purification and healing is more closely focused in the mind, with the development of concentration (*samādhi*). The *samādhi* group comprises right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. *Samādhi* is the general term for formal meditation. Its main function is to inwardly concentrate the mind in a more focused way and become more keenly aware of the sub-

tlar movements and impulses of the body and mind. This deliberate concentrated mindfulness helps relax the fast-paced thoughts and other excited mind/nervous system activity. With practice the mind can settle down and relax into a calm, clear stillness. The normal desire and aversion-based thoughts and reactions to sense stimuli subside and become temporarily suppressed. Thoughts stop wandering to the past and future. The motives or intentions that normally could lead to thoughts about transgressing the precepts or other unwholesome behavior cannot even arise. All the psychophysical energies get merged and balanced in a powerful but tranquil, present-moment awareness. This state of samādhi is not influenced or disturbed by the ranting of “I”, “me” or “mine.” The body and mind can attain various subtler levels of this tranquility (*jhanas*) that can be flooded with blissful sensations and intense happiness. These are powerful but soothing and healing vibrations which go down all the way down into the cells of the body, nervous system and brain; where it helps effect the deeper healing and transformation process.

The Buddha described and taught various meditation subjects or objects on which to focus the mind for achieving different levels of tranquility and for developing insight. The different meditation subjects are like having a variety of medicines to take—each one tailored for overcoming different ailments. For example, there is the meditation on *metta* (loving-friendliness), to help heal the mind of ill-will and hatred; the reflection on the body to help weaken lust; the meditation on food to help overcome to abuse of food; the meditation on mindfulness of the breathing to soothe restlessness and neurotic thoughts. In this way, meditation is seen and used as medicine for the mind.

The tranquil, blissful vibrations of samādhi can be quite alluring; even intoxicating. One can get very attached to the mental quietude. But these absorbed states of peace usually last for only a short period of time; for the average person probably between thirty minutes and two hours (although a very advanced practitioner could remain in such a state for many hours or a day and a night). When a person emerges from samādhi, however, this tranquility can quickly dissipate. The mind gradually reverts to focusing attention outwardly and can quickly become actively engaged in the external world. The internal negative thoughts and neurotic habit patterns will once again be reactivated.

The practice of using concentration techniques alone, with the sole purpose of attaining only temporary “peace of mind,” has a limited value. It is like mowing or cutting down the weeds in the garden to the ground level but leaving the roots intact. It looks nice for a time, but with the next rain the weeds quickly return. Consider the analogy of the child’s toy: the jack-in-the-box: You push the coiled spring attached to the head of the clown down into the box and replace the lid. The head stays in the box as long as the lid is well secured. When the lid is removed the head then springs quickly up out of the box. This happens because the coiled spring still has its power. In the same way, when normal thought activity is suppressed by the sheer power of concentration, it is as if the head of the ego-driven impulses and thoughts are pushed down into the unconscious “box.” Not much in the way of permanent healing or purification has transpired. One feels refreshed and calm for awhile, but a person can again resort to unwholesome, harmful thoughts and behavior that could result in breaking the precepts.

So, just as with physical and verbal restraint, the practice of tranquility meditation to achieve temporary inner peace has a valuable but limited role in the process of total healing and transformation.

This is where the deepest level of vipassana or insight wisdom plays its pivotal role in the

Buddhist spiritual path. To further the penetrating light of wisdom to its subtlest levels, insight into the empty, no-self nature of consciousness needs to be realized. This is where the meditation on the four foundations of mindfulness, vipassana, or another powerful method of insight needs to be employed. When consciousness is deeply concentrated and aware, not reacting to any sense stimuli, then this sense of “I” fades away, evaporates, dissolves. This can happen because the boundary of “I” was never something real or substantial in the first place.

The sense of separation and individual identity is the most subtle and pervasive level of ignorance. It is the basis of all thoughts and impulses of “I”, “me”, “mine”, and “other”. It is the primary boundary that separates, alienates, and pits the assumed inner “self” against everything it perceives to be external to it. A newborn baby does not yet have this feeling of separation from its environment, this notion of “I”, or subjective cognition. But self-consciousness gradually develops over the first couple years or so of life, because of the attention given to it by its parents and the development of language. “I” consciousness then becomes the nucleus of all subsequent experiences. “I” becomes firmly entrenched and engrained in the subtlest infrastructure of the mind/brain nervous system. This self-illusion/delusion then evolves into the fundamental source of all future alienation, confusion, greed, hatred, and ignorance, that fuels the cycles of kamma, rebirth and suffering.

In the development of insight wisdom there usually are several degrees of insight into this “I” dissolving process; each connected with further purification of the mind. The deepest level of concentrated awareness completely pierces and tears asunder the veil or illusion of the separate self, ego, and “I” consciousness. It goes right down to the very roots of dis-ease and liquidates the source of the problem altogether. Returning to the analogy of the jack-in-the-box: it is like snipping in half the compressed spring under the head so that it has no more power to leap back up out of the box; the I-powered defilements no longer have the potency to rush back into action and create conflicts. In the garden analogy, the first levels of wisdom, intellectual and reflective contemplation are like watering the soil so it becomes loose and workable. Then the sword of penetrating insight slices through the softened earth to cut the base of the taproot. Then the whole weed can be pulled out; lock, stock, and barrel. You can then eat the ripe fruits of your careful labor.

This leads to and accomplishes the complete and holistic healing process of the body/mind organism. The wisdom of no-self allows consciousness to revert to its intrinsic fusion and oneness with reality. It reintegrates the person, now liberated from suffering, back into the harmonious flow of life. All of one’s activities of body, speech, and mind now spontaneously arise and flow with the natural laws. No waves of unwholesome vibrations will disrupt the smooth effortless interaction with the world—inside or outside. There *is* no inside or outside, past or future, but only the timeless, eternal Now. This is the culmination of the path, the ultimate healing and transformation from bondage to freedom, from an unenlightened being to an enlightened being. This is the end of dukkha.

As the Buddha has put it:

Such and such is virtue (sila), such and such is concentration (samādhi), such and such is wisdom (pañña). Great becomes the fruit, great is the gain of concentration when it is fully developed by virtuous conduct; great becomes the fruit, great is the gain of wisdom when it is fully developed by concentration; utterly freed from the

*taints of lust, becoming and ignorance is the mind that is fully developed in wisdom.
(DN part two, 4.)*

Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of Nibbāna—namely, the four foundations of mindfulness. (MN 10)

He has severed craving, flung off the fetters, and with the complete penetration of conceit he has made an end of suffering. (MN 2; 22)

Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being. (MN 4; 32)

[Abbreviations: *Dhp*: *Dhammapada*; *MN*: *Majjhima Nikāya*; *DN*: *Dīgha Nikāya*.]

Practice of Peace

Ven. Bhikkhunī Sobhanā

Ven. Bhikkhunī Sobhanā has been a student of Bhante Gunaratana since 1989. She received novice ordination from him in 2002, and full ordination in 2006 at Dambulla, Sri Lanka. She resides at the Bhāvanā Society.

“Not by dogmatic view nor learning nor knowledge do the skillful call one a sage. Those who live disarmed, undisturbed, without expectation, I say that they are the sages.” (*Sn* 1078)

“When the tides of conceiving no longer sweep over him he is called a sage at peace.”
Dhātuvibhanga Sutta (M 140.7)

Something shifted for me after receiving bhikkhunī ordination in 2006. I found out about the intentional practice of peace. It grew clear that the detailed rules of bhikkhunī vinaya are gifts for calming the afflictive emotions. They directly support the equanimity that we seek in meditation.

Many of the rules that we observe in the monastery circle around one point: “Don’t pick a fight. Speak and behave in ways that promote tranquility in yourself and others. Avoid agitation.” This means practicing contentment; becoming much more aware of the impact our actions may have on other people; developing patience; expressing metta much more consistently.

To my surprise, I learned that my weak point in the practice of peace came up with issues of morality. I saw how easy it is to be inconsiderate of others when I believe that I am in the right. How easy it is to become emotional when I think I’m the victim of wrongdoing. How easy it is to rationalize my preferences as matters of right and wrong. How easy it is to become unwise on behalf of another person who is victimized. To be more peaceful when confronted by the inevitable unfairness, mistakes and wrongdoings in the world—that has been a new experience.

Although my examples are drawn from the small world of a junior nun, this practice may be relevant to you. Perhaps you can also use the code of conduct that you share within your family, your workplace, and your governing bodies, as a way for calming and a way to become peaceful.

In our American culture, a positive value is placed on righteous confrontation. We have learned from many heroic examples that one should stand up and oppose tyranny and injustice—even bear arms against the tyrant. This is spelled out in our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. Our founding documents set the tone for a culture of confrontation on matters great and small. When someone steps on our toes, we believe that it is good to speak up and tell them how hurt we are, to more or less politely ask them to modify themselves so we can feel comfortable. Our legal system has removed the opportunity for us to personally take revenge on our enemies, but the government does

this on our behalf. So as a society, we are still quite cruel.

In Buddhism, it's quite different. For us, the purpose of virtue is not to confront others, but to make ourselves harmless and to purify our own mind. It is still possible to be an activist, to make our corner of the world into a better place. In fact, being able to speak and act from a place of calm, we can experience power and efficacy, not weakness and passivity. But improving things on the outside has very little to do with our own liberation. Our own liberation is an inside job.

We calm ourselves in ordinary life and interactions with people in order to build the habits of tranquility. Then, when we seek liberating insight through meditation—a much more difficult endeavor—those habits of mind are there to help us.

This calming is not only a private matter, to be done in our room or on the cushion. It is also a social project. The active expressions of forgiveness and friendliness to others are very effective ways to help calm ourselves. Anticipating how our behavior might disturb others, and becoming very vigilant to avoid such upsets are wonderful ways to improve our own mindfulness.

BECOMING MORE HONEST

Can we become more honest about how our likes and dislikes are projected as questions of morality? This is not to deny that sometimes we are truly injured by unfairness, injustice, and the flat-out meanness of people. At other times, the insult or injury is only in our mind. In either case, it's most important to stop and notice the unpleasant feeling. Just be present for the experience without spinning off into a story of victimhood or vindication. Such inner speechifying is actually a way of escaping from the pain; an attempt to patch up the bruised ego.

Instead, if we remain mindful we are on the way to using the pain to understand the first noble truth: "There is dukkha. There is suffering." We can use our own pain to develop compassion for others who also suffer. The proper use of suffering is to gain wisdom. When our compassionate nature is mature, we won't see others as evil. We will only see their ignorance and their suffering. Then we can respond to the other person skillfully, seeking the way to help them out of their painful situation. We will no longer try to coerce another for our own comfort.

HOLDING MORALITY THE RIGHT WAY

"Clinging to rules and rituals" is one of the fetters that bind us to the cycle of rebirth and suffering. The traditional definition of this fetter is: a belief that certain external actions like bathing in a holy river or self-mortification suffice to bring one to liberation. With this teaching, the Buddha clearly distinguishes the way to liberation from any simple, materialistic approach. It is a mis-use of the this teaching to characterize other people's faith as "superstition" when we actually need to examine how our own rules and rituals may be wrongly held.

The precepts of Buddhism are like the stripes on the highway: effective because they are clear, bright, and simple. They are rightly held when they lead to calming our greed, anger and selfishness, when they lead to detachment. Rightly held, our rules help us to prevent unskillful behavior from arising in the first place, or if we realize that we've taken a wrong turn, to drop it quickly and completely. To carry a guilt-ridden, hateful self-characterization or to stereotype others as morally defec-

tive, would be forms of clinging to rules. Such judgments and a comparing mind mean we are identifying with our morality. When our ego is tied up in keeping to any set of rules, we're moving away from liberation and away from peace.

We believe that until we attain liberation, meritorious deeds lead to a pleasant rebirth, but doing good deeds out of calculated self-interest is exactly the wrong approach. This actually impedes our liberation by making us selfish.

TWO PHASES OF VIRTUE

There are two phases in the practice of virtue. First, we use restraint. It's necessary, but not so peaceful, because there is an internal pressure being applied. By preventing the outward expression of our unruly impulses, we avoid disturbing our neighbor's peace. More important, we learn to control and direct the mind, a skill that we need for the internal work of liberation. Also, by using restraint, we buy time for mindfulness. We buy time to hold that negative impulse with compassion and awareness, and to allow it to pass by naturally.

Later, there is a much more stable form of virtue which is based upon wisdom. We have become less protective of our ego, there are fewer selfish needs for control, status, safety, comfort or pleasure. Like children's toys, these things don't distort our thinking anymore. Then we will really see how the other's happiness and our own happiness are identical, so kindness will come naturally. Seeing that the other's suffering and our own suffering are the same, compassion will arise naturally. That way, our virtuous behavior is arising in a very free way, out of our wisdom. That is the kind of virtue that we're aiming for.

We really need both kinds of virtue at all times. Our standard of skillful behavior becomes more exacting as our understanding grows. Finding the skillful solution when those around us make mistakes is challenging, especially if we have accepted responsibility for the welfare of family, employees, students, or for any other situation of trust. When someone feels hurt, should we teach acceptance and forgiveness, or should we act on the complaint? When is it suitable to point out someone's errors, and when is it best to overlook them? In such cases, the less we need to protect our own self-interest, the more freedom we'll have to discover a creative solution. The more wisdom we have attained, the better we will be at creating and maintaining peace.

HOW TO CRITICIZE

Here in the monastery, we have a famous example to avoid and another one to follow: The monks of Kosambi bickered and brawled over a minor rule (DhA I.5), while Ven. Anaruddha and his companions lived "in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes." (M 31.6) We have some specifics for living in concord, which you may consider adopting for your own family or your own group.

The practice of formally giving and receiving criticism was established and taught by the Buddha. This is how we improve. Otherwise a harmonious community would always be a dysfunctional community; problems would always be swept under the rug. When admonished, the Buddha said that a bhikkhu or bhikkhunī should not prevaricate, lead the talk aside, or show disturbance, hate and bit-

teness. (M.65, 22) Instead, we should regard the critic as our most valuable friend. We make ourselves easy to correct. When we receive criticism, we stop that reaction of self-defense, and try to listen very carefully, in order to learn.

The Buddha also gave instructions for those who would offer criticism. Before admonishing another, one should inquire, "Are my own actions and speech pure? Is a heart of good will established in me towards my fellows? Have I heard the Dhamma, practiced and penetrated the Dhamma with insight? Is the our code of behavior known and thoroughly understood by me?" Having investigated in this way, he or she would then speak at the right time, speak of facts, speak gently, speak only profitable words, and with a kindly heart (A.V, 198) Thus, when we do speak, it is for the welfare of the other person, not just for our own comfort.

CONFESSION

The practice of confession is very clear in the monastery. It's not a lugubrious ritual, but often quite cheerful. We have so many minor rules, there is not too much at stake. Usually, a simple admission is all that is needed to "purify" us, as we say, and we can really forget about it afterwards. When this procedure is followed conscientiously, it sets up an atmosphere of calm honesty that supports mindfulness. We have developed good habits to deal with small problems, and when there is a big problem, those habits are in place for our use.

It is not necessary to always be technical about a code of precepts. Sometimes a wrongdoing does not rise to the level of an offense against any particular rule. It's really about intention, a lapse of kindness. I may have said or done something without kindness. More and more, I can notice this intuitively. I call it my "bad kamma cloud." My world just gets a little dark if I act hurtful, even in the smallest way. As soon as I see this, I know that I must take care of it right away.

Think how nicely this could work in your family or office. If people agreed about a code of ethics, and had the practice of quickly apologizing for minor misbehavior, then the culture would be developed, and it would be so much easier to deal with the serious difficulties.

FORGIVING OTHERS AND OURSELVES

This brings me naturally to the idea of forgiveness. Forgiveness is rarely mentioned in the Suttas, at least not in the Judeo-Christian sense, because of the implication for kamma. We do not expect to escape from the results of our actions by getting God to forgive us. The Buddhist equivalent of forgiveness is really a cluster of three wholesome mental states:

1. Patience, to make us undisturbed by another's evil action or by harm to us,
2. Harmlessness, to make us renounce all thought of revenge, and
3. Compassion, to make us skillful in alleviating the wrongdoer's suffering.

Here is an example: There was a shocking and brutal murder in a working class section of Atlanta. Trish Nuckles was a librarian who dedicated her life to helping children, and Ivan Simpson a brain-injured and mentally-ill drug addict. He had never committed a violent crime and intended only to

rob; but after tying up his victim, selling the merchandise and taking crack, he experienced a command hallucination. The demon ordered Ivan to rape and murder Trish. Trish's father, Hector Black, was a Quaker civil rights activist who had dedicated a lifetime to good causes. He spoke against the death penalty at the trial and told the murderer "I don't hate you. I only hate what you did." At that point, Ivan wanted only to die, but his life was spared: he received a life sentence without parole. The broken-hearted father had learned at the trial about Ivan's horrible childhood, and heard his sincere apology. In the midst of his pain, Black was moved to write to Ivan, and they corresponded for many years. As the result of this first-ever experience of consistent kindness, Ivan repented of his crimes, although he could never forgive himself, and undertook to spend the rest of his life—within prison—trying to help people. In an interview, Ivan described persuading a depressed fellow inmate not to commit suicide, and breaking up fights between violent men. (Barasch, 218 ff.)

What can we see in this example? Hector Black had cultivated virtue and nonviolence for a lifetime. He had the good habits when he needed them. He announced his harmlessness and renounced any desire for revenge. Although he was not at all equanimous, he controlled his emotions, deflecting his hatred away from the man and just toward "what you did." He had insight into Ivan's grave unease and moral peril as the result of the crime. Hector's skillful practice of compassion was the exchange of letters. He both revealed himself and made himself present for whatever Ivan had to express. Just as in meditation, as we develop non-judgmental awareness of our own painful thoughts and feelings, Hector attended to Ivan.

We can see here that forgiveness is not a weak, sour, half-hearted gesture. It is powerful and skillful. With forgiveness we actively reach out towards our wrongdoer, and attend to that person with the heart of loving-kindness.

THE INNER WORK: EQUANIMITY

Do you ever wonder why the Buddha put such a high premium on equanimity? Knowing the answer to this question is essential to the practice of peace. Otherwise, we will not have enough incentive to do the work.

The Buddha made a direct connection between our innermost psychological patterns and the troubles of the greater world. He said that lustful desire, appropriation, avarice, guarding of possessions, the taking up of stick and sword, quarrels, disputes, arguments, strife, abuse, lying and other unskilled states, all flow from the moment of feeling. (D 15.8-19) Our individual sense faculty makes contact with its object; there is a resulting feeling, then a reaction to that, and we're off to the races. But if we have insight and the right habits of mind, we can stop this chain reaction. We can nip it off right at the moment of feeling, by calling up equanimity.

Equanimity sometimes feels as subtle as a feather balanced on a needle, sometimes as unshakeable as a mountain. Equanimity is not just neutral feeling, but inner stability of mind. It is not dull indifference, but an alert, observant state. It allows us to pay equal attention to the delightful and the repulsive; no need to argue with any part of our experience.

How can we come closer to this beautiful state? We must first understand the factors that keep our mind agitated, and how to tame those factors. In this respect, I see two major groups of trouble:

1. The nexus of unwholesome underlying tendencies, mental proliferation and feeling;
2. The believe that our “self” is to be found in any of the five aggregates of clinging.

THE POISONOUS STEW

What is called afflictive emotion is usually a complex stew of painful feelings, self-centered thinking, and the tendencies for craving and aversion. Feeling is the trigger. It can churn up memories and create a cascade of visceral reactions, resulting in a full-blown emotional reaction. To cure it, we must understand three factors: “underlying tendencies,” “feeling” and “mental proliferation.”

“*Underlying tendencies*” refers to unskillful inclinations that operate below the radar of our awareness. For example, one may not constantly have an aversive mind, but if when touched by painful feeling one “sorrows, grieves and laments, beating the breast” then the underlying tendency to aversion must be present. (M 148.28) It’s not difficult to see how underlying tendencies come to be. They are just habitual patterns, grooves in the brain, which make us react the same way we reacted in the past. “Whatever we frequently think and ponder on, that becomes the inclination of the mind.” (M 19.11)

“*Feeling*” triggers these underlying tendencies. And what is feeling? Just the pleasant/unpleasant/neutral tone that arises with every single moment of contact between any of our six senses and their objects.

“*Mental proliferation*” refers to the “craving, conceit and views, on account of which the mind embellishes experience by interpreting it in terms of I, mine, myself.” (Footnote to M 18.8) For example, when a long-term resident leaves our small monastic community, I can’t help myself from calculating how my life will be poorer in their absence.

The practice of peace is for the stilling of these self-centered reactions. Whenever emotions spring up and seem to take hold of the mind, we should check whether we are blocking out some painful feeling or delighting and holding on to a pleasant feeling. In either case, we should try to let go of the self-centered views—that old “Story of Me.” We should simply acknowledge the feeling, but drop the story.

Over and over, feeling is mentioned as the critical point where the storm of proliferation is triggered. Feeling is also the most effective point where we can turn the process around with mindfulness. The challenge is to see the first arising of feeling, to see our reaction almost before it is fully formed. With that very fast insight, our reactions are quickly transformed into equanimity.

AGGREGATES OF CLINGING

We can see now that greed and aversion are not enough to destroy our peace, not by themselves. It is necessary to add the element of self-centered view. To put an end to agitation and conflict, we must look directly at the so-called self, through contemplation of the five aggregates of clinging: material form, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness. The Buddha taught us to observe these aspects of experience individually, to reflect how impermanent each one is, how unreliable. Because they are impermanent, they are unsatisfactory, and because they are unsatisfactory, not worthy to be considered “my self.” Elsewhere, the Buddha taught us to reflect “This is not me, this is not mine, this is not my self.”

I want to point out how the group of five aggregates really works as a team to build up that impression of “self,” and to make us believe that there is a “me” there, which has continuity in time. The aggregates are said to be “affected by clinging,” because we love and identify with them, and because they seem to cling together.

1. *Form*. Form seems to be “mine.” Our physical eyes and the beautiful things in the world are so dear. We would pay any amount of money to prevent or cure our own blindness, and to surround ourselves with pleasing people and objects. Likewise for each of the senses.
2. *Feeling*. Eons of biological evolution went into our ability to sense what is poison and what is nutrition, what is safe and what is dangerous. Feeling is perfectly designed to protect “me”.
3. *Perception*. By naming our experience according to the categories of perception, we feel in control of our world. We seem to empower “the self”.
4. *Volitional formations*. Whether meritorious or evil, intentions rooted in the delusion of self are always reaching for renewed existence. “I want to be somebody.”
5. *Consciousness*. What is that knowing faculty used for? Consciousness knows “I see this, I feel this, I recognize this, I want this.” Consciousness adverts to the next object, making the senses ready, always in motion. Moment to moment the I-consciousness is reborn, and carries us along with an impression of continuity, like the monkey swinging from tree to tree

When we see how deeply the aggregates of clinging are tied up with self, we understand why the Buddha sees them “as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumor, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as void, as not self.” (M64.9) This is strong language! But we need strong medicine to overcome the deep attachment which makes us recoil from this truth.

The habit of calmness helps us to go into contemplation of the aggregates. We can look at what is unpleasant, even frightful, without flinching. Every time we see things as they really are, with mindfulness, the five aggregates affected by clinging are diminished for us. (M149.9) Once we fully see them as they are, how they change and cease, how they are not worth clinging to, then unshakable equanimity will arise. This mindfulness is the inner practice of peace.

THE ULTIMATE STATE OF PEACE: NIBBĀNA.

The Buddha describes the perfection of equanimity very beautifully in the Dhātuvibhanga Sutta. Stopping at a humble potter’s shed for the night, the Buddha met a monk, Pukkasāti, who had made the decision to follow the Buddha, but didn’t know that this was the Teacher before him. They spent the night in meditation, and the Buddha decided to teach this monk the Dhamma:

He spoke of a purified and bright consciousness which cognizes and understands the arising of pleasant, painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant feelings, in dependence on the corresponding contacts; which cognizes and understands how feeling ceases and subsides with the cessation of contact. The Buddha said, “Then there remains only equanimity, purified and bright, malleable, wieldy, and radiant.” The Buddha reminded Pukkasāti of the danger of staying for a long time in the peaceful realms of meditation, telling him to use that equanimity for liberation: “Since he

does not form any condition or generate any volition tending towards either being or non-being, he does not cling to anything in this world. When he does not cling, he is not agitated. When he is not agitated, he personally attains Nibbāna.” (M140.20-22)

Hearing this discourse, the monk Pukkasāti realized with great joy “Indeed, the Teacher has come to me! The Sublime One has come to me! The Fully Enlightened One has come to me!”

Here we see a kind of equanimity, which is as free as space. Here, the arahant is not pulled in any direction by volition. Mind is fully in contact with its experience, but does not get stuck anywhere. Mind is at peace within itself.

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The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Ven. Ajahn Sona

Ven. Ajahn Sona was born in Canada in 1954. In 1989 he ordained as a bhikkhu with Bhante Gunaratana at the Bhāvanā Society. He further trained for three years at the forest monasteries of Wat Pah Nanachat and Wat Keuhn in Northeast Thailand. Ajahn Sona returned to British Columbia in 1994. He is the founder and abbot of Birken Forest Monastery at its new and expanded location near Kamloops, BC. His teachings on Buddhist practice combine tried and true Buddhist wisdom with modern common sense.

I have been a seeker of truth for as long as I can remember. Even in childhood I wondered about the nature of reality, the meaning of life, and the proper way to conduct it. I was raised in the modern or post-modern West and had to make my way through the jungle of conflicting views and ideologies. I remember in Grade 2 or 3 being trained to hide under our desk in the event of a nuclear bomb! Religions, politics, gender roles: all that is traditional was up for scrutiny in my early life. My quest for truth continued through university, beginning in philosophy, which disappointed me since it was not philosophy as a way of life but merely philosophy as ideas and history. I switched to music, studying jazz and classical music formally, and became a professional musician. It was a pleasant, sophisticated and genteel life but not enough.

As the quest continued, I finally narrowed it down to Buddhism. Having read widely but neglected to meditate, I was impressed by Buddhist ideas but had not felt their transforming power until I began to meditate in the late 1970s with a Tibetan lama. I felt like an amnesiac, looking for his family. I did indeed recognize Tibetan Buddhists at least as my cousins, but my quest among the schools of Buddhism continued. In the early 1980s I studied in the Korean Zen tradition. I became extremely serious about the matter of practice and its conflicts with lay life. After a few years of training in formal meditation, I took up a radical lifestyle as a lay hermit-meditator and immersed myself in the Theravāda Pāli canon and commentaries. My amnesiac quest for my true family was nearing its end. I felt, finally, completely at one with the Theravāda Forest monastic tradition. The only problem was that nowhere in North or South America was there a Theravāda Forest monastery.

After several years of living as a hermit and enjoying a rich, intense adventure in solitude and an immersion in meditation, I finally got wind of the first forest monastery opening in North America: the Bhāvanā Society in West Virginia, with Venerable Gunaratana as abbot and teacher. This karmically fortuitous discovery came about through a brief retreat in 1987 with the famous traveling monk Venerable Piyadassi from Sri Lanka. Soon thereafter, I was on the doorstep of the still-incomplete Bhāvanā Monastery in the Blue Ridge Mountains. There, I became a jack-of-all-trades until such time as I was honored with ordination as a bhikkhu in the first ordination ceremony carried out at Bhāvanā.

I enjoyed my new monastic life immensely—having ironically found my family in homelessness.

I benefited greatly from the teachings of Bhante Gunaratana, but I had a hankering to do further training, totally immersed in a Buddhist country where faith was universal. I went to Thailand, to the forest tradition, to continue my training. Again, it was a rich and profitable experience. After finishing my fifth Rainy Season in Thailand, I returned to Canada on my odyssey, without firm plans, except to continue practicing as an ordained Buddhist monk. That was twelve years ago. I now find myself as abbot of a Theravāda Forest monastery in my own homeland—a mere 19 years after being frustrated by the fact that there was no such a thing in Canada. The voyage continues, but I often think back to the wonderful times and teachings in West Virginia with Bhante Gunaratana, and so I am particularly pleased to contribute a few words of dhamma to this book which is dedicated to my esteemed teacher.

THE SEVEN FACTORS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

As I reflected on what to write about as a dhamma topic, I remembered the first dhamma talk that I gave in West Virginia at the invitation of Bhante Gunaratana. It was an assignment for my benefit, to learn how to give dhamma talks and to research a specific topic. I suppose that, for my audience of a dozen or so captive meditators, it was a wonderful opportunity to practice patience as well. The ambitious theme I chose was the “seven factors of enlightenment.” It turned out I had enough material to give two talks. So I thought, these 18 years later, that it might be appropriate to revisit this sublime teaching.

I’ve been giving talks on the seven factors of enlightenment over the last four or five years, because of the entirely positive, enthusiastic, energizing nature of this set of teachings. I find that it is under-taught, not mentioned enough. An undue amount of time and attention has been given to the first enlightenment factor: mindfulness (*sati*), without understanding the context and position of *sati* in relation to enlightenment factors that swell out of it. Briefly, the seven factors are: mindfulness (*sati*), investigation of dhamma (*dhamma-vicaya*), energy (*virīya*), joy (*pīti*), tranquility (*passaddhi*), concentration (*samādhi*) and equanimity (*upekkha*). Just reading over the list is enough to make me feel better and, I think when these are explained and reflected on, is enough to arouse interest in most meditators. Indeed, the very recitation of the seven factors of enlightenment is used traditionally through Asia as a healing verse. It is said that such arahants as Kassapa and Moggallana were themselves healed of ailments, just by hearing the seven factors recited. It seems that arahants, or enlightened people, have realized these seven factors, and the very mention of their wonderful qualities stirs a healing spirit within one who is familiar with their liberating qualities.

An overarching aspect of the seven factors first needs to be understood. They function in two ways in relationship to each other. In the first way, they proceed in an orderly fashion from mindfulness to equanimity. One leads to the next; one lays down the causes and conditions for the arising of the next. That is very important to understand in practicing them. The second aspect is that they can all exist simultaneously, as it were, in a single mental state. The simile that best describes this simultaneous co-existence is that of a roof being held up by rafters. Seven rafters may be conceived of as supporting a roof, just as the seven factors may be thought of as supporting enlightenment. However, these rafters representing the factors also compose the roof. Just so is enlightenment composed of the seven factors.

We could say that the seven factors are a magnification of the last three factors of the Noble

Eightfold Path: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. This is, in fact, where attention needs to be placed, in order to realize meditative aspects of the Eightfold Path. It is presumed that the previous five factors of the Eightfold Path have been suitably developed in order to support this more refined mental development, which consists of the seven factors of enlightenment.

We begin with mindfulness and since so much has been written about this factor, I will be brief. There are two definitions of mindfulness that the Buddha gave. One is the simile of the sentry. This is that aspect of mind which is attentive, like a sentry, to the contents which are being processed in the mind. It is also a discerning sentry, who, when trained, cannot be distracted, does not drowse, cannot be “bribed” by the sensual world, and has sufficient intelligence to recognize two accurate messengers of the nature of the world of the senses: serenity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*). This alert and discerning sentry admits messages delivered in serenity and stamped with three characteristics (*aniccā, dukkha, anattā*) to consciousness, which therefore gives correct information and conditioning to consciousness.

The other definition of mindfulness is as a form of memory. It is not particularly a memory of things heard long ago, but more like the prompter which remembers to remember its Dhammic duties. It is the string on your finger when you go to the store which triggers the mental note to buy a loaf of bread. So mindfulness is the initiator of the sequence of the remaining six factors. Without it, the factors will not have the characteristic leading to enlightenment.

Next we have the investigation of dhamma (*dhamma-vicaya*). This seems to be a sustained attention sharing the qualities of both one-pointed focus (*samatha*) and the questioning nature of *vipassana*. It is the inquiring mind. The word “Dhamma” makes sure that the inquiry is into the nature of things rather than mere inquiry. Intelligence answers questions; wisdom knows which questions to answer. This is how we should understand *dhamma-vicaya*.

If this focused, interested inquiry is successful, energetic enthusiasm and interest will naturally follow. This is *virīya*. It is not a difficult progression to understand. Even if we look at our ordinary mental processes, we will recognize that energy follows interest. When interest and energy have been suitably established, we naturally experience joy (*pīti*). It may be noted that *pīti* is also a factor in the first *jhāna* and, of course, interest, energy and mindfulness all are present in a substantial degree in the first *jhāna* as well. So we see that the factors are beginning to emerge as similar to the factors of the *jhānic* states.

Following this experience of joy at the processes of investigation, we see that *passaddhi*, or a sense of ease, appears. *Passaddhi* can perhaps be thought of as a kind of coasting experience after the initial propulsion and rousing of the joy and energy factors. It is similar to the worldly feeling of contentment and ease at the end of a productive day’s labor. Again, it is not significantly different from the worldly sequence of psychological events starting with application of mind, investment of energy in a task, enjoyment of the task, absorption and energetic accomplishment of the task and resultant satisfaction. The difference in this series is that *passaddhi* is based on super-mundane inquiry and tasks.

Following *passaddhi*, true *samādhi* naturally swells. This progression is stated in a variety of ways by the Buddha. Usually he explains that *samādhi* is not something one can will, but that which results from the skillful development of causes. Like baking a cake: If the right ingredients are mixed together in a skillful way and the temperature in the oven is right, a good cake is the expected result. So it is

with the enlightenment factor of concentration. Again, we are obviously paralleling the eighth factor of the Eightfold Path: Right Concentration (*samma-samādhī*). We should remember that it is only “right” concentration when it is towards the end of insight. That is why it qualifies as an enlightenment factor.

Finally we come to equanimity (*upekkhā*). Here again we note that the fourth *jhāna* is primarily defined by the predominance of equanimity. We may presume that the equanimity referred to in the seven factors and also in the fourth *jhāna* are very similar, again with the condition that it is at the service of full awakening, rather than merely equanimity for equanimity’s sake. It would seem that equanimity might be different when regarded as one of the seven factors leading to enlightenment, than when regarded as one of the seven factors comprising enlightenment. When it is leading to enlightenment it is still primarily a form of *samādhī*. When it is fulfilled as having attained enlightenment, it is equanimity based on wisdom. However, this does not preclude the possibility that the enlightened person enjoys equanimity based on *samādhī* as well as on wisdom.

There is another way of looking at the seven factors which is interesting and helpful. That is to regard investigation, energy and joy as particularly “active” factors and *passaddhī*, *samādhī* and *upekkhā* as “passive” factors, and, with mindfulness the adjuster and monitor, keeping each side of the balance-scale equal. When investigation gets out of control, it spins off to an unhelpful proliferation of thoughts. When energy is excessive, it becomes agitation. When joy is excessive it produces distraction. When *passaddhī* is not energized it sinks towards sleep. When *samādhī* is not energized, it inclines towards dullness. When *upekkhā* is not balanced with energy it becomes dullness or apathy. Mindfulness, therefore, is the inspector which balances and rouses the other six factors. So this is the way that they relate in a sequential fashion and also in an interwoven, simultaneous fashion.

The seven factors are found at the end of the *Satipatthana Sutta* (Four Foundations of Mindfulness) under *dhamma-anupassana*, which I translate as “Dhamma categories.” The meaning of this is that one must be familiar with the teaching of the seven factors of enlightenment and recognize any individual factor in relation to its category as a member of the seven factors of enlightenment. There’s an interesting phrase in the *Satipatthana Sutta* regarding the seven factors. It is asserted they should be cultivated and sustained. Previous categories such as the five hindrances are to be seen as impermanent, and to be let go of. It is not the case in our practice of mindfulness that we are merely to watch the arising and passing away of the seven factors of enlightenment and to feel that we are “doing *vipassana*,” but that they are to be most enthusiastically cultivated and maintained, and that mindfulness is only successful when it accomplishes this purpose.

In conclusion, I highly recommend the seven factors of enlightenment as a joyful and inspiring teaching which certainly can serve as the basis of a ten-day retreat or, indeed, a lifetime of practice. I do recall the Buddha saying that the Dhamma is beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, and beautiful in the end. And, if it has seemed rather more grim and difficult in the beginning, then it’s perhaps worth reflecting on and aspiring to the seven factors of enlightenment.

Good Thinking

Ven. Bhikkhunī Sucinta

Ven. Bhikkhunī Sucinta was born in Germany. In 1991, she became an anagārika at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England. She joined the Bhāvanā Society in 1994. Bhante Gunaratana ordained her as a samaneri and she lived under his guidance for five years. With his approval she participated in the International Full Ordination Ceremony in Bodhgaya in February 1998. Between 1999 and 2003 she spent several years meditating and studying Buddhism in Myanmar. In January 2007 she went to Melbourne at the invitation of the Buddhist Society of Victoria to support the foundation of a Theravāda monastery for fully ordained women in Australia.

When Bhante G ordained me as a samaneri in May 1994, he gave me the Pāli name Sucinta, which means “Good Thinking.” He certainly chose it with careful consideration, as parents do with their child’s name. I was indeed quite top heavy. In fact, back in Germany, a friend had compared me (when I was a lay person in my typical posture) to Rodin’s famous sculpture “The Thinker.”

Later, after my ordination, there were times when I was somewhat unhappy with the name Sucinta and wished I had a more lofty name—something like Bodhinanda (the Bliss of Enlightenment) or Jayanti (the Victorious One). At other times, I felt quite pleased with my name, because everyone has the potential to develop good thinking as a fundamental step on the path. From the time of my childhood I was aware that thoughts can be a torment; yet as a western European person I had been conditioned to think very highly of thinking and thoughts.

A kind of crisis regarding my name or, in other words, the role of thinking in dhamma practice, occurred while I meditated and studied in Myanmar. My habitual use of thinking was greatly challenged by my meditation teacher’s statements. “If you think, you are in trouble,” he said. When I defended my pondering as a way to solve problems, he answered, “A peaceful mind is the solution.” It was convincing, and thinking appeared to me to be a giant hindrance.

At the International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University we were taught to discern the difference between paṭṭatti (names and things named), and paramattha (ultimate reality), as set out in the Abhidhamma. I began to look down on conceptual thinking, since only paramattha can take us to seeing things as they truly are. We were also asked to listen, absorb, and memorize—rather than to question critically, analyze, and form opinions based on our own analysis—the techniques generally emphasized at European and American schools and universities.

In confusion, I wrote to a British bhikkhunī in the Tibetan tradition, one of the first European-born nuns, who lived at that time in India. She answered, “Get rid of muddled thinking, but we do need clear thinking.” Later, a European monk in Sri Lanka pointed out to me that Sucinta also means “loving thinking.” It includes all the good qualities usually associated with the heart, not just those attributed to the head.

Indeed, when I looked at the root of the word *cintā* (wisdom) and its connection with *citta* (the seat and organ of thought), it was interesting to find that *citta* emphasizes the emotional and intentional side of thought, rather than its rational side. According to the Pāli Dictionary (Rhys Davids and Stede) it is justified only later in scholastic language to use the term “thought” in the technical sense—as some kind of reasoning. In translations from Thai language, *citta* is usually translated as “heart”, not as “mind”, or both English terms are used interchangeably.

Since then I have come to appreciate my name even more. The occasion of Bhante G’s 80th birthday seems a good moment to reflect on the benefits of learning to sit cross-legged, cultivate awareness of mental habits, and let go of those habits not conducive to peace of mind. To express my gratitude, I will look more deeply into “good thinking,” its value in dhamma practice, and its impact on my own path.

“THINKING” IN THE BUDDHA’S TEACHINGS

The Pāli Canon is rich in words for thinking or terms related to the thinking process, which indicates its crucial role within the teachings. If I were to thoroughly analyze these terms, the undertaking would not be completed before Bhante G’s 90th birthday. Therefore, I will only briefly mention the most common Pāli words for thinking.

The term *sucinta*, as far as I have found, does not appear in the scriptures; however, *cintā* does occur. Often we find it associated with *paññā* (wisdom). *Cintā-maya-paññā* is knowledge based on thinking. It is the second step in the development of wisdom, following *sutta-maya-paññā* (knowledge gained from hearing or reading the Buddha’s teaching) and it precedes *bhāvanā-maya-paññā* (knowledge which directly realizes the Dhamma as the truth). Thus *cintā-maya-paññā* is the link between these two—the intermediate process, which turns the teachings inward. Thus it paves the way for *bhāvanā-maya-paññā*.

The Buddha clearly pointed out the importance of thinking and pondering in shaping or coloring the mind as the forerunner of speech and action: “Bhikkhus, whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of the mind” (*Dvedhāvitakka Sutta*, MN 19). What we think—which kinds of thoughts we follow and cultivate—determines happiness or unhappiness in the future. Before his enlightenment, it occurred to the Buddha to divide his thoughts into two classes: unwholesome thoughts of greed, hatred and cruelty, and wholesome thoughts of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-cruelty.

Sammāsankappo, which can be regarded as a synonym of *sucinta*, is the second aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path. Sometimes translated as Right Thought, sometimes as Right Intention, it includes the intentional aspect of thought as well. Here the Buddha specified further what “right” thinking is, what deserves the attribute “good”:

Thoughts of letting go instead of thoughts associated with greed.

Thoughts of loving friendliness instead of thoughts of ill-will.

Thoughts of compassion instead of thoughts of cruelty.

These three Right Intentions particularly follow the second Noble Truth: Because greed is the basic underlying cause of all our suffering, we need to let go of greed as well as greed’s flip side, aversion and cruelty. *Sucinta*, therefore, includes thoughts of *metta* as well as compassion.

Another Pāli term for thinking frequently found in the Pāli Canon is *vitakka* and it covers a wide range of mental activity, not merely discursive thinking, and its kammic consequences are variable; i.e., it can be wholesome or unwholesome. In *Vitakkasanthāna Sutta* (MN 20), for example, it appears in the sense of distracting thoughts: “evil, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion.”

On the other hand, when found together with *vicāra*, *vitakka* plays an important role in the process of focusing the mind. Both are factors in the first jhana. In this context, *vitakka* is usually translated as “applied thought” and *vicāra* as “sustained thought.” As jhana factors, both are definitely *kusala* (skillful). The right application of thought supports the mental process of unification and leads to stability. In the beginning, it is thought or intention that brings the mind back to the breath or another meditation object again and again (*vitakka*) and keeps it focused there (*vicāra*). Therefore, thoughts cannot be universally regarded as a hindrance to concentration. Thoughts of renunciation and thoughts of benevolence are necessary conditions for the practice of mental cultivation.

In order to see the downsides of thinking and to discriminate more clearly between good thinking and destructive thinking, I found it helpful to take into consideration those forms which lead us away from clarity and peace of mind. One is *maññati* (conceiving), a form of thinking usually tainted by the egocentric perspective (see MN 140). Descartes’s “Cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am.”) is probably the strongest possible expression of this inclination to identify with thinking and to consider ourselves as the thinker. We confirm our sense of self in thoughts and hold on to “our” views. The Buddha’s advice is to regard thoughts, just as with the body, feelings, perceptions, and consciousness, as “This is not me, this is not mine, this is not myself.”

Sucinta is definitely opposed to *papañca* (mental proliferation), which feeds on *tanhā*, *ditthi*, and *māna* (greed, wrong view of self, and conceit); factors that keep us in the rounds of samsara. Obsessive thinking belongs to this category. Good thinking does not overwhelm us; it is easier to master and to let go of. The proliferating mind builds all kinds of castles in the air or creates monsters, makes up stories and dramas, ruminates, and indulges in complexity. Any sensory impression or mental object (memory, mental image, or thought) may trigger a chain reaction of ideas, which sometimes leads us far away from the original sensory input and makes us act in ways that are no longer in accord with reality. This kind of thinking should be regarded as dangerous as nuclear material. It may completely run out of control. *Papañca* corrupts thinking. It distorts perceptions and provokes further mental loops, which cause an accumulation of trouble. The monsters fabricated, which are based on impressions through all the six senses, come to haunt their creator. What is true for the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body applies as well to the mind as the sixth sense:

Dependent on the mind and mental objects, mind-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man with respect to past, future and present forms cognizable through the mind” (MN 18, Madhupindika Sutta).

This process will continue unless we cultivate its opposite: *nippapañca*, which ends the mental process right at the raw sense impressions, such as seeing, hearing, and touching, leading to simplic-

ity, calm and peace.

GOOD THINKING AS A REMEDY FOR DESTRUCTIVE THINKING

These teachings are more familiar in the context of meditation, but we know that distracted thinking is also destructive in daily life. Whether on or off the cushion, most meditators' minds won't stop all mental fabrication immediately. Actually, when we want the thoughts to go away, they will invade the mind even more forcefully and keep coming up with more elaborate stories. To counter this, the first step in practice is to replace our self-centered dramas with good stories that lead the mind to calm and peace; like the lullabies that helped us fall asleep when we were babies. We tend to review insults and hurtful words and acts of other people, or follow dreams of acquisition or worry. Instead we should cultivate a heart of forgiveness and compassion for conditioned beings in a world of imperfection. In the *Vitakkasanthāna Sutta* (MN 20), this is the first method the Buddha recommended for dealing with distracting thoughts. He gave the simile of using a finer peg to remove a coarse one.

The Buddha often used very strong metaphors to help us understand and wake up. In this way he encouraged us to use our capacity for imagination to create images that help us to let go of troubling thoughts. He illustrates the second method for overcoming distracting thoughts with such a metaphor. If we indulge in mental fabrications, enjoying them so much that we keep on following their trail, it is necessary to realize their downside. He recommends that we imagine them as being something very ugly like the carcass of a dog hanging around our neck. Thus we pay attention to the danger in our mental activity, the state of delusion we nourish when we pursue it, and the disappointment and unhappiness that inevitably result when greed and delusion take over. We learn that the thoughts and pleasant feelings that accompany fantasizing are fleeting and leave us with an empty heart.

As a third method, the Buddha recommended deliberately distracting the mind from unwholesome thoughts and directing it to some other object. We might bring the attention to the body, the breath, or other physical sensations, such as sounds or sights. This works in the same way that a parent might distract a crying baby with the ring of a bell or the sight of a colorful toy. While the baby is listening, watching, or touching, he stops crying and might even smile. Sometimes it is sufficient to have the adult's mind deliberately think of something else; for example, listening to a dhamma talk, remembering a memorized passage, or attending to a phrase or even just an inspiring word.

The fourth method—in case the first three do not work—the Buddha called “the stilling of thought formations.” He compared it to a man who is walking, and he asks himself, why is he walking, then comes to a standstill, sits down, and then lies down. In a similar way, the active mind with awareness is able to change its mode, to slow down, to settle, and to become calm. When the mind is agitated—full of intricate dramas with many characters involved—it helps to trace the agitation back to its origin. This was the method of the lion, the king of the beasts, according to the Jataka story, “The Rabbit Who Overcame Fear:”

A young rabbit believed the world was breaking apart. His fear was contagious, and not only other rabbits, but many larger animals created a stampede, running for their lives. The animals ran closer and closer to a cliff. Just before they fell into the ocean, the lion watching them from aside roared out to make them stop. Then he began an investigation into what was really going on. Finally he confronted the young rabbit

who had been the first to run. The lion and the rabbit retraced their steps to the place where the rabbit had heard a loud noise. It was that noise that had given him the idea the world was going to pieces. The cause of the noise? A mango had fallen from the tree under which the rabbit had been sleeping.

Our stories may not begin with falling mangos or plucked apples, but similar trivial events trigger human mental dramas. Fear is an especially powerful fuel for mental proliferation. It is helpful to find the emotion that feeds recurring thoughts. Once the emotion is recognized and felt directly—physically, mentally, or both—destructive narratives lose their power. It is no longer necessary to beat around the bush. We can face the trouble-maker head on. What is known we can let go. The mind relaxes and comes to peace.

But certain thoughts or impulses may be very strong and resist all previously mentioned methods. If thoughts connected with greed, hatred and delusion persist, the Buddha advised the following method as the last resort: “With his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he beats down, constrains, and crushes mind with mind.” In this case a very strong determination is needed as an emergency brake to prevent harm.

GLADDENING THE MIND

Good thinking, on the other hand, may be used as a tool for energizing and gladdening the mind. In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (V.10.10, Bhikkhunīs’ Quarters) the Buddha taught “development by direction” (directing the mind to a particular subject of recollection) and “development without direction” (using no other subject besides the four foundations of mindfulness). When a bhikkhu is contemplating the body or the other foundations of mindfulness and there arises in him “either a fever in the body or sluggishness of mind, or the mind is distracted outwardly”, then he should “direct the mind towards some inspiring sign.” The commentary suggests reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha or another suitable subject which inspires confidence and gladdens the mind. “When he is gladdened, rapture is born. When the mind is uplifted by rapture, the body becomes tranquil. One tranquil in body experiences happiness. The mind of one who is happy becomes concentrated.” Once the mind is concentrated, according to the Buddha’s instruction, the bhikkhu then should withdraw thinking and examining.

In my experience, many Westerners have difficulty gladdening the mind by recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha. They might have to translate the attributes given to the Buddha a bit differently than usual, and these renderings could be a worthwhile subject in itself. For me, I feel the compassion and wisdom of the Buddha when I think of him as the “Knower of the Mind” instead of the “Knower of the World.” He knew that an untrained mind can do more harm to us than our worst enemy and he found a systematic training as a cure. Reflecting on other attributes of the Buddha, such as “the Worthy One” or “the Accomplished One,” can inspire our devotion and dedicated practice.

Recollection of dhamma includes the reflection on the Dhamma as natural law which exists independently of anyone’s acknowledgement. Aniccā (impermanence), dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), and anattā (selflessness) were present before the Buddha realized them and pointed out these fundamental principles to us. Guided by his teachings, also called the Dhamma, we are headed in the right direction, living more and more in accordance with things as they really are. We test the Buddha’s instruc-

tions and see the results for ourselves. When we experience that we are led from darkness to light, or from light to more light, our confidence and delight in the Dhamma increases. We recollect the good qualities we are developing on this path and begin to taste the freedom that comes with this practice.

Recollection of the Sangha can help us, when we feel discouraged. We remember those noble beings who started deep in confusion and yet made an end to their suffering: a mass murderer like Angulimāla; women mad with grief like Kisāgotami and Patācārā; prostitutes like Ambapāli; Anuruddha, who was so pampered as a child that he thought “no cake” was just another kind of cake; and Culapanthaka, who could not even remember a single stanza of the teaching and was therefore considered a dullard. Their example encourages us to persevere.

FROM THOUGHTS OF LETTING GO TO LETTING GO OF THOUGHTS

When we gladden the mind, it becomes content and tranquil. It sees that even good thoughts tire the body and the mind and realizes the advantage in letting go of thinking. Renunciation becomes another source of happiness.

Without regarding thoughts as adversaries or hindrances, we look at them in a different way and lose interest in their contents. There is a part of the mind that is not involved in thinking the thought, but is able to observe the thinking; it knows the difference between these two alternative modes. Watching the process of thinking with detachment requires concentration and skill, because otherwise we get caught up in the content. My meditation teacher in Myanmar compared this task with catching a snake: If we hold it only at the tail, it will turn around and bite us. Again we believe the mind’s chatter and allow its poison to flow in. In vipassana meditation we mentally “lean back” and keep thoughts at a distance, so that we see them as if from outside, as empty bubbles. When thoughts slow down, we appreciate the gaps, the silence between them.

Thoughts are *sankhāras* (formations)—both conditioned and conditioners—connected with many mental factors: wholesome, unwholesome, or neither wholesome nor unwholesome. In the *Abhidhamma* we learn that those mental factors are *paramattha* (ultimate reality) as well. All thoughts can reveal the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena: *aniccā*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. If we do not get carried away by our thoughts, they too are the raw material for insight and stepping stones for the way out of suffering.

Relinquishing thoughts might be the hardest part of the practice for some people who meditate, especially those of us with a speculative mind. However, the more the mind is inclined towards relinquishing all worldliness, the more stillness and peace of mind increase and the easier meditation becomes. Renunciation finally includes thinking itself. It is like gliding: once the glider is airborne, the aircraft that pulled it up becomes superfluous and the connecting rope is let go. Now it is gliding freely. In the end: letting go of everything. No gliding, no movement. No fear, no delight. Just peace.

Compassion Within the Eightfold Path

Ven. Bhikkhunī Sudhamma

Ven. Bhikkhunī Sudhamma, born in 1963 in Charlotte, NC, enjoyed a brief career as an attorney in San Francisco before changing professions to take care of people with disabilities. In 1999, she first encountered the Dhamma through Thai monks visiting San Francisco. In mid-1999, she gratefully received from Bhante Gunaratana the opportunity to live the holy life and went forth as a samaneri. She obtained bhikkhunī ordination in Sri Lanka in 2003. Currently, Bhikkhunī Sudhamma serves as the resident monk at Carolina Buddhist Vihāra, in Greenville, SC.

Compassion is often described as a melting of the heart at the thought of the suffering of another being, with the wish to alleviate that suffering. Although compassion does not encompass the entire path of spiritual development taught by the Buddha, it plays a significant role.

The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path is a set of eight directives for how to achieve freedom from suffering, or at least enjoy a happier life. His path combines development of wise perspective (*pañña*), with cultivation of skillful outer conduct (*sīla*), and skillful inner mental conduct (*samādhi*). The second and the sixth steps imply cultivation of compassion.

The path starts with Right or Skillful Understanding. This is the basic understanding of how the whole big picture of life fits together through the law of cause-and-effect. On a refined level, it means understanding the root of all our mental pain as being any kind of desire or grasping, and that the end of all suffering depends upon the cessation of all desire. (Desire as the root of all suffering is a key part of the Four Noble Truths. Step one on the path is often defined as understanding the Four Noble Truths.) More fundamentally, it means recognizing that "what comes around goes around," or "what goes up must come down." In other words, Right Understanding requires a basic grasp of kamma (karma). Whatever you do will come back to you one way or another, sooner or later.

COMPASSION WITHIN STEP TWO

Knowing even a basic idea of kamma, one becomes well-motivated to embrace step two of skillful or right intention. Do you want others receiving you with a generous, open heart, loving-kindness and compassion? Or, is stingy indifference, aversion, and cruelty just fine, coming at you from every direction, now and also later? What comes around goes around.

The Buddha described three aspects to right intention:

1. Intention of renunciation, in the sense of letting go of any objects of desire. It implies open-hearted, generous letting-go of all grasping; hence it directly counteracts the root of suffering.
2. Intention of non-ill will. Ill will is a deepening of suffering caused by desire so intensified as to

have become twisted into the seemingly opposite quality of aversion; non-ill will implies loving-kindness.

3. Intention of non-cruelty. Cruelty lies at the farthest, worst end of twisted desire, being the most ugly and brutal manifestation of ill-will. The word cruelty brings up images of the worst and most famous examples of human brutality, as in cases of outrageous cruelty during war. Yet cruelty has relatively subtle manifestations, too. Is the word “idiot” not a cruel thing to say to someone? Even mere thoughts can have a tone of cruelty. Non-cruelty implies compassion.

Hence compassionate intention is a significant part of the natural, intelligent response to understanding that “what comes around goes around.” Compassion brings immediate reward too, as the open-hearted sense of connection feels quite pleasant, soothing the mind and relaxing the body.

No one ever said that the law of “what comes around goes around” applies only to actions towards certain people. When deliberately cultivated to full strength, compassion has the potential to become boundless, extending far beyond one’s usual limited ability to recognize commonality and to empathize. Before cultivating compassion, people begin at varying degrees of separation. The most miserable, shut-down, walled-off people recognize only their own selfish interests. With improvement, such people may begin to care also about their immediate family or clan. With a wider perspective, they find empathy for people of their town or region, yet may still resist those outside of these boundaries; for example, “I like Southerners, but Yankees should go home.” Some people habitually cut off empathy for an entire gender, race, or ethnicity. Some people may watch the news carefully for any word about English-speaking people or Christian people, with ready sympathy for such select groups, but shrug off what happens to the others, feeling only begrudging concern for them.

Some people have their heart as wide as the world for all people, unhindered by the usual excuses for separation—yet remain uncaring, even cruel towards non-human beings. They may help raise money for hunger-relief overseas, yet set out traps or poison to kill the hungry raccoons that enter their backyard in search of food. Many have no regard for animals since they supposedly have no “so-called” soul. Even among those who care about domesticated creatures, few show any concern for small, wild creatures. Far fewer care whatsoever for insects. Yet an expert told me that insects’ bodies are miniaturized, like computer chips, containing everything necessary for sentience, simply smaller in size. Universal compassion wisely does not hesitate to feel a sense of commonality and wish to relieve suffering of all sentient beings—motivating one to move as quickly to pull a drowning fly out of water as one would move to rescue a kitten or child.

If someone suffers obstructive habits such as blame, shame, resentment, despair or aggression, compassionate intention allows spiritual development to take root. For example, if you begin to shut down or become rigidly controlling, you can step back and find compassion for the hurting being—oneself—who suffers so much that he or she needs to think and act this way. Relief is immediate. If you suddenly feel foolish or perceive yourself as a failure, again you may turn to compassion to prevent or overcome the taunting, shaming messages of your own mind (such as, “You always ...!” “You should not have ...! Stupid!”) By stopping the internal cruelty, you prevent it from going outwards to others.

Compassion not only quickly cuts off cruel tendencies; it leaves a sense of balance and gentle

uplift. It brings an overflowing kindness for others that feels almost like water welling up in the heart and flowing outwards to those who need sympathy. Once someone begins to practice compassion, many others will come to rely on his or her kindness, calling him or her words such as “sweet” and “nice,” and never guessing how foreign such kindness was to him or her before beginning this practice.

The Eightfold Path does not end with the skillful and beautiful intentions of step two, but continues with the rest of the eight directives. Compassion has a role in another of these. To explain requires a brief explanation of the rest of the steps. They are, in full: (1) Right Understanding, (2) Right Intention, (3) Right Speech, (4) Right Action, (5) Right Livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) Right Mindfulness, and (8) Right Concentration.

Given the understanding that what comes around goes around, along with skillful intentions—the open-hearted gesture of letting go, loving-kindness and compassion—you become well-motivated to modify your speech and behavior to be more beautiful, harmonious and kind. Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood, cover the modification and purification of speech and behavior. Right Livelihood is essentially the reminder that kamma still applies to one’s behavior even on the job, and to the way one earns one’s living. Thus the Buddha covered most of our possible actions of speech and body.

Yet, there are not just these two, but three kinds of actions that anyone can do; the third is actions of the mind. All three—actions of body, speech and mind—can be modified, uplifted, and made more perfectly skillful. The remaining steps of right effort, mindfulness and concentration, get down to the business of directly training the mind. With these last three steps you begin to modify your mental actions.

COMPASSION WITHIN STEP SIX

Right effort has to do with choosing wholesome mental states over unwholesome mental states every waking moment. It is the skillful effort to let the mind become beautiful. Right Mindfulness essentially encourages us to remain mindful of all actions of body and mind, as in “be here now,” and noting deeper reality as it continually manifests. The last step of Right Concentration has to do with sitting in meditation, enjoying the uplifted, beautiful states that lead into deeper and deeper concentration. This makes the mind extremely focused and powerful. With these deeper levels of concentration, the mind can become like a microscope, and, if wedded to right mindfulness, it gets to where one sees the present moment completely clearly, bringing no more doubt about reality.

Returning to Right Effort, the Buddha described it as a sequence of efforts, of preventing and overcoming unwholesome states of mind, and developing and making a continuing habit of wholesome states of mind. Compassion plays a role in this step, so we need to take a closer look.

First, let us separate wholesome from unwholesome states of mind. Anger, obviously, is unwholesome. Grasping, impatience, resentment, rage, fear, laziness, stinginess and pride, among others, belong on the same list. Opposite qualities such as loving-kindness, compassion, letting-go, energy, generosity, gratitude, caring, humbleness, honesty, faith and patience, among others, belong on the wholesome list. Even children can easily sort out most wholesome states from the unwholesome ones.

The Buddha offered an underlying logic to these two divisions: unwholesome states arise out of

deeper roots of greed, aversion, and delusion; wholesome states arise out of deeper roots of non-greed, non-aversion, and clarity.

If any unwholesome state enters your heart, all other unwholesome states remain near at hand. Jealousy, for example, can easily lead to anger and other unwholesome states, can it not? Anger can lead to resentment, ingratitude, hard-heartedness, or any other miserable quality on the sorrowful, regrettable, unwholesome list. Imagine that in a village lives a group of mean brothers in a one-room house; on entering the mean home to talk with one brother, the other brothers hang around nearby, listening, and may enter the conversation. The most minor unwholesome state, such as mild irritability or self-pity, may quickly flare into worse states that bring harmful speech and evil actions. On the other hand, allowing into your heart any one of the wholesome states, such as serenity, easily leads to other lovely states such as gladness, generosity, or compassion; all good qualities remain near at hand, also like a clan of brothers.

A funny thing about the wholesome states and unwholesome states: you cannot have both qualities at the same time. The mind has one experience after another, and, for ordinary beings, mental experience must have either a wholesome flavor or an unwholesome flavor. The mind visits either the wholesome camp or the unwholesome camp at any given instant (although it goes back and forth so rapidly that you cannot easily say which quality predominates. Hence a moment of a wholesome state such as compassion guards against an unwholesome state during that moment.

Compassion, like other wholesome states, brings you close to all the other delightful states of mind that let you feel like life is worth living, even a joy to live. When one's heart softens and melts, feeling open to whatever comes towards oneself or others, pliant and strong, accepting and kind, the unwholesome states hide away (at least temporarily). The heart becomes full and overflowing.

HEAVEN ON EARTH

Many wholesome mental states exist, yet the Buddha repeatedly recommended four as particularly powerful for raising up the mind: loving-friendliness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), altruistic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). He called them "*Brahmavihāra*." Brahma means a high god and vihāra means a dwelling place. In this sense Brahmavihāra means "heavenly dwelling." In other words, with your heart steeped in loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy or equanimity, you experience a kind of heaven-on-earth.

Loving-friendliness and compassion often receive mention almost interchangeably, but they do differ. With loving-friendliness, one emanates well-wishing for other beings. A typical phrase of loving-friendliness is, "May they be well, happy and peaceful." Loving-friendliness has a lighter, brighter, more cheerful and uplifted quality than sober compassion, that full-hearted response to the depth of pain and loss in the world.

Altruistic joy means the opposite of jealousy: gladness, a sense of uplift at the thought of good things happening for other people.

Equanimity refers to a vibrant, balanced state of mind, unshaken by life's vicissitudes. One who strongly cultivates equanimity does not become depressed or elated, no matter how rough or comfortable one's conditions. He or she simply continues on mindfully. (It is said that enlightened ones "walk evenly over the uneven." SN Ch 1 No. 8 [S i 4]). At its greatest strength, equanimity, supported

by other factors of wisdom,¹ opens into full enlightenment. Yet even a little bit of equanimous attitude goes a long way towards helping us let go of unwholesome states and habitual patterns of thinking that threaten to destroy our peace of mind.

Many times the Buddha suggested using the Brahmavihāras as the focus of meditation. He said to start by pouring well-wishing feelings of loving-friendliness into every direction. (He offered various methods for filling every direction.²) Next, do the same with compassion, then altruistic joy, then equanimity.

These four go together well not only in sitting meditation; they also support each other in one's ongoing, daily mental development. Any one Brahmavihāra by itself, in anyone not yet enlightened, has certain pitfalls, but when cultivated together, each guards the others from their specific possible downsides.³

A Brahmavihāra offers a quick remedy against its opposite quality, called its "far enemy." Yet for each Brahmavihāra there is another unwholesome counterpart, called the "near enemy." This is not a clear opposite, but rather seems so close to the wholesome quality that the two can be mistaken for each other. People sometimes fall into this pitfall when attempting to cultivate these wholesome states. Compassion helps to overcome the near enemies of the other Brahmavihāras.

The practice of loving-friendliness overcomes its far enemy of anger/aversion. Yet, someone making effort to open the heart with loving-friendliness may carelessly slip into its near enemy, attachment. Attachment, unlike universal loving-kindness, is rooted in underlying greed. It can manifest in several ways. What began as simple well-wishing can turn into excessive involvement in the lives of others, and one may get swept up in their dramas. Becoming overly focused on certain people, one also may practice favoritism, wishing well for some while excluding others from the reach of one's kindness (particularly those who oppose the more favored peoples' interests). Such attachments, though easily mistaken for loving-kindness, may serve as a base for heavier unwholesome states of mind, such as resentment, and mislead one into unwholesome speech and actions, bringing deep suffering, and perhaps resulting in the worst evil deeds.

Compassion balances against the excessive involvements, favoritism and narrowness of an imperfect loving-kindness, for compassion embraces every being. Let's say that I feel loving-kindness for my friends but despise the thieves who recently robbed them. Compassion that is very big, broad, and open would remind me, "Thieves suffer too." They suffer from what they do, they suffer from their confusion, maybe they suffer from past circumstances that turned them in wrong directions, and they will suffer in future lives too. Doing evil *hurts*. With great compassion, if one sees a victim and the perpetrator both standing nearby, both looking stunned, then one does not prefer the victim over the perpetrator, for they both suffer.

Lust is another way attachment may manifest. A meditator sending someone loving-kindness that slips into attachment may suddenly start to think, "I've gotta have this person!" This is a disaster in some circumstances, especially for a celibate. A monk once told an audience that when he was newly ordained, each of his first five monk-teachers fell in love, disrobed, and ran away to be married. He eventually realized that those five monks had practiced loving-kindness as a focused meditation and carelessly directed it intensely towards individuals of the other gender. (This is why many meditation teachers warn against directing any lingering thoughts of loving-kindness towards an individual to

whom one may become attracted.) Compassion for everyone affected definitely will prevent harmful sexual behavior. On a higher level, compassion, if strong enough, brings such an uplifted regard for all beings that selfish sexual urges naturally fall away.

Altruistic joy overcomes the far enemy of jealousy. The near enemy of altruistic joy is excessive exuberance over someone's good fortune. Mental agitation arises, based on others' good fortune, rooted in greed. (An alternative teaching holds that *mudita's* near enemy is a pretense of shared happiness for the purpose of flattery and manipulation.) For example, someone wins the lottery and her neighbor begins jumping up and down, screaming and crying out, "Oh how wonderful!" Compassion brings down the giddiness with the steady understanding that, no matter how good things may get for some people, there remains unimaginable suffering for others. It also brings the sobering reminder that people's present joy may yield to future suffering. One needs to maintain a balance between this present, momentary joy and the bigger picture that includes impermanence and suffering.

An imperfect altruistic joy also tends towards partiality, favoring the happiness of these over the happiness of those. Compassion does not allow that, either.

Equanimity overcomes its far enemy of agitation. What do you suppose the near enemy of equanimity would be? Cold indifference. This is not wholesome detachment. Rather, it is the shutting down of the heart, motivated by aversion. Indifference, when mistakenly cultivated instead of equanimity, may mislead people into thinking they are making spiritual progress as they lose both positive and negative reactivity to the world around them. The unwholesomeness of this shut-down mental state becomes clear when you consider that it is often a factor in suicide. Compassion, however, does not allow indifference for even a heartbeat. Compassion breaks down the barriers, letting life and love and all good states come streaming in. Guarded by compassion, equanimity can be safely developed towards full perfection without getting lost in the near enemy.

Compassion, too, has a near enemy: pity (in the negative sense of the word). The shallow, sentimental dismay of pity covers aversive resistance to another's suffering. Pity lacks a sense of connection; one cannot connect with others' painful feelings—or one's own. "I'm so glad I'm not like those poor people over there. Keep them over there; I'm not really like them." The heart is closed. One looks down on them, thinking of them as separate, perhaps feeling twinges of sorrow, guilt, or other unwholesome states rooted in aversion. I have seen people express pity for a starving, lost pet, but when the desperate creature comes closer to beg for assistance these people cruelly stomp their feet or threaten the animal with a broom. "Poor thing!" they say with a sigh as the animal scurries away.

The *Brahmavihāra* of loving-friendliness quickly reveals to oneself the shortcomings of shallow pity. Loving-friendliness does not allow a sense of separation. It soothes and brightens the heart, taking away aversion. If well-developed, loving-kindness does not allow unwholesome pity to get even a foothold.

While we try to perfect compassion, another obstacle may arise. We can notice so much suffering that we become overwhelmed. We may feel melancholy, depressed, despairing, burned out, or even bitter. The uplift of altruistic joy comes to the rescue! Hearing of happy things happening to someone, we gain renewed sense of uplift and hope for all these suffering beings to find relief. Altruistic joy can tempt someone back out of his or her shell, saying, "Come on! There's a lot of good happening, not just pain. Come out, be alive, rejoin the world!" Thus altruistic joy brings balance. Most particularly

uplifting is news of someone turning his or her efforts to spiritual endeavors and making good progress in wisdom.

Equanimity also comes to compassion's rescue when aversive pity has developed. Equanimity reminds us that no beings receive random bad luck, but all are the owners of their kamma, reaping the pleasurable and painful experiences they have sown these many lifetimes. Furthermore, every being's internal nightmare in response to painful conditions comes entirely from his or her own mass of ignorance; no matter how hard the circumstances, an enlightened being cannot suffer. The most profound equanimity based upon insight into "non-self" (*anattā*) brings the most powerful remedy, which is wisdom into the true nature of all beings, including oneself. This purifies compassion completely from any downsides.

However, do not imagine that the teachings of the Buddha conclude with heavenly states of mind. We do not seek merely uplifted states of being to let ourselves enjoy a happier samsara and go to heaven. All states of being continue to harbor unsatisfactoriness, if there remains any subtle, underlying clinging. We need to develop wholesome actions of body, speech and mind without losing sight of the real goal: complete freedom. The Buddha said that the teaching of all buddhas is, "Do no evil, do good, and purify the mind." (*Ovada Patimokkha* Dh 183.) First, we must escape hellish states! Few people could effectively leap from the midst of painful, confused actions into a process of refined letting-go. Having put evil actions and mental states such as greed, anger and cruelty far behind us, we thoroughly cultivate wholesome states such as the Brahmavihāras. Once heavenly states of compassion and the rest are achieved and steadied, then the soothed, uplifted mind can settle into the transformative training of letting-go of even desire for these lovely states of being.

¹ For the seven factors of wisdom (bojjhanga or "factors of enlightenment") see MN 118.

² For examples: 1) Imagine the universe divided into four quarters and pervade each, in turn, with the well-wishing feelings of loving-kindness, sending it "above, below, around and everywhere, and to all as to myself". 2) Pour loving-kindness into the ten directions, starting with the northern direction, then northeastern direction and so forth, finishing with the directions above and below. 3) Mostly simply, in a text on loving-kindness alone, the Buddha said to spread it "upward to the skies, and downward to the depths; outwards and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill-will.")

³ For this section I am indebted to Ven. Nyanaponika Thera's "*The Four Sublime States*," Wheel Pub. No. 6, by BPS. See this brochure for more analysis of the mutually supportive Brahmavihāra.

The Way It Is

Ven. Ajahn Sumedho

Ven. Ajahn Sumedho was born in Seattle, Washington in 1934. In 1966, he went to Thailand to practice meditation at Wat Mahāthāt in Bangkok. Later he took dependence from Ajahn Chah and remained under his close guidance for ten years. In 1975, Luang Por Sumedho, established Wat Pah Nanachat, International Forest Monastery. In 1977, Ajahn Chah sent him to the West to establish a monastic Sangha. He was central in establishing Amaravati Buddhist Monastery and Chithurst Buddhist Monastery. He is currently resident as senior incumbent at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in Hertfordshire.

A skilful reflection is: “This is the way it is.” Venerable Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the renowned Thai sage, said, “If there was to be a useful inscription to put on a medallion around your neck it would be ‘This is the way it is.’” This reflection helps us to contemplate: wherever we happen to be, whatever time and place, good or bad, “This is the way it is.” It is a way of bringing an acceptance into our minds—a noting rather than a reaction.

The practice of meditation is reflecting on “the way it is” in order to see the fears and desires which we create. This is quite a simple practice, but the practice of Dhamma should be very, very simple, rather than complicated. Many methods of meditation are very, very complicated, with many stages and techniques—so one becomes addicted to complicated things. Sometimes because of our attachment to views, we don’t really know how things are. However, the more simple we get, the more clear, profound and meaningful everything is to us.

For example, consider the people here, the monks and nuns we live with. Maybe some we feel attracted to, some we feel averse to, some we sympathize with, some we understand, some we don’t understand; but whatever view we have, we can see it as just a “view” of a person, rather than a real person. We can hear ourselves saying, “I don’t want him to be like that... I want him to be otherwise. He should be this other way... shouldn’t be like this.”

“I want it to be otherwise” is the wail of the age, isn’t it? Why can’t life be otherwise? Why do people have to die? Why do we have to get old? Why this sickness? Why do we have to be separated from our loved ones? Why do innocent children who wouldn’t hurt anyone in their lives, and old people who wouldn’t hurt anyone—why do they have to suffer from starvation or brutality?

There is always some new horrible thing happening. The other day someone wrote to me about the Bangladesh Muslims trying to get rid of Buddhist Hill Tribes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts through genocide. Then we hear about Iranians trying to eradicate the Baha’is... it goes on endlessly. The Sinhalese and the Tamils... There’s always this clash between groups... one trying to take over another’s land or power.

This has been going on since who knows when. There’s always been someone trying to extermi-

nate someone else since Cain murdered Abel—and that was a long time ago! But each time we hear of these atrocities we say, “How terrible...it shouldn’t be...”

We hear about American drug companies selling poisonous and horrible drugs to the Third World countries. “That shouldn’t be! Dreadful.” The pollution of the planet, the despoiling of the environment, the killing of dolphins and whales...where does it end? What can you do about it? It seems to be an endless problem of human ignorance. At a time when people should know better, they are doing the most horrendous things to each other. It is a time of gloomy predictions...earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and diseases. It shouldn’t be like this.

Now saying, “This is the way it is,” is not an approval, or a refusal to do anything, but it is a way of establishing oneself in the knowledge that Nature is “like this.” In the animal kingdom it’s very much a question of survival of the fittest, a natural, self-selecting law, where the weaker strains are destroyed. So in that way, even Nature is quite brutal, isn’t it? We think of Nature as being everything it “should” be: sweet, with flowers, and sunshine—but Nature is also very brutal.

What is our position in Nature? We can live on the level of the animal kingdom with its emphasis on the survival of the fittest, the strong over the weak and living by fear and power. We can live like that because we share that animal mentality. We have an animal body and it has to survive like any other animal body on this planet. So, the “law of the jungle” is something human beings can subscribe to—which many of them do.

But this is only a lower level, isn’t it? If we just live on that level, then we must expect the world to be as it is: in a state of fear, and anxiety. But as human beings we can get beyond this animal level; we can decide to have some kind of moral standard to abide by, so that we don’t have to live our lives in a state of anxiety.

But even higher than that is our ability to realize the Truth—to contemplate existence, to cultivate the reflective mind through which we can transcend personality. At the level of moral behavior we still have very strong personality view. And in our civilization we’ve developed a sense of “me” and “mine” to absurdity. So strong is this sense of “me” and “mine” that it seems to dominate everything and taint everything that we’re doing; and there always is a sense of anguish and suffering connected with it.

Just contemplate this: whenever there is a sense of “me” and “mine” in anything, it always seems to give rise to discontentment or uncertainty or doubt, guilt, fear, or anxiety. There is this view of “me” as an individual being, that “this” is mine, that “I” should or should not, based on a belief in oneself as the body or mental conditions. However, this view is based on an illusion; it comes from conditioning, not from insight. So as long as we identify with the limitations of the body and the mind, then of course we are going to experience doubt, despair, anguish, sorrow, grief, and lamentation—these mental forms of suffering. How could it be otherwise? We’re certainly not going to get enlightenment from distorted misunderstanding and wrong view.

We have this opportunity now, to establish Right View and Right Understanding, which frees us from the personality illusion—the identification with what are called the five aggregates: body, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. So we contemplate the consciousness through the senses—the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. We can contemplate mental formations, the yesterdays of our own creation and the thoughts and views that we create. We can see them as impermanent.

We have the ability to contemplate the nature of things; this ability to say, "This is the way it is." We can notice "the way it is" without adopting a personality viewpoint. So with the breath of the body, the weight of it, the posture of it, we are just witnessing and doing nothing; observing how it is, now, in this moment. The mood of the mind, whether we feel bright or dull, happy or unhappy, is something we can know, something we can witness. And the empty mind, empty of the proliferations about oneself and others, is clarity. It's intelligent and compassionate. The more we really look into the habits we have developed, the more clear things become for us. So we must be willing to suffer, to be bored, and to be miserable and anguished. It's an opportunity to bear with these unpleasant mental states, rather than suppress them. Having been born, this is the way it is, at this time, at this place.

ACCEPTING THE WAY IT IS

How many of you have been practicing today, trying to become something: "I have got to do this... or become that... or get rid of something... or got to do something...?" That compulsiveness takes over, even in our practice of dhamma. "This is the way it is" isn't a fatalistic attitude of not caring or being indifferent, but is a real openness to the way things have to be at this moment. For example, right now at this moment, this is the way it is and it can't be any other way at this moment. It's so obvious, isn't it?

Right now, no matter whether you are feeling high or low or indifferent, happy or depressed, enlightened or totally deluded, half-enlightened, half-deluded, three-quarters deluded, one-quarter enlightened, hopeful or despairing—this is the way it is. And it can't be any other way at this moment.

How does your body feel? Just notice that the body is this way. It's heavy, it's earthbound, it's coarse, it gets hungry, it feels heat and cold, it gets sick; sometimes it feels very nice, sometimes it feels very horrible. This is the way it is. Human bodies are like this; so that this tendency to want it to be otherwise falls away. It doesn't mean we can't try to make things better, but we do so from understanding and wisdom rather than from an ignorant desire.

The world is this way and things happen, and it snows and the sun comes out, and people come and go; people have misunderstandings, people's feelings get hurt. People get lazy, and inspired and people get depressed and disillusioned, people gossip and disappoint each other and there is adultery and there's theft, drunkenness and drug addiction and there are wars; and there always have been.

Here in a community like Amaravati we can see the way things are. Now it's the weekend and more people come to offer alms-food and it's more crowded and noisy and sometimes there are children running up and down screaming and people pounding vegetables and chopping things and everything going on all over the place. You can observe "this is the way it is", rather than "these people are impinging on my silence." "I don't want it to be like that, I want it to be otherwise," might be the reaction if you like the quiet orderliness of the meal where there's none of that going on and there are no loud noises or harsh sounds. But life is like this, this is the way life is, this is human existence. So, in our minds we embrace the whole of it, and "this is the way it is" allows us to accept the changes and movements from the silent to the noisy, from the controlled and ordered to the confused and muddled.

One can be a very selfish Buddhist and want life to be very quiet and want to be able to "practice"

and have plenty of time for sitting, plenty of time for studying the Dhamma and “I don’t want to have to receive guests and talk to people about silly things” and “I don’t want to... blah, blah, blah.” You can really be a very, very selfish person as a Buddhist monk. You can want the world to align itself with your dreams and ideals and, when it doesn’t, you don’t want it anymore. But rather than make things the way you want them, the Buddha way is to notice the way things are. And it’s a great relief when you accept the way it is, even if it’s not very nice, because the only real misery is not wanting it to be like that.

Whether things are going not so well or well, if we’re not accepting the way things are the mind tends to be creating some form of misery. So, if you are attached to things going nicely, then you’ll start worrying about them if they don’t go so well, even when things are actually going well. I have just noticed that with little things, such as when it’s a sunny day and one jumps for joy—then the next thought will be, “But in England you know, the sun can disappear in the next moment.”

As soon as I’ve grasped one perception and I’m jumping for joy at the sunshine, the unpleasant thought arises that it may not last. Whatever you’re attached to will bring on its opposite. And then when things aren’t going very well, the mind tends to think, “I want them to get better than this.” So suffering arises wherever there is this grasping of desire.

The sensory world is pleasurable and painful, it’s beautiful and ugly, it’s neutral; there are all gradations, all possibilities in it. This is just what sensory experience is about. But when there’s ignorance and the self-view operating, I only want pleasure and I don’t want pain. I want only beauty and I don’t want ugliness. “Please God, please make me healthy; give me a good complexion, physical attractiveness, and let me stay young for a long time, get lots of money, wealth and power, no sickness, no cancer, lots of beautiful things around me; surround me with beauty and the pleasures of the senses at their best, please.” Then the fear will come that maybe I’ll get the worst. I could get leprosy, AIDS, Parkinson’s disease or cancer. And I might be rejected and despised and humiliated and left alone out in the cold; hungry, sick and in danger, with the wolves howling and the wind blowing.

From the viewpoint of the self, there’s a tremendous fear of rejection, ostracism or being despised in our society. There’s a fear of being left alone and unwanted; there’s a fear of being old, and left to die alone; there’s natural fear of physical danger, of being in situations where our bodies are in danger; and there’s the fear of the unknown, the mysterious, the ghosts and the unseen spirits.

So we gravitate to security don’t we? Cozy little places with electricity, central heating, insurance and guarantees on everything—rates paid and legal contracts. All of these give us a sense of safety or we seek emotional security. “Say you’ll always love me, dear. Say you’ll love me, even if you don’t mean it. Make everything safe and secure.” And in that demand there’s always going to be anxiety, because of the grasping at desire.

So we’re developing a light around the uplifting of the human spirit rather than the material guarantees. As an alms mendicant, you’re taking the risk that you might not get anything to eat. You might not have shelter, you might not have any really good medicine, you might not have anything nice to wear. People are very generous, but as mendicants we don’t take it for granted, assuming that we deserve it. We are grateful for whatever is offered, and cultivate the attitude of fewness of wants, fewness of needs. We need to make ourselves ready to be able to leave and relinquish everything at any moment; to have the kind of mind that doesn’t think, “This is my home; I want it to be guaranteed to

me for the rest of my life.”

No matter which way it goes, we adapt; our needs are few. And so we make adaptations to life, to time and place, rather than make demands. Whatever way it goes is the way it is.

Whatever diseases I may get, or tragedies or catastrophes or successes or the best to the worst, one can say this is the way it is. And in that there is acceptance and non-anger, non-greed and the ability to cope with life as it’s happening.

We are not here to become anything, or to get rid of anything, or to change anything, or to make anything for ourselves, or to demand anything—but to awaken more and more, to reflect, observe and know the Dhamma. Don’t worry that it might change for the worse. Whatever way it changes we have the wisdom to adapt to it. That is the real fearlessness of the alms mendicant life. We can adapt, we can wisely learn from all conditions, because this life span is not our real home.

This life span is a transition we’re involved in, this is a journey through the sensory realm and there are no nests, no homes, no abiding in this sensory realm. It’s all very impermanent, subject to disruption and change at any moment. That is its nature. That’s the way it is. There is nothing depressing about that if you no longer make the demand for security in it.

The reality of existence is that there isn’t any home here. So the homeless life, the going forth into mendicancy is what they call a heavenly messenger, because the religious spirit is no longer sharing the delusions of the worldly mind—which is very determined to have a material home and security. You have the trust in the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha and the teaching and the opportunities as mendicants and meditators for the insight and understanding to free the mind from the anxieties that come from the attachment to the sensory realm as a home.

The idea of owning, and hanging on to things is the illusion of the worldly life. The view of the self sends forth all these delusions in which we have to protect ourselves all the time. We’re always endangered, there’s always something to be worried about, something to be frightened of. But when that illusion is punctured with wisdom, then there is fearlessness. We see this is a journey and we are willing to learn the lessons no matter what those lessons might be.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND SENSITIVITY

Sometimes we approach meditation too much from an ideal of trying to control the mind and get rid of unwanted mental states. It can become an obsession. Meditation can be just another thing we have to do; and this worldly attitude tends to affect what we’re doing.

See meditation not as something for measuring yourself as a person, but as an occasion or opportunity to be mindful and be at peace with yourself and with whatever mood or state you happen to be in at this moment. Learn to be one who’s at peace with the way things are, rather than someone who’s trying to become something, or achieve a state that they’d like to have.

That whole way of thinking is based on delusion. I remember when I started meditating in Thailand, all my ambitious and aggressive tendencies would start taking over. The way I’d lived my life would affect how I would approach meditation. So I began to notice that. I began to let go of things and to accept even those tendencies, and be attentive to the way it is. The more you trust in that, the more quickly you will understand the Dhamma, or the way out of suffering.

If our peace and serenity depends upon conditions being a certain way, then we get very attached.

We become enslaved, we want to control situations and then we become even more angry and upset if anything disrupts them, gets in the way of our peace. “I’ve got to find some place, a cave. I’ve got to get my own sensory deprivation tank and find the ideal situation. Set up all the conditions where I can keep everything at bay so I can just abide in the blissful serenity of the purity of the mind.” But then you see, that view is based on desire, isn’t it? It’s a self-view, a desire to have that experience, because you remember it, liked it and want it again.

One time on a retreat, I heard some person who was having trouble swallowing. I was sitting there and that person would go, “Gulp, gulp.” They weren’t very loud but when you’re attached to total silence, even a gulp can upset you. So I got quite irritated and wanted to throw that person out of the meditation hall. Reflecting on it, I realized that the fault was in me, not in the person.

But mindfulness and understanding the Dhamma allow you to adapt and accept life—the total life experience—without having to control it. With mindfulness you don’t have to hold on to bits and pieces that you like and then feel very threatened by the possibilities of being separated from them. Right meditation allows you to be very brave and adaptable, flexible with your life and all that that implies.

By knowing the way it is, then you find yourself quite capable of accepting life and not being depressed and bewildered by the way life happens to be. Once you understand it and you see it in the right way, then you’re not going to create any wrong views about it. You’re not going to add to it with fears, and desires, and bitterness, and resentments and blame. We have the ability to accept the way life happens to us as individual beings. Even though we’re terribly sensitive, we’re also tough survivors in this universe.

Understanding dhamma allows us also to have a fearless attitude. We begin to realize that we can accept whatever happens. There’s really nothing to be afraid of. Then you can let go of life, you can follow it, because you’re not expecting anything out of it, and you’re not trying to control it. You have the wisdom, the mindfulness, the ability to roll with the flow rather than to be drowned by the tidal waves of life.

The Integrity of Emptiness

Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff) began practicing meditation with his teacher, Ajaan Fuang Jotiko in the Thai forest tradition in 1974. He ordained as a bhikkhu in 1976. In 1991 he came to southern California to help set up Metta Forest Monastery in the mountains of north San Diego county. Ajahn Geoff is the author of *The Mind Like Fire Unbound*, *The Buddhist Monastic Code*, and *The Wings to Awakening*. He is also translator of a number of Thai meditation guides, including the complete writings of Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo.

For all the subtlety of his teachings, the Buddha had a simple test for measuring wisdom. You're wise, he said, to the extent that you can get yourself to do things you don't like doing but know will result in happiness, and to refrain from things you like doing but know will result in pain and harm.

He derived this standard for wisdom from his insight into the radical importance of intentional action in shaping our experience of happiness and sorrow, pleasure and pain. With action so important and yet so frequently misguided, wisdom has to be tactical and strategic, in fostering actions that are truly beneficial. It has to outwit short-sighted preferences, to yield a happiness that lasts.

Because the Buddha viewed all issues of experience—from the gross to the subtle—in terms of intentional actions and their results, his tactical standard for wisdom applies to all levels as well, from the wisdom of simple generosity to the wisdom of emptiness and ultimate Awakening. Wisdom on all levels is wise because it works. It makes a difference in what you do and the happiness that results. And to work, it requires integrity: the willingness to look honestly at the results of your actions, to admit when you've caused harm, and to change your ways so that you won't make the same mistake again.

What's striking about this standard for wisdom is how direct and down-to-earth it is. This might come as a surprise, for most of us don't think of Buddhist wisdom as so commonsensical and straightforward. Instead, the phrase "Buddhist wisdom" conjures up teachings more abstract and paradoxical, flying in the face of common sense—emptiness being a prime example. Emptiness, we're told, means that nothing has any inherent existence. In other words, on an ultimate level, things aren't what we conventionally think of as "things." They're processes that are in no way separate from all the other processes on which they depend. This is a philosophically sophisticated idea that's fascinating to ponder, but it doesn't provide much obvious help in getting you up early on a cold morning to meditate, nor in convincing you to give up a destructive addiction.

For example, if you're addicted to alcohol, it's not because you feel that the alcohol has any inherent existence. It's because, in your calculation, the immediate pleasure derived from the alcohol outweighs the long-term damage it's doing to your life. This is a general principle: attachment and addic-

tion are not metaphysical problems. They're tactical ones. We're attached to things and actions, not because of what we think they are, but because of what we think they can do for our happiness. If we keep overestimating the pleasure and underestimating the pain they bring, we stay attached to them regardless of what, in an ultimate sense, we understand them to be.

Because the problem is tactical, the solution has to be tactical as well. The cure for addiction and attachment lies in retraining your imagination and your intentions through expanding your sense of the power of your actions and the possible happiness you can achieve. This means learning to become more honest and sensitive to your actions and their consequences, at the same time allowing yourself to imagine and master alternative routes to greater happiness with fewer drawbacks. Metaphysical views may sometimes enter into the equation, but at most they're only secondary. Many times they're irrelevant. Even if you were to see the alcohol and its pleasure as lacking inherent existence, you'd still go for the pleasure as long as you saw it as outweighing the damage. Sometimes ideas of metaphysical emptiness can actually be harmful. If you start focusing on how the damage of drinking—and the people damaged by your drinking—are empty of inherent existence, you could develop a rationale for continuing to drink. So the teaching on metaphysical emptiness wouldn't seem to pass the Buddha's own test for wisdom.

The irony here is that the idea of emptiness as lack of inherent existence has very little to do with what the Buddha himself said about emptiness. His teachings on emptiness—as reported in the earliest Buddhist texts, the Pāli Canon—deal directly with actions and their results, with issues of pleasure and pain. To understand and experience emptiness in line with these teachings requires not philosophical sophistication, but a personal integrity willing to admit the actual motivations behind your actions and the actual benefits and harm they cause. For these reasons, this version of emptiness is very relevant in developing the sort of wisdom that would pass the Buddha's commonsensical test for measuring how wise you are.

The Buddha's teachings on emptiness—contained in two major discourses and several smaller ones—define it in three distinct ways: as an approach to meditation, as an attribute of the senses and their objects, and as a state of concentration. Although these forms of emptiness differ in their definitions, they ultimately converge on the same route to release from suffering. To see how this happens, we will need to examine the three meanings of emptiness one by one. In doing so, we'll find that each of them applies the Buddha's commonsensical test for wisdom to subtle actions of the mind. But to understand how this test applies to this subtle level, we first have to see how it applies to actions on a more obvious level. For that, there's no better introduction than the Buddha's advice to his son, Rāhula, on how to cultivate wisdom while engaging in the activities of everyday life.

OBSERVING EVERYDAY ACTIONS

The Buddha told Rāhula—who was seven at the time—to use his thoughts, words, and deeds as a mirror. In other words, just as you would use a mirror to check for any dirt on your face, Rāhula was to use his actions as a means of learning where there was still anything impure in his mind. Before he acted, he should try to anticipate the results of the action. If he saw that they'd be harmful to himself or to others, he shouldn't follow through with the action. If he foresaw no harm, he could go ahead and act. If, in the course of doing the action, he saw it causing unexpected harm, he should stop the

action. If he didn't see any harm, he could continue with it.

If, after he was done, he saw any long-term harm resulting from the action, he should consult with another person on the path to get some perspective on what he had done—and on how not to do it again—and then resolve not to repeat that mistake. In other words, he should not feel embarrassed or ashamed to reveal his mistakes to people he respected, for if he started hiding his mistakes from them, he would soon start hiding them from himself. If, on the other hand, he saw no harm resulting from the action, he should rejoice in his progress in the practice and continue with his training.

The right name for this reflection is not “self-purification.” It’s “action-purification.” You deflect judgments of good and bad away from your sense of self, where they can tie you down with conceit and guilt. Instead, you focus directly on the actions themselves, where the judgments can allow you to learn from your mistakes and to find a healthy joy in what you did right.

When you keep reflecting in this way, it serves many purposes. First and foremost, it forces you to be honest about your intentions and about the effects of your actions. Honesty here is a simple principle: you don't add any after-the-fact rationalizations to cover up what you actually did, nor do you try to subtract from the actual facts through denial. Because you're applying this honesty to areas where the normal reaction is to be embarrassed about or afraid of the truth, it's more than a simple registering of the facts. It also requires moral integrity. This is why the Buddha stressed morality as a precondition for wisdom, and declared the highest moral principle to be the precept against lying. If you don't make a habit of admitting uncomfortable truths, the truth as a whole will elude you.

The second purpose of this reflection is to emphasize the power of your actions. You see that your actions do make the difference between pleasure and pain. Third, you gain practice in learning from your mistakes without shame or remorse. Fourth, you realize that the more honest you are in evaluating your actions, the more power you have to change your ways in a positive direction. And finally, you develop good will and compassion, in that you resolve to act only on intentions that mean no harm to anyone, and you continually focus on developing the skill of harmlessness as your top priority.

All of these lessons are necessary to develop the kind of wisdom measured by the Buddha's test for wisdom; and, as it turns out, they're directly related to the first meaning of emptiness, as an approach to meditation. In fact, this sort of emptiness simply takes the instructions Rāhula received for observing everyday actions and extends them to the act of perception within the mind.

EMPTINESS AS AN APPROACH TO MEDITATION

Emptiness as an approach to meditation is the most basic of the three kinds of emptiness. In the context of this approach, emptiness means “empty of disturbance”—or, to put it in other terms, empty of stress. You bring the mind to concentration and then examine your state of concentration in order to detect the presence or absence of subtle disturbance or stress still inherent within that state. When you find a disturbance, you follow it back to the perception—the mental label or act of recognition—on which the concentration is based. Then, you drop that perception in favor of a more refined one—one leading to a state of concentration with less inherent disturbance.

In the discourse explaining this meaning of emptiness (*Majjhima Nikāya* (MN)121), the Buddha introduces his explanation with a simile. He and Ananda are dwelling in an abandoned palace that is

now a quiet monastery. The Buddha tells Ananda to notice and appreciate how the monastery is empty of the disturbances it contained when it was still used as a palace—the disturbances caused by gold and silver, elephants and horses, assemblies of women and men. The only disturbance remaining is that caused by the presence of the monks meditating in unity.

Taking this observation as a simile, the Buddha launches into his description of emptiness as an approach to meditation. (The simile is reinforced by the fact that the Pāli word for “monastery” or “dwelling—vihāra—also means “attitude” or “approach.”) He describes a monk meditating in the wilderness who is simply noting to himself that he is now in the wilderness. The monk allows his mind to concentrate on and enjoy the perception, “wilderness.” He then steps back mentally to observe and appreciate that this mode of perception is empty of the disturbances that come with perceptions of the village life he has left behind. The only remaining disturbances are those associated with the perception, “wilderness”—for example, any emotional reactions to the dangers that wilderness might entail. As the Buddha says, the monk sees accurately which disturbances are not present in that mode of perception; as for those remaining, he sees accurately, “There is this.” In other words, he adds nothing to what is there and takes nothing away. This is how he enters into a meditative emptiness that is pure and undistorted.

Then, noting the disturbances inherent in the act of focusing on “wilderness,” the monk drops that perception and replaces it with a more refined perception, one with less potential for arousing disturbance. He chooses the earth element, banishing from his mind any details of the hills and ravines of the earth, simply taking note of its earthness. He repeats the process he applied to the perception of wilderness—settling into the perception of “earth,” fully indulging in it, and then stepping back to notice how the disturbances associated with “wilderness” are now gone, while the only remaining disturbances are those associated with the singleness of mind based on the perception of “earth.”

He then repeats the same process with ever more refined perceptions, settling into the formless jhanas, or meditative absorptions: infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception, and the objectless concentration of awareness.

Finally, seeing that even this objectless concentration of awareness is fabricated and willed, he drops his desire to continue mentally fabricating anything at all. In this way he is released from the mental fermentations—sensual desire, becoming, views, ignorance—that would “bubble up” into further becoming. He observes that this release still has the disturbances that come with the functioning of the six sense spheres, but that it’s empty of all fermentation, all potential for further suffering and stress. This, concludes the Buddha, is the entry into a pure and undistorted emptiness that is superior and unsurpassed. It’s the emptiness in which he himself dwells and that, throughout time, has never been nor ever will be excelled.

Throughout this description, emptiness means one thing: empty of disturbance or stress. The meditator is taught to appreciate the lack of disturbance as a positive accomplishment, and to see any remaining disturbance created by the mind, however subtle, as a problem to be solved.

When you understand disturbance as a subtle form of harm, you see the connections between this description of emptiness and the Buddha’s instructions to Rāhula. Instead of regarding his meditative states as a measure of self-identity or self-worth—in having developed a self that’s purer, more expansive, more at one with the ground of being—the monk views them simply in terms of actions and their

consequences. And the same principles apply here, on the meditative level, as apply in the Buddha's comments to Rāhula on action in general.

Here, the action is the perception that underlies your state of meditative concentration. You settle into the state by repeating the action of perception continually until you are thoroughly familiar with it. Just as Rāhula discovered the consequences of his actions by observing the obvious harm done to himself or to others, here you discover the consequences of concentrating on the perception by seeing how much disturbance arises from the mental action. As you sense disturbance, you can change your mental action, moving your concentration to a more refined perception, until ultimately you can stop the fabrication of mental states altogether.

At the core of this meditation practice are two important principles derived from the instructions to Rāhula. The first is honesty: the ability to be free of embellishment or denial, adding no interpretation to the disturbance actually present, while at the same time not trying to deny that it's there. An integral part of this honesty is the ability to see things simply as action and result, without reading into them the conceit "I am."

The second principle is compassion—the desire to end suffering—in that you keep trying to abandon the causes of stress and disturbance wherever you find them. The effects of this compassion extend not only to yourself, but to others as well. When you don't weigh yourself down with stress, you're less likely to be a burden to others; you're also in a better position to help shoulder their burdens when need be. In this way, the principles of integrity and compassion underlie even the most subtle expressions of the wisdom leading to release.

This process of developing emptiness of disturbance is not necessarily smooth and straightforward. It keeps requiring the strength of will needed to give up any attachment. This is because an essential step in getting to know the meditative perception as an action is learning to settle into it, to indulge in it—in other words, to enjoy it thoroughly, even to the point of attachment. This is one of the roles of tranquility in meditation. If you don't learn to enjoy the meditation enough to keep at it consistently, you won't grow familiar with it. If you aren't familiar with it, insight into its consequences won't arise.

However, unless you've already had practice using the Rāhula instructions to overcome grosser attachments, then even if you gain insight into the disturbances caused by your attachment to concentration, your insight will lack integrity. Because you haven't had any practice with more blatant attachments, you won't be able to pry loose your subtle attachments in a reliable way. You first need to develop the moral habit of looking at your actions and their consequences, believing firmly—through experience—in the worth of refraining from harm, however subtle. Only then will you have the skill needed to develop emptiness as an approach to meditation in a pure and undistorted way that will carry you all the way to its intended goal.

EMPTINESS AS AN ATTRIBUTE OF THE SENSES AND THEIR OBJECTS

Emptiness as an attribute, when used as a departure point for practice, leads to a similar process, but by a different route. Whereas emptiness as an approach to meditation focuses on issues of disturbance and stress, emptiness as an attribute focuses on issues of self and not-self. And whereas emptiness as an approach to meditation starts with tranquility, emptiness as an attribute starts with insight.

The Buddha describes this kind of emptiness in a short discourse (*Samyutta Nikāya* 35:85). Again, Ananda is his interlocutor, opening the discourse with a question: In what way is the world empty? The Buddha answers that each of the six senses and their objects are empty of one's self or anything pertaining to one's self.

The discourse gives no further explanation, but related discourses show that this insight can be put into practice in one of two ways. The first is to reflect on what the Buddha says about "self" and how ideas of self can be understood as forms of mental activity. The second way, which we will discuss in the next section, is to develop the perception of all things being empty of one's self as a basis for a state of refined concentration. However, as we shall see, both of these tactics ultimately lead back to using the first form of emptiness as an approach to meditation, to complete the path to awakening.

When talking about "self," the Buddha refused to say whether it exists or not, but he gave a detailed description of how the mind develops the idea of self as a strategy based on craving. In our desire for happiness, we repeatedly engage in what the Buddha calls "I-making" and "my-making" as ways of trying to exercise control over pleasure and pain. Because I-making and my-making are actions, they fall under the purview of the Buddha's instructions to Rāhula. Whenever you engage in them, you should check to see whether they lead to affliction; if they do, you should abandon them.

This is a lesson that, on a blatant level, we learn even as children. If you lay claim to a piece of candy belonging to your sister, you're going to get into a fight. If she's bigger than you, you'd do better not to claim the candy as yours. Much of our practical education as we grow up lies in discovering where it's beneficial to create a sense of self around something, and where it's not.

If you learn to approach your I-making and my-making in the light of the Rāhula instructions, you greatly refine this aspect of your education, as you find yourself forced to be more honest, discerning, and compassionate in seeing where an "I" is a liability, and where it's an asset. On a blatant level, you discover that while there are many areas where "I" and "mine" lead only to useless conflicts, there are others where they're beneficial. The sense of "I" that leads you to be generous and principled in your actions is an "I" worth making, worth mastering as a skill. So, too, is the sense of "I" that can assume responsibility for your actions, and can be willing to sacrifice a small pleasure in the present for a greater happiness in the future. This kind of "I," with practice, leads away from affliction and toward increasing levels of happiness. This is the "I" that will eventually lead you to practice meditation, for you see the long-term benefits that come from training your powers of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

However, as meditation refines your sensitivity, you begin to notice the subtle levels of affliction and disturbance that I-making and my-making can create in the mind. They can get you attached to a state of calm, so that you resent any intrusions on "my" calm. They can get you attached to your insights, so that you develop pride around "my" insights. This can block further progress, for the sense of "I" and "mine" can blind you to the subtle stress on which the calm and insights are based. If you've had training in following the Rāhula instructions, though, you'll come to appreciate the advantages of learning to see even the calm and the insights as empty of self or anything pertaining to self. That is the essence of this second type of emptiness. When you remove labels of "I" or "mine" even from your own insights and mental states, how do you see them? Simply as instances of stress arising and passing away—disturbance arising and passing away—with nothing else added or taken away. As you

pursue this mode of perception, you're adopting the first form of emptiness, as an approach to meditation.

EMPTINESS AS A STATE OF CONCENTRATION

The third kind of emptiness taught by the Buddha—as a state of concentration—is essentially another way of using insight into emptiness as an attribute of the senses and their objects as a means to attain release. One discourse (MN 43) describes it as follows: A monk goes to sit in a quiet place and intentionally perceives the six senses and their objects as empty of self or anything pertaining to self. As he pursues this perception, it brings his mind not directly to release, but to the formless jhana of nothingness, which is accompanied by strong equanimity.

Another discourse (MN 106) pursues this topic further, noting that the monk relishes the equanimity. If he simply keeps on relishing it, his meditation goes no further than that. But if he learns to see that equanimity as an action—fabricated, willed—he can look for the subtle stress it engenders. If he can observe this stress as it arises and passes away simply on its own terms, neither adding any other perceptions to it nor taking anything away, he's again adopting emptiness as an approach to his meditation. By dropping the causes of stress wherever he finds them in his concentration, he ultimately reaches the highest form of emptiness, free from all mental fabrication.

THE WISDOM OF EMPTINESS

Thus the last two types of emptiness ultimately lead back to the first—emptiness as an approach to meditation—which means that all three types of emptiness ultimately lead to the same destination. Whether they interpret emptiness as meaning empty of disturbance (suffering/stress) or empty of self, whether they encourage fostering insight through tranquility or tranquility through insight, they all culminate in a practice that completes the tasks appropriate to the four noble truths: comprehending stress, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path to that cessation. Completing these tasks leads to release.

What's distinctive about this process is the way it grows out of the principles of action-purification that the Buddha taught to Rāhula, applying these principles to every step of the practice, from the most elementary to the most refined. As the Buddha told Rāhula, these principles are the only possible means by which purity can be attained. Although most explanations of this statement define purity as purity of virtue, the Buddha's discussion of emptiness as an approach to meditation shows that purity here means purity of mind and purity of wisdom as well. Every aspect of the training is purified by viewing it in terms of actions and consequences—which helps to develop the integrity that's willing to admit to unskillful actions, and the mature goodwill that keeps aiming at consequences entailing ever less harm, disturbance, and stress.

This is where this sort of emptiness differs from the metaphysical definition of emptiness as “lack of inherent existence.” Whereas that view of emptiness doesn't necessarily involve integrity—it's an attempt to describe the ultimate truth of the nature of things, rather than to evaluate actions—this approach to emptiness requires honestly evaluating your mental actions and their results. Integrity is thus integral to its mastery.

In this way, the highest levels of wisdom and discernment grow primarily not from the type of knowledge fostered by debate and logical analysis, nor from the type fostered by bare awareness or mere noting. They grow from the knowledge fostered by integrity, devoid of conceit, coupled with compassion and goodwill.

The reason for this is so obvious that it's often missed: if you're going to put an end to suffering, you need the compassion to see that this is a worthwhile goal, and the integrity to admit the suffering you've heedlessly and needlessly caused throughout the past. The ignorance that gives rise to suffering occurs not because you don't know enough or are not philosophically sophisticated enough to understand the true meaning of emptiness. It comes from being unwilling to admit that what you're obviously doing right before your very eyes is causing suffering. This is why awakening destroys conceit: it awakens you to the full extent of the willful blindness that has kept you complicit in unskillful behavior all along. It's a chastening experience. The only honest thing to do in response to this experience is to open to release. That's the emptiness that's superior and unsurpassed.

In building the path to this emptiness on the same principles that underlie the more elementary levels of action-purification, the Buddha managed to avoid creating artificial dichotomies between conventional and ultimate truths in the practice. For this reason, his approach to ultimate wisdom helps validate the more elementary levels as well. When you realize that an undistorted understanding of emptiness depends on the skills you develop in adopting a responsible, honest, and kind attitude toward all your actions, you're more likely to bring this attitude to everything you do—gross or subtle. You give more importance to all your actions and their consequences, you give more importance to your sense of integrity, for you realize that these things are directly related to the skills leading to total release. You can't develop a throwaway attitude to your actions and their consequences, for if you do, you're throwing away your chances for a true and unconditional happiness. The skills you need to talk yourself into meditating on a cold, dark morning, or into resisting a drink on a lazy afternoon, are the same ones that will eventually guarantee an undistorted realization of the highest peace.

This is how the Buddha's teachings on emptiness encourage you to exercise wisdom in everything you do.

The Stillness of Being

Ven. Ajahn Viradhammo

Ven. Ajahn Viradhammo was born at Esslingen in Germany in 1947. He traveled to Thailand to become a samanera at Wat Mahāthāt and took upasampada in 1974 at Wat Pah Pong. He was asked by Ajahn Chah to join Ajahn Sumedho at the Hampstead Vihāra in London. In subsequent years, he was involved in the establishment of both Chithurst and Harnham monasteries. In 1985 he moved to New Zealand, where he lived for 10 years setting up Bodhinyanarama monastery. He has now set up The Tisarana Buddhist Monastery in the Ottawa area.

Buddhist concepts can help us. They can awaken us to certain things about human experience which we need to understand in order to be free. They are not just ideas that we put away until our next exam in Buddhism; they are principles and concepts through which we look at life, like lenses.

For me, monastic life is a model that the Buddha has offered of how we can all practice. Sometimes lay people ask: “But how do I do it as a lay person?” Lay life is so varied. Life situations vary so much; some people have families, some don’t. There are all kinds of lifestyles, so it’s hard to set up any specific model.

Certain general suggestions are given for lay practice: to keep the precepts, to live a moral life, to practice generosity. Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood are offered, but lay practice has to be creative in using life itself as a vehicle for freedom, and that’s very individual. Monastic life has a more uniform quality because we live together according to rules; as lay practitioners you can contemplate how this model works for reflection and contemplation.

Now the basic and fundamental prerequisite of monastic life is surrender, a giving up to a certain form and discipline. We take the precepts and accept this lifestyle; that’s the choice we make.

But then it becomes a situation where we no longer have that many choices. We live in a hierarchy. We have a prescribed way of relating between men and women. We have rules about taking care of our robes and the equipment of the monastery. We have rules that govern the sharing of things. We have various ways of admonishment and of ordination, of legal processes. As a monastic order we give up to this training and form. Some people think that rules are an infringement on freedom, but actually what this surrender or commitment does is give us the opportunity to watch, rather than a freedom always to do what we want. Before I ordained as a bhikkhu I lived in India for some time and had a tremendous amount of physical freedom. I managed to live on about ten dollars a month. I didn’t have the constraints of my old culture so there was enormous freedom.

But I became very confused. I got confused, because at that time I still believed that if I did what I wanted, I’d reach some kind of fulfillment. Instead I found that doing what I wanted to do just made me more and more frustrated, because it did not put an end to wanting. It did not put an end to that

fundamental restlessness which I kept trying to overcome by obtaining an experience: travel, a relationship or whatever. That kind of freedom actually was fun for a while, but it led to despair—the more I went out into the world of situations and events, the more I realized that this was not working. Then, through some stroke of good fortune I managed to become a bhikkhu.

I didn't find it easy, but of course that's not the point. The first year of monastic life was terribly frustrating, the second year was terribly frustrating, and the third year was terribly frustrating! I couldn't shuffle the pieces on the chessboard around. I couldn't go to the monastery I wanted.

I'd go to Ajahn Chah, and I'd say, "Luang Por, I'd like to go to such and such a monastery." He'd say, "What's wrong with this one? Don't you like me?" Ajahn Chah's way was very much one of frustrating desire—and he was fearless in that. He didn't mind if his disciples got angry with him! That's the kind of compassion he could exhibit: the compassion to frustrate. That takes a lot of courage, doesn't it? So I decided that if I was going to get anywhere near the Truth that the Buddha was trying to point out, I just had to stop and look. I couldn't just keep rearranging things according to my desires. I had already given that a good go and I knew it didn't work. The reason I took up this model, this vehicle, was not just to have fun, nor was it because I wanted to get something out of it. It was because I wanted to be able to observe the nature of frustrated desire as well as fulfilled desire.

So this fundamental commitment to a structure allows for the freedom to watch. Can you translate that into your own life? For example, your family, your job, your social structure: these can be vehicles for spiritual understanding, if you begin to accept that within them there will be frustrations—rather than always trying to rearrange situations to fulfill personal desires and needs. Obviously, if the situation is harmful in some way, then you have to make a change. But the usual humdrum, boring, annoying stuff of life is actually the stuff of enlightenment, if we are willing to observe how it is. So commitment is very important; and this is what the robe is: it's a symbol of commitment. Responsibility can be used as commitment, or it can be seen as a burden. I can take on the responsibility of being the senior monk and have kind of a martyr syndrome about it: "Oh, poor me, I have to be the senior monk..." or I can feel great about it: "Wow! Look at me, I'm the senior monk..." or I can just see it as a convention: "I'm the senior monk. I'd prefer to be a fly on the wall actually, but there I am: senior monk."

Then I watch what it does to me—whether there's like or dislike, or feeling that I'm doing it well or that I'm hopeless—beginning to observe how the mind functions within that situation, rather than changing or rearranging the situation according to some personal opinion. So, applying this to your own situation, ask yourself: "What happens to me at work?" "What happens to me at home?" Work is just not always going to be fulfilling. It can be boring, interesting or annoying, but we can make use of this commitment. If we're always shifting according to personal desire, we can never really understand how it operates in the mind. So commitment is fundamental to understanding our human mind. Now within commitment there are three themes that I find very helpful in my own practice: discovery, training and purification. Discovery (sometimes called vipassana) is fundamental, because the Buddhist way is the way of awakening. It's not the way of getting rid of, or attaining something in the future. These are bound up with ego, aren't they, with what we call "self-view?" Awakening is always something immediate: we awaken.... What do we awaken to? To things we haven't seen before. We discover things we haven't been aware of before. So the Buddha's teaching is pointing out things which

are always there, but which perhaps we have not seen before.

This is how Buddhist concepts can help us. They can awaken us to certain things about human experience which we need to understand in order to be free. They are not just ideas that we put away until our next exam in Buddhism. They are principles and concepts through which we look at life, like lenses. So, can you take a conceptual structure like the three characteristics of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self (aniccā, dukkha, anattā)—and explore how you might apply that to your life?

For example, anattā: the teaching that this mind and body are not self. But if I'm not this body and I'm not this mind, the mind begins to question, then who am I? The question directs the mind, it starts to awaken us. The beauty of the Buddha's teaching is that it allows for and uses doubt in a way to liberate the mind.

Or take a teaching like aniccā: "That which has a nature to arise has a nature to cease." Begin to look at life through that. Life's experiences are varied, so if I'm always involved in experiences, it's very confusing. But if I use this teaching as a lens to look through, I see that that which has the nature to arise also has the nature to cease, and is not personal.

So I begin to discover the nature of my conscious experience, because I'm no longer attached to it. I begin to discover things about experience that I've never noticed before. An angry thought is not mine, it's a condition of nature; it arises and ceases. Perhaps I can then begin to let go of guilt, anger and things like that, seeing them as not personal, not-self. I have discovered something.

Often we talk about dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), in terms of conflict. We all have conflict in our lives, but before I came across this teaching I was always just trying to get rid of conflict: trying to be a nice guy if I was angry, trying to get rid of greed if I was obsessed with greed, trying to distract my mind if I got bored. So there was this random attempt to get around it somehow. But when I heard the teaching that says conflict has a cause I began to question, and to discover, the cause of suffering.

The delusion of our life is that we tend to get fascinated by particular types of experience. If I get angry at the bus being late, I think it's the bus driver's problem, or it's my problem. I'm always looking outside myself to figure out what the problem is, but I'm not looking at the anger itself.

The teaching that we use is one of being more objective: "Okay, this is an experience of anger, but that it also is something which arises and ceases. What's causing the suffering here?" So we're detaching now from the seeming urgency and complexity and fascination of our experiences. In this process, it doesn't matter what we're angry at. What matters is that we look more deeply into these basic mental patterns in order to understand. If we are willing to look into our conflicts, to open our minds to conflict, then we can discover something, can't we? Whereas if we make a judgment that we should be someone who never has fear or anger—should always be bright and beautiful and charming—then when the opposite comes up, we tend to try to push it away. There is no reflection. There is just some kind of idea or expectation that we attach to and then frustration when this can't be met. But if we look at it differently, we see that experience is just a process, and in that process there is something that we have to discover, something we have to look at. We have to understand what the cause of conflict is.

So it's not the experience that is the problem; lust is not the problem, fear is not the problem, boredom is not the problem. The problem is the attachment to these.

What does this word attachment mean? What is attachment? Attachment is always bound up with

a sense of “I.” Letting go is an open acceptance of this moment the way it is. This is something that we have to discover, we have to see it quite clearly. This is the path of insight. Undertaking training (bhāvanā) requires us to make effort. Sometimes this teaching of letting go can sound like a sort of complacent acceptance. I might get angry and punch someone in the nose and say to myself, “It’s all right, just let go. No problem!” Then get angry again and punch someone else in the eye, and say, “I’m an angry person. That’s just the way it is!” But that’s not it, is it? That’s not what we mean by letting go. There is training to be done.

Two points that I find very helpful in training are: (1) to see cause and effect, and (2) to see intention. We can always reflect upon cause and effect, asking, for example, “What is the result of my practice? How long have I been practicing and what’s the result? Am I more at ease with life than I was ten years ago? Or a year ago? Or am I more uptight?” If I’m more uptight, then I need to consider my practice! If I’m more at ease, then also I should consider my practice. So we look at cause and effect, asking quite simply, “What is the result of my life, the way I live my life?” Not as a judgment, saying, “There I go, getting angry again.” That kind of attitude is not reflective. Instead notice: The way I speak: What’s the result of that? The way I consume the objects of the sense world, whether it’s ideas in books or ham sandwiches: What is the result of that? What is the result of my sitting meditation? What’s the effect on my mind and body, on the society around me? These are things we can contemplate. It’s simple, but very important—to see what works and what doesn’t work.

It’s because we don’t understand that we make mistakes, so the trick is to make as few mistakes as possible, and not to make the same mistakes again and again. Yet sometimes we have this blindness, and we don’t see why we have suffering in our lives. Ignorance blinds us. So then what can we do? Wherever there is suffering or confusion, we can begin to look at that pattern in our lives. If we look at this whole pattern, we can discover the causes of suffering, and begin to make intentions to not allow those causes to come up all the time.

Let’s say I’m a person who is always making wise-cracks. I watch people cringe, I begin to notice that no one likes me, and end up hating myself. So I reflect: “This kind of speech brings me remorse and regret. This kind of speech brings other people suffering.” And then I see: “Ah, that’s the result. So then what can I do?”

Now this is when it’s important to know the difference between remorse and guilt. Remorse is a healthy response to inappropriate action or speech or thought. It’s a healthy response, because it’s telling me, “This is painful.” But most of us probably turn that into guilt. There is remorse, but also an inappropriate amount of self-flagellation. This is the unhealthy nature of guilt.

For me, it seems that guilt is a kind of cover-up of the pain. I numb the pain, covering it over with these thoughts of guilt: “Yes. You are rotten to the core, Viradhammo!” But this is self-view. What does it feel like when we just go to the pain? If I say something which is unkind to someone, and then see them get hurt, I think: “Oh, I did it again!” And there’s the jab. There’s the pain. There’s the result of my action. This is why meditation is so important, because when we sit we get to see the results of our practice in our life.

Sometimes it’s difficult to sit when there is suffering, because we want to get away from that suffering. If we actually sit and feel the pain, without judgment—really feel the physical and emotional feeling of that—we can contemplate: This is the result of that. With this, there is that. We see depend-

ent origination: that the origin of this feeling depends on a certain action, or condition. If we really feel the pain that registers in our minds in a way that is intuitive, in a way that is quite fundamental, we understand that when we do certain things we are going to suffer. We realize cause and effect. So, then what can we do? Well, we can use skillful thinking rather than guilty thinking. We can say, "From now on, I'm going to try not to speak in those ways." We can make that intention; and establishing that intention in the mind helps to make us more mindful.

So, five days later when I say the same thing again, instead of thinking, "There you go again. You're not good, you're rotten to the core!" I can go back and examine: What's the result? It hurts, it really hurts! I feel it.

That pain can teach me: With the arising of this condition you get that condition, but when this condition isn't there you won't get that. If I go through that process again and again and again, with those habitual patterns of suffering, eventually I begin to see the arising of that unwholesome condition. Mindfulness is now established. Mindfulness is very powerful. It's like recollection or remembering. It sees: "Ah, there it is... the impulse to wisecrack... but I'm not going to react to it, I'm not going to follow that one." I button my lip, I don't say it. Then there's the joy: "I didn't do it! I didn't get sucked in." The heart is freed from that particular habit.

Now in all of that there has been no hatred. There has been intention, but it hasn't been bound up with self-view; there has been no activity of desire. I'm not trying to become a person who doesn't do that. There is no activity of aversion. There is mindfulness, awakeness. That's training, always working from awakeness and intention: I'm going to be awake, not become anything, just be awake and aware of the way things are.

Purification, the third consideration that I find helpful, is probably one of the most difficult parts, because it's so boring. Of course, I can only speak for monastic life, because I never really developed the training as a lay person. I know that monastic life is not fun; it's not meant to be. Though I love the brotherhood and find the monks inspiring, there are times when I don't like the people, or I feel annoyed or intimidated or fed up. But I have the freedom to watch that, and this is the purification.

This is where we have to have tremendous patience. A favorite reflection of mine is: "Infinite patience, boundless compassion." This is the practice. When it all begins to surface—when you start to feel annoyed at the apartment and the marriage, or fed up with the kids—desire manifests as frustration. But then if we can bear with the frustration, not judge it, we go through a purification. So we have to allow this stuff to surface into the mind; we have to allow the rubbish to become conscious.

This is why the teaching of *anattā* and *aniccā*, non-personality and change, is so important, because if we didn't have that teaching, we would take it personally. But the more we contemplate this teaching and discover that it's true, the more courage we have to allow these things to come up into consciousness. The more courage we have to let them up into consciousness, the more patience we have to bear with them, the more we realize the underlying peace of the mind.

That peace is not something we get by becoming anything. Instead it happens by letting go, by allowing things to cease. That's why we talk so much about cessation. Say, when I'm feeling grumpy, I remember the teaching: "That's going to change. Don't make it a problem."

So I allow myself to be grumpy, which isn't an indulgence in being grumpy or laying that mood onto the other monks, but neither is it a denial of that grumpiness. It's just recognizing that that which

has a nature to arise has a nature to cease: I can awaken to that, and then it does cease.

I realize that more and more, and it becomes a path of courage and confidence. There is the confidence to allow these things to be there, to make them fully conscious—to allow fear, anger or whatever to be fully conscious.

The tendency to repress unpleasant experiences is powerful. We are panicked by conditions and then they can become a threat. We try to push them away, but they come back. So if we find that conditions keep coming up in our lives, we have to consider: “Am I really allowing them to be conscious, or am I pushing them away?” This balance between indulgence and repression is hard to find, although actually it’s very simple—it’s just awakening to the way it is right now.

It’s a very moment-to-moment practice, so when the question comes up: “Am I repressing or am I indulging?”, see that as doubt, just a condition in the mind. “This is the way it is now, I feel this way now”—awakening, making things conscious. Notice that there is no desire in that, no aversion. It’s not bound up with the desire to become anything or to get rid of anything. There is no movement away from this moment towards another moment. It’s timeless. It’s immediate. It’s awakening here and now.

Questions and Answers

Ask Bhante G

(The following questions and answers are drawn from dhamma talks and interviews with Bhante Gunaratana at the Bhāvanā Society. They were compiled by Douglas Imbrogno.)

1. Question: How much effort should be bring to our meditation practice? Zen teachers sometimes speak of “effortless effort” and to “just sit” when meditating. How hard should we be trying when meditating?

Bhante G: When it comes to meditation, your effort should not be haphazard or blind. It’s a committed effort. Before you even start, you should consider: “Is this the right moment for me to practice?” Suppose it’s a busy time; the TV is blaring somewhere, people are running around. No matter how hard you try, you can’t seem to do the practice. So you have to understand the situation, you have to be mindful of when to sit.

But once you’ve chosen the place and time to practice, by all means, apply every ounce of effort to overcome laziness, drowsiness, restlessness, worry and so on. These are very common, ordinary obstacles. In Buddhism, we call them “hindrances,” since they hinder our progress. When hindrances arise, we shouldn’t be lazy. We shouldn’t think, “Well, this is just way too hard. I’m wasting my time. This stuff always comes up and blocks me when I try to meditate. I give up.” You must encourage yourself and always renew your effort at sitting. You might tell yourself: “I can do this. This is possible. I can overcome my sleepiness, I can work with this restless mind. I see other people who have learned how to do this. I can do this myself.” So you must exert yourself, you must try to shake yourself awake and tell yourself: “Hey, you! Don’t chicken out of this!”

As for “effortless effort,” well, that’s a lazy man’s advice. There is no such thing as effortless effort. Things don’t come to us just like air. On the other hand, laziness, drowsiness, lust, greed—they come to us very naturally! Good things often don’t come to us naturally. We have them in us by our nature, but we must work hard to arouse them. The trouble is that our mind is like water. Water always finds its way down to the lowest place. In a similar way, our mind tends to drag us down into the lower state of things—to base ideas, lazy practices, the easy way out. Yet if we head that way, we’ll end up going down the drain from all the rubbish in the mind! So we must turn up the volume on our effort. We repeat the same thing, again and again and again, until we achieve it. We bring commitment to our meditation practice, in spite of whatever happens in any one sitting.

There are really three stages of effort. In Pāli, the first stage is called arambhadhatu. That means the “element of beginning.” When you read an inspiring book about meditation or have an inspiring discussion with a friend or teacher on Buddhist practice, you may become enthusiastic and start meditating right away. Yet a few weeks or months later, your effort may wane. You slide right back into the same old, same old. How do you avoid that?

That’s where the second stage of effort comes in: nikkamadhatu. That essentially means “proceeding” with your effort. You stick to it, you work at your meditation practice with dedication and

regularity. Even then, you can become lazy or may waver in your resolve. Then you have to play your last card. You have to give yourself a pep talk, but also be firm with yourself: “This is it! I won’t budge from this cushion even if my back is killing me! OK, so I’m restless—I’ve seen that before. Alright, now my knees hurt—I’ve experienced that, too. I can sit through this. I can work with this. Reduce me to a skeleton and still I won’t budge!” That is the third kind of effort called parakkamadhatu. “Parak” is valor. In the armed forces, you are encouraged to bring valor and bravery to your work. Meditators also need that kind of effort.

Sometimes people come here to the Bhāvanā Society with all good intentions to meditate. They book a place months in advance and come to stay for a week, or two weeks, or a month. Then a few days later, they tell me: “Um, Bhante, I have to go. I forgot I had to get back because I have this job to do and....” Or you may experience an inspiring meditation retreat, return home and start practicing. Weeks or months later, your resolve may waver in establishing a daily practice. Remind yourself: You can do this. See the example of your teachers and fellow meditators. Seek out the support of sitting groups, attend retreats regularly. Really, it comes down to this: When you take the time to practice, when you make that commitment, stick to it with all the energy you can muster.

Pāli Quotation: Āraddhaviriyaṣāyaṃ dhammo nāyaṃ dhammo kusītaṣa. (AN. Vol. 4,3)

Translation: This dhamma is for one who is energetic, not for one who is lazy.

2. Question: On retreat it may be easier to meditate, since that is what everyone has come to do. Yet returning home to busy, modern life it’s hard to maintain mindfulness and calm awareness. How can we bring the benefits of meditation into busy daily lives?

Bhante G: Slowing down is a way to nourish the roots of mindfulness. We can do this wherever we are, in a monastery, but also at home and in the workplace. We talk about creating world peace, but people must also be concerned with creating mental peace—making their minds healthy and calm. And a healthy mind comes from mindfulness.

When you’re at work or when you are unable to sit for a longer period in a quiet place, you can also enjoy a few moments of mindfulness. I recommend that everyone take one minute every hour during the day to do this. Work hard for 59 minutes, then take a one-minute break, and totally focus your mind on your breathing. Close your eyes, if you can. Or if you’re at your desk in a busy office, keep your eyes open at a point in front of you. Quietly, peacefully, count out 15 breaths—that’s about a minute. Don’t think about the future, don’t think about anything during that one minute. Just keep your mind totally free from all those things. When that minute is over, you have added some clarity to your mind. You have added some strength to continue on for the other 59 minutes in the hour. Then, vow to yourself that when another hour has passed you’ll give yourself another one-minute mindfulness break.

You can do this at your kitchen table or office desk. You can do this after you’ve parked your car and turned off the engine. You can do this during a restroom break. If you do this kind of one-minute meditation the whole day, at the end of an eight-hour work period you’ll have spent eight minutes in meditation. You’ll be less nervous, less tense and less exhausted at the end of the day. Plus, you’ll have a more productive and healthier day, both psychologically and physically.

It is up to each person to take charge of their own mind. Each one of us must learn how to slow down. You know, un-mindful people are always in the majority. You can easily lead yourself down that same path if you let yourself. Don't get caught in this trap! Wherever you are—at home, at a retreat center, in your car, or in line at the grocery store—mindfulness can rescue us from stressful, painful mental states. I like to call mindfulness one's "emergency kit." It's like when you cut or burn or yourself—you immediately reach for a first-aid kit to treat the wound. The same is true for the mind. When the mind is pained, when it is agitated and distracted, when you suffering mentally, you really need some first-aid to come back to mental health.

But if you don't take care of painful mental states, they can grow worse—just like a wound. At their worst, we slip into a depression or nervous breakdown. And our mental suffering can manifest itself in all kinds of illnesses, from stomach problems to heart disease. So many things are going on in your mind! Only when something triggers a breakdown or serious illness do you begin to look back at all the time you've spent making your life chaotic. So, you must bring yourself back to mindfulness wherever you are, all the time. So along with your regular meditation practice, add into your daily life practices like this one-minute meditation. Train yourself in this way—as soon as some psychic irritation arises, stop and take care of it before you proceed on with other activities in your day.

Pāli Quotation: Māvamaññetha puññassa-na mañtam āgamissati. Udabindu nipātena - udakumbho pi pūrati pūrati dhīro punnassa - thoka thokampi acinam. (Dh. 122)

Translation: Think not highly of good, saying "It will come to me." Drop by drop is the water pot filled. Likewise, the wise man, gathering little by little, fills himself with good.

3. Question: Buddhism teaches that three things: sila, samādhi and prajna—or morality, concentration and wisdom—are fundamental to a successful meditation practice. And we must have good sila or morality as a first step toward a successful meditation practice. Could you please elaborate?

Bhante G: In using the word morality for sila I would also suggest the words "discipline" or "restraint," perhaps even in place of the word "morality," which has a philosophical connotation. And, yes, it is correct to say that practicing sila—acting with discipline and restraint in daily life—lays an essential foundation for a good meditation practice.

Depending on how disciplined we are, our practice becomes successful. When we don't have sufficient discipline, our practice will be difficult. Mindfulness may then be hard to attain or to sustain. We must have good discipline to be mindful. Most of the time we don't remember to be mindful—we are not mindful of mindfulness! It's harder yet when our minds are distracted or bothered by unwholesome actions we may have undertaken or be involved in.

The Pāli word sila recalls the word "sealant" in English. When you want to close a crack, you use a sealant and seal it off. You lay the foundation for a house and cover all the cracks, so no water will seep in, no insects will enter, and the foundation won't collapse. As a result, the foundation for your house remains firm and is sturdy enough to build upon. Sila is like that when it comes to meditation. It's the foundation. Through restraint, through wholesome actions and decisions made in our daily lives, we lay this foundation.

If we don't lay a good foundation for meditation, we can directly see the results in our practice.

You may be meditating regularly, sitting a half-hour or an hour. All of a sudden one day, you can't even sit for 10 minutes. Your mind is agitated, you're constantly distracted, you simply can't focus. Something you have done in your life—becoming enraged with someone, sexual misconduct, addictive behavior of all sorts or some other unwholesome action of body, speech or mind—has deeply registered in your subconscious mind. It keeps coming back up, making you feel remorseful, guilty, restless, full of worries. You just can't sit!

On the other hand, it's unrealistic to expect people to become paragons of virtue before they ever begin to meditate. If we wait until we are saints, if we put off meditation until our sila is perfect, then we will never meditate! Whatever our moral situation, we must begin. We make the commitment to root out unwholesome behavior and to encourage wholesome habits in our lives. It helps to make the commitment and to come back to it, time and time again: "OK, from now on I'm going to undertake this meditation practice and I'm going to try not to break my principles." If you do, then learn from those consequences. Feel the heaviness in your mind and in your life. Our goal is to make the mind light, to make our life light. After all, we are seeking to attain en-light-enment, aren't we?

Sila, though, should not be confused with a set of commandments. It is something you undertake by yourself, on your own accord. If you don't make the effort, if you commit some unwholesome behavior, you reap the consequences and it affects your meditation practice. If you do make the effort, you'll also see the positive consequences—it's very cause and effect. We practice sila for own self-confidence and to overcome our weaknesses. So, sila is a way of behaving, that we ourselves choose. We undertake it by ourselves for the sake of a steady state of mind, for the sake of progress in our practice. Good sila strengthens our courage and ability. It gives support to our meditation practice and provides psychological strength. It is this foundation that is absolutely necessary to gain concentration.

4. Question: How does wholesome sila affect our ability to meditate?

Bhante G: It's important to understand that restraint and discipline are just one side of the coin. Observance—which means undertaking wholesome actions and encouraging positive states of mind—is the other side of that coin. Restraint is called samvara; observance is called rakkhama. For instance, we give up killing and harming other beings. That's a wonderful thing. But we also practice loving-friendliness. We give up stealing. That's a wonderful thing, but at the same time we cultivate generosity. We abstain from telling lies. But we also strive to tell the truth. We choose to abstain from abusing alcohol and other drugs. Then, we do all we can in our daily lives to maintain a steady, peaceful state of mind.

So, while sila means abstaining from unwholesome actions or habits of mind, it also means observing other wholesome practices and habits of mind. As we restrain our senses on the one hand, we cultivate positive, opposite tendencies in working with the senses on the other. Then, having gained some confidence in how you live your daily life, as soon as you sit to meditate, you are better able to gain concentration, since your mind is clear, clean and steady. There's no remorse, no regret, no guilty feelings, no shame.

So you shouldn't consider sila as some kind of burden imposed upon you. Sila lays the groundwork in meditation and is a springboard to concentration. And concentration is then a springboard to wisdom. Each links with the other. The Buddha repeatedly mentioned it: "The concentrated mind

knows things as they are.” Concentration is like training a spotlight on something. Wisdom or insight is like eyesight—which then sees and understands what has been caught in the glare of that spotlight of concentration.

So these two—concentration and wisdom—become strong when we have a strong moral foundation or good sila. And these three elements are the three main pillars of Buddhism. Actually, the entire teachings of the Buddha can be contained in these three categories: sila, samādhi, prajna. They are like a tripod: one leg cannot stand without the other two. That is why we emphasize these things in meditation practice—especially at an advanced level. If people really want to stick to meditation practice, they must—they must!—undertake this kind of commitment. They must begin to take total responsibility for how they live their lives.

5. Question: In my daily life, how often should I meditate and for how long? If I am serious about committing to a meditation practice, what do you see as a minimum amount of meditation for a lay person?

Bhante G: I think every day—at least 30 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes in the evening—you must meditate. That is not a fixed or mandatory limit, of course. But given people’s active and busy lives, that is the minimum for someone who is serious about meditation practice. I encourage meditators to try to maintain that schedule every single day, without fail. And also to undertake the one-minute hourly meditation during the work day that I have talked about previously. And when you have the time, you should make the effort regularly to go on meditation retreats at a meditation center. In all these ways, then, you will always be in touch with regular meditation practice. The commitment to practice is important. And the opportunities for mindfulness are there every moment of the day. Even as you lie in bed at night, go to sleep keeping the mind on the breath.

As for regular sitting, it’s good to get into the habit of sitting in the morning and also in the evening. In the morning, it may be easier to meditate as your senses are not yet bombarded by the day’s sense stimuli. It can be quite enjoyable to get up before anyone else—to have this time for yourself. In the evening, it can seem a little more difficult to meditate, especially for lay people. The TV and computer may be blaring, your children fighting, phones in the house ringing constantly. But after things have quieted down or if you’re able to go off by yourself to a quieter place, meditating in the evening can be wonderful. After all, dealing with all the nitty-gritty problems of a fast-paced modern life can be nerve-wracking! Yet all that stress and over-stimulation can be handled more easily, more calmly, more wisely—if you lock in a regular daily period in the evening when you allow the agitation from the day to settle. This will give your mind and spirit time to rest and settle down from the day’s agitation. People often collapse when they get home and think that a good night’s sleep is all they need. But while a good sleep is revitalizing to the body and mind, a good evening meditation can far more powerfully clear the mind of the distractions and agitations of the day,

It is also important to grow used to sitting regularly for longer lengths of time. That’s because when you try to meditate, even if you’re able to sit for one hour, your real, true meditation may be no more than 15 minutes. So, as you work with your practice, work on sitting a little bit longer each time. This is another reason why it is important to go to retreats regularly and also to find a supportive sitting group in your area, where possible. These will all help you in deepening your practice.

Many people come here to the Bhāvanā Society and hope to maintain a regular link to the center and to the monastics here. We ask them how much time do you spend on meditation? How frequently? These are essential matters. The answers help us to help them. But what if that person doesn't keep up their regular meditation practice? All of a sudden, problems arise and they consult us for help. It will be hard for us to give them the necessary help, because they haven't been doing their homework!

Pāli Quotation: Attānaṃ ce piyaṃ jaññā—sakkhuyya naṃ surakkhitaṃ. Tiṇṇaṃ aññataraṃ yāmaṃ—paṭijaggeya paṇḍito. (Dh. 157)

Translation: If one holds oneself dear, one should diligently watch oneself. Let the wise man keep vigil during the three watches of the night.

6. Question: While sitting in meditation, I try to keep at it when pain and discomfort arise. But after awhile, I feel I just have to change my position. How do you handle pain and discomfort in trying to sit for longer periods of meditation?

Bhante G: Normally, the first and immediate reaction to pain and discomfort is to want to change position. That can be conquered if you have a little patience and if you stay with the pain. Pain that arises in meditation is not going to kill you. But if it does kill you, well, that is the best way to die—while meditating! After all, there are a whole lot more miserable ways to go!

But you won't die. You just need to work with the pain or discomfort. When you have a pain in your back, your knee or somewhere else while meditating, just watch it at first. Pay mindful attention to it. If you think you will lose your leg or something like that, watch even that reaction—since the way you react can intensify your perception of the pain. The first dart that you experience is the physical sensation of the pain. But the second dart is your attitude to the pain. So try to have a positive attitude by looking at the pain and seeing it exactly for what it is. Try just sitting with the pain without immediately shifting your position. Say to yourself: “Let me sit with this pain and see how it increases and what happens after that...”

You will be surprised as you pay careful attention to the pain. It seems to increase in volume and intensity. It increases until it reaches its painful climax—then it breaks down and even disappears. It becomes a neutral sensation. It becomes weak and blurred. Then your mind is able to return its focus to the breath. If you stay with that neutral feeling, it turns into a pleasant feeling. Then, as you watch that pleasant feeling, it turns into a neutral feeling again. Then, that neutral feeling may again turn into the unpleasant feeling of discomfort again. So it goes in a cycle like that. Try to see this whole cycle of pain and your reaction to it, ebbing and flowing throughout your meditation.

Suppose you are sitting and after 30 minutes you start to experience a lot of pain. If you tolerate the pain for 5 or 10 minutes with this wholesome, positive attitude, you will see the pain or discomfort change into neutral and then pleasant feelings. Then it may become unpleasant for awhile. Then, it's a neutral again. When you come to that neutral feeling a second time, you have spent perhaps 45 minutes meditating. Through such effort, you can overcome the immediate desire when encountering discomfort to shift away from it. Sitting through these cycles of pain and discomfort, seeing how the mind reacts, can be a very powerful experience. In this way, you can really get to deeper levels of meditation.

The trouble is that many people don't have a lot of patience, or have not developed it enough. So this difficulty is always coming up in meditation practice for them. I just advise them to stay with the pain and see the whole cycle. Certainly, if you feel you really need to, you can mindfully shift your position or get up quietly and do standing meditation for awhile, and then return to sitting. Working with pain and discomfort in meditation can offer deep insights into how our minds work. Plus, as you learn to sit longer, your body will grow used to the posture and discomfort will not be such a big issue. Please don't get discouraged when you have discomfort as you sit. That is a part of the deal. Accept it and work with it.

Pāli Quotation: Na taṃ mātā pitā kayirā - aññe vāpi ca nātakā. Sammā paṇihitaṃ cittaṃ— seyyaso naṃ tato kare. (Dh. 43)

Translation: Neither mother, father, nor any other relative can do greater good than one's own well-directed mind.

7. Question: Are we trying to empty the mind when meditating? What is the ultimate aim of meditating?

Bhante G: Sometimes people think insight meditation is just sitting on a cushion doing nothing. This is not mind-emptying meditation! This is mindfulness meditation. There is more to it than just sitting there. After all, you can devote 100 percent of your attention to what you are doing and still not gain any insight. A cat or a tiger pays total attention to its prey but doesn't gain an iota of insight about anything. Why? All they have is simple concentration as they focus intently on their prey in their minds. But in insight meditation, we pay total attention with mindfulness. We work on gaining the ability to look at everything that arises with the clearest state of mind—without greed, hatred or delusion.

That is not how we normally pay attention to things. Usually our minds are obsessed or distracted by some variation of greed or desire for things or a rejection of things. We feel annoyance, dislike or dissatisfaction with our current state. We want to be someplace else, anyplace else, than where we are. Or there is ignorance about what is really going on around us and inside us. But when we start to pay mindful attention to our moment-to-moment experience, we learn to see the mind's restlessness and distraction, its illusions and desires, more keenly. That is where letting go comes in.

Very often you hear about "letting go of things." Sometimes meditators become confused about this. We must remember what is meant by this phrase. We must learn to let go of those things which are harmful to our practice. But we keep those things which are beneficial. What is harmful to us? Greedy thoughts are harmful; hateful thoughts. Jealousy, fear, worry, confusion—we must train ourselves to abandon these states by cultivating their opposites. When we have mindful reflection, what do we see? What do we gain? We gain clear comprehension.

Clear understanding of the purpose, according to the Buddha, means we understand our aim. It means that we meditate not just to gain a little relaxation or to temporarily feel good. Those are certainly nice byproducts of meditation practice. But the ultimate aim of practicing meditation is the purification of our being. We aim at no less than overcoming suffering, treading the path that leads to liberation, and finally attaining that liberation. Our mind and body is our laboratory for this effort. In

the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Buddha repeated something so many times that it is like a chorus: “This body is not something to cling to. This body exists for me to gain knowledge and insight.” So that is really what we what we are doing in meditation practice, not just blanking out.

Pāli Quotation: Atthi kāyoti vā pana’ssa sati paccupaṭṭhitā hoti yāvadeva nānamattāya patisatimattāya anissito ca viharati na ca kiñci loke upādiyati. (DN. 22)

Translation: Mindfulness that “there is a body” is present to him just to the extent necessary for knowledge and awareness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. (M. Walshe)

8. Question: Does one have good and bad meditation sessions? If so, what is the difference?

Bhante G: Actually, when you practice mindfulness there is no difference. There is no “good” meditation or “bad” meditation. Why? No matter how “bad” we think our meditation is going, we can use those so-called bad experiences as the object of our mindfulness, right then and there.

Why do we think a meditation session is a bad one? Maybe it’s because the mind is wandering. Or it’s full of worries and fear—distracted and agitated by anger, tension, lust or restlessness. But in fact, these are the actual material we have to use in meditation. These are called mental objects.

So during a “bad” meditation session, if some really unpleasant feelings or distracted states arise then use them—then and there, as the object of your meditation. If anger at your spouse or your boss arises—watch it. Don’t do anything. Learn to watch the anger without getting carried away by it. Don’t let it obsess you. Try to be aloof from it. Be mindful of the focus of your mind at that second, noting: “This is anger. This is how anger is! This is what it does. It disturbs my peacefulness. I can feel my heart beat faster.” You know, as soon as anger arises in the mind, marching orders go out to the heart: “Get that heartbeat racing! Elevate that blood pressure!” We can see this connection, we can see this happening.

So we just keep watching, watching.... As the seconds and minutes pass, the anger, the fear, the anxiety, the lustful thoughts that have come to dominate our attention slowly subside. Perhaps not very quickly—it may take awhile. But they will if we watch it from start to finish. This process of mindful observation of mental objects is part and parcel of what we do during meditation. So how can it be “bad”?

And when you say “good meditation,” what do you mean by good meditation? Perhaps your mind is not so busy. Yet perhaps a “good” meditation lulls you to sleep. Someone might say: “Ah, now that’s a good meditation.” That is not good meditation! That is bad meditation. [Laughs]. If you do feel sleepy, by the way, just watch that sleepiness too. And do something to rouse your energy, to wake you up and get rid of your drowsiness. Take three deep breaths and hold them, to oxygenate the blood. Do standing meditation to wake your body up from its drowsiness. Even that situation, if we handle it mindfully, is not “bad” meditation. So I would not say there is good meditation and bad meditation. It all depends on how we handle each moment. If we handle a moment mindfully, any situation is a “good” meditation.

Pāli Quotation: Yo ve uppatitaṃ kodhaṃ rathaṃ bhantaṃ va dhāraye, tamahaṃ sārathim brūmi ras-miggāho itaro jano. (Dh. 222)

Translation: He who checks rising anger as charioteer checks a rolling chariot—him I call a true charioteer. Others only hold the reins. (B. Buddharakkhita)

9. Question: Should I try to do the lotus posture? Is it important?

Bhante G: When it comes to posture, if I say one thing is important or better, other people who cannot do that position may feel bad about their own posture. Since you asked the question I must say, yes, the lotus position is the best posture. Once you sit in lotus posture you see how steady your body is, how easy for you to breathe, how easily you gain concentration. The lotus posture is not something impossible. Once you sit in that posture you feel how comfortable it is—that is why it is called the yogic posture, the diamond posture. The lotus is considered to be the best flower among flowers. The yogis used it to sit for hours in that posture—no other posture can keep you steady and enable you sit that long without moving. For these reasons, this is the best posture.

If you cannot go for the best [laughs], go for the second best: the half-lotus. And so forth—to scale it down to the easiest posture, so that you will not be deprived of the practice of meditation. Sitting in a chair is fine, too, if that is all you feel your body can manage at the moment. The important thing is just to start a regular meditation practice.

As for the challenge of attaining the lotus posture, I can talk about that. When I was 65, I decided to sit in full lotus. Before that I never sat in full lotus, I sat only half-lotus. One day I thought, “Gee, I’ve been sitting and meditating for so many years, let me try it: full lotus.” That day, I sat only five minutes. Boy, I thought I was going to die! It was so-oooo painful! But my determination was stronger. I said, “No, I must try this.” The next day I sat in lotus posture. And the next day. And the next day. Each time I increased my length of sitting. Finally, I could sit in full lotus for more than an hour without any trouble. So, from my experience, I can tell you this is not something impossible. Anybody can do it, if I could start doing it at the age of 65! For the last 15 years I have been sitting in that posture.

10. Question: Why should we work on mindfulness and study the Buddha’s teachings? How is it any different from other philosophical systems that talk about the nature of reality and the problems of existence?

Bhante G: Well, there is a big difference between the Buddha’s teaching and mere philosophic speculation about the nature of reality. The Buddha’s teachings are not a philosophy to study just for the sake of knowledge and intellectual curiosity. The Buddha taught a way out of samsara, meaning the repeated round of birth and death. He found a solution to the recurrence of suffering in life after life, after life.

It’s not a speculative method at all, but a practical and realistic one. His teaching of morality is a systematic training to discipline the mind, to simplify our life and to clear the way to enlightenment. His teachings on ethics offer definite guidelines for dealing with the rest of the world. And his psychological teachings help us to see how the mind actually works.

That’s not just interesting and stimulating stuff to know. Instead, these teachings offer a means of ending those habits of mind and behavior that cause us so much grief and pain. In short, it’s a complete system for liberation and enlightenment, not just a system of ideas or interesting insights into reality.

Of course, it's possible for individuals to gain some wisdom from their own life experiences without knowing the Buddha's teachings about insight meditation. Obviously, this happens all the time. If they're lucky or wise, people do learn from their mistakes! Anyone with some common sense can learn to stop stubbing their toes on the same stupid or ill-advised mistakes they keep making. Unfortunately, the world is also full of confused teachings, confused people, confused influences. People are made dizzy by all these confused ideas and teachings. They may have a hard time sorting out what to accept and what to reject in this world.

So, the Buddha points out a path, a very definite direction, through all this confusion. It's a path with morality as its foundation. It has concentration as its strength, to keep us focused on that path. And wisdom is the guiding light we follow while walking that path. At the end of that path lies nothing less than enlightenment, liberation, and a final end to suffering. Not a bad deal!

Pāli Quotation: Eso va maggo, natthañño—dassanassa visuddhiyā etañhi tumhe paṭipajjatha—māraṣṣ'etaṃ pamohaṇaṃ. Etañhi tum he paṭipnā dukkhass'antaṃ karissatha akkhāto ve mayā maggo—aññāya sallasanthaṇaṃ. (Dh. 274-275)

Translation: This is the only path; there is one other for the purification of insight. Tread this path, and you will bewilder Mara. Walking upon this path you will make an end of suffering. Having discovered how to pull out the thorn of lust, I make know the path. (B. Br)

11. Question: Sometimes, I become disillusioned by the large amount of work I have to do to become enlightened. How can one ever achieve Nibbāna (Nirvana)? It seems like such an impossible goal!

Bhante G: I tell you, the simplest way to attain enlightenment is just to get rid of your greed, hatred and delusion. That's all! You don't have to do anything else! [Laughs]

It's true that enlightenment appears to be very difficult. I have to say, though, that these questions stem from our most basic ignorance. Please don't get offended when I use the word "ignorance." We all have ignorance. Some people have more, some less. But until we eradicate this ignorance, then enlightenment appears to be impossible. As we learn to eradicate ignorance, then it seems more possible.

Sometimes, when we use the term "enlightenment," it sounds like some mind-boggling, far-out, impossible concept. You may think: "I have so many problems in my life. I have so many faults. I can't even balance my checkbook at the end of the month much less achieve Nibbāna!" Or some Westerners may think: "Oh, enlightenment, that's something for Asians. All the enlightenment's over there." So they decide, "Let's go to Asia and get ourselves some of that enlightenment!" Westerners read lots of Buddhist books which talk about so many beautiful things. Straightaway, they read about Nibbāna—it sounds so peaceful, so calm, so quiet. No worries! No fears! So they head to Eastern countries with the belief that every one of those millions of nuns, monks and lay people there are sitting under trees meditating. "That must be why they are poor, they never work, they're always meditating." But when you go to Asia you hardly see anybody sitting anywhere, except perhaps alongside the road waiting for the bus. So it's a completely wrong notion! Enlightenment is not there. Enlightenment is, in fact, anywhere we are.

It all begins with the way we train our mind. Don't worry about enlightenment right now. What we have to do is take first things first. Just take one step at a time. Just begin. Unfortunately, there is no shortcut. You must commit to the process, stick with it. As you begin, as your practice and experience deepens, you will start to see taking shape what the Buddha called the seven "Factors of Enlightenment." Each of these Factors of Enlightenment links up and connects with the following one. You begin with mindfulness, which leads to investigation, which leads to energy, which leads to joy, and that leads to tranquility, then concentration, then equanimity.

With an honest commitment, we can at least have a glimpse of all these things in our meditation practice. As our practice deepens, so will our understanding. The important thing is just to begin and then to stick with it.

Pāli Quotation: Yato yato sammāsati—khandhānaṃ udayabbhayaṃ labhatī pīti pāmojjaṃ—amatam taṃ vijānatam. (Dh. 374)

Translation: Whenever he sees with insight the rise and fall of the aggregates, he is full of joy and happiness. To the discerning one, this reflects the Deathless." (B. Br.)

12. Question: How important is in-depth study of Buddhist teachings in my spiritual practice? The teachings seem so voluminous and complex. Is a deep intellectual understanding of the teachings necessary?

Bhante G: It is possible to attain enlightenment without too much learning—all one has to do is study oneself and practice mindfulness and concentration. Without having any academic knowledge, one can certainly attain a high spiritual level. After all, everyone who attained enlightenment in the past didn't have a Ph.D. in "Enlightenment Studies"! They just studied the Dhamma. Where did they learn dhamma? They learned dhamma from within themselves. The mind and body is just like a huge encyclopedia. If one wants to study things very carefully, the mind and body provide ample source material. But there has to be some guidance, somebody to offer some guidelines. There has to be some instruction in how to undertake that study of oneself. That is where teachers and spiritual friends come in.

13. Question: What do you mean when you use that phrase? What is a "spiritual friend"?

Bhante G: A spiritual friend is someone who is full of loving-friendliness and compassion, and is willing to help you in your spiritual growth. Spiritual growth means to grow in peace and harmony. Such a person helps you develop your mind and body in a harmonious way. A spiritual friend can be a teacher, relative, or a friend who is willing to help you without expecting anything from you. He understands your need and willingness to grow. He would sacrifice his own comfort to make you peaceful and happy.

A spiritual friend demonstrates an enormous amount of patience and dedication towards you. He or she is available to give you advice and listen to you. He would not turn you away until you are satisfied with his help. He is a good listener and good communicator. He would not encourage you to do any thing detrimental to your peace and happiness. He would never encourage you to do anything unwholesome that might bring you pain and suffering, now or in the future.

There is no big difference between a spiritual friend and a teacher, because one plays both roles in spiritual matters. Someone who strives for liberation from suffering needs a spiritual friend until they attain liberation. So a spiritual friend would not say, "I have played my role. Now you are on your own." Rather he would say to you, "Come any time you need help. Don't forget to ask me any question. I am available to you any time. Whenever you have any difficulty, remember, I am here waiting to help you. Don't think you are alone. I am here."

Spiritual friends give you a sense of security. You always feel someone is paying attention to your spiritual needs. You feel there is somebody to help you. You don't feel as if they will ignore you. A spiritual friend is there to help guide you in the right direction.

14. Question: Buddhist teachings speak of "hindrances" and "fetters;" those things that keep us from mindfulness. What do these terms mean, and what is their significance to our practice?

Bhante G: Hindrances are mental obstacles that block your way forward. It's like you are driving down a road and suddenly there's a roadblock. You can't go on. The roadblock may be lifted, you drive on a while—and then there's another roadblock! And another after that one. You're trying to go somewhere, but you're having a difficult time getting anywhere. Hindrances are like that. The Buddha spoke of five specific hindrances that keep blocking our way, which constantly prevent us from achieving a concentrated mental state and from seeing things clearly. They are: ill-will, sensual desire, a slothful or lazy mental state, restlessness, and doubt.

Now, "fetters" are the deep, established roots from which these hindrances grow. Hindrances come and go in the mind repeatedly. We may think we have dealt with them but then they rise up again and again. That's because we haven't dealt with the roots from which they spring. For instance, say that you get really angry with a colleague at work or with a friend or spouse. You want to wring their neck! You try to calm yourself down. You take a couple of breaths; you go do something else. You think you have dealt with your anger. The next day comes, and you have another encounter with that person. Something is said and your anger flares up hotter than ever. You hate them! Your face turns red. Your blood pressure goes through the roof. What happened, you wonder later? You thought you had dealt with your anger. Superficially, you had. But you see, you haven't gotten to the root source of your feelings of dislike or hatred. You haven't dug up and destroyed those roots—they are tough roots, they grow deep! Until you do that, those roots will keep throwing off new shoots.

The Buddha identified ten fetters—ten sets of deep roots, that keep causing us grief. We won't get into the meaning of all these fetters in detail. That would take awhile. But these fetters are what tie us to samsara and the wheel of repeated existence. They are: (1) belief in an enduring self, (2) skeptical doubt, (3) clinging to rules and rituals, (4) sensual desire, (5) ill-will, (6) craving for fine-material existence, (7) craving for immaterial existence, (8) conceit, (9) restlessness, and (10) ignorance.

So the difference between hindrances and fetters is that fetters are firmly rooted—they're very strong. Hindrances are temporary things that return again and again, arising from these deep roots. When we ultimately eliminate these fetters, then new shoots can no longer grow from them. We've eliminated the roots once and for all by attaining liberation and enlightenment.

The Buddha spoke about two kinds of reflection: mindful reflection and unmindful reflection. Wholesome or mindful reflection is a great fertilizer if you want to grow strong, healthy roots. If you

want to stunt the roots of our unwholesome states of mind, then cultivate mindfulness. Unmindful reflection, on the other hand, nourishes some pretty unwholesome roots. It's why ignorance, hatred and greed keep shooting up again and again.

Pāli Quotation: Yathā'pi mūle anupaddave dalhe chinno pi rukkho punar'eva rūhati evampi taṇhānusaye anūhate nibbattatī dukkamidaṃ punappunaṃ. (Dh. 338)

Translation: Just as a tree, though cut down, sprouts up again if its roots remain uncut and firm, even so, until the craving that lies dormant is rooted out, suffering springs up again and again. (B. Br)

15. Question: Buddhist precepts speak of sexual misconduct. Please define this term with specificity.

Bhante G: The precept actually is not only sexual misconduct, it is sensual misconduct. Most of this time this precept has been narrowed down only to sex. But the precept is in plural—kame su michacharya. Since it is said in plural, it means sensual misconduct: abusing our senses, including sex. I have given a whole list of things in my book *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*, about sexual misconduct and sensual misconduct.

To be specific, sexual misconduct is sex with anybody against the person's wish or in violation of one's vows. This includes someone who is under the protection of parents, the protection of guardians or the protection of a spouse.

Sensual misconduct is abusing one's senses—overdoing anything excessively. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—all can be done excessively. Someone I know told me he never turned off his radio as he never wanted to miss any news—so 24 hours a day he keeps his radio on. How can this fellow have any peace of mind? The more you listen to news, what do you hear? Examples of greed, hatred and delusion in the world. So, you could say that this person is abusing their hearing faculty. Therefore, this precept has a wider connotation rather than a narrow meaning.

16. Question: A story was told about bhikkhus misunderstanding meditation on the unpleasantness of the body—some even killing themselves out of repulsion for the body. Could you go into what the Buddha actually meant?

Bhante G: What the Buddha intended was for us to practice mindfulness of the impermanent nature of the body and not cultivate negative emotional reactions to it. Mindfulness meditation does not generate loathsomeness or hatred of the body. The purpose of mindfulness is never to develop negative states of mind. When you look at the body as loathsome, ugly, or repulsive, what kind of emotion arises in the mind? Hatred and rejection. There is a beautiful sutra in *Majjhima Nikāya*, the last one—No. 152—called "Development of the Faculties," where the Buddha specifically mentions that the purpose of mindfulness practice is to cultivate equanimity. Equanimity is not something negative, but is the highest altruistic, emotionally balanced state of mind.

That means an impartial attitude towards the body, too. When we are unmindful, for instance, we admire our hair. When we have good hair, healthy hair, protein-rich hair, young-looking hair; we love that. We take great pride in our hair when it is on our head—only when it is on our head. While eating, if one of those beautiful hairs falls into our bowl of soup, do you eat that soup? You are now

repulsed by it. Your own hair a minute ago that you so admired in the mirror; now, it is in the soup—and you throw away the whole bowl. Why? Because you are looking at your hair unmindfully. If you looked at your hair mindfully, it wouldn't matter whether that hair is on your head or in the bowl of soup. Your attitude will be the same—an equanimous attitude. You understand this is just hair. When it is on the head it is not different from when it is in that bowl of soup. It's just hair.

So, rather than looking at the body with either excessive repulsion or—and this is more likely—excessive attachment, we see it for what it is.

17. Question: The world seems so full of hatred, violence and pain. How is it possible to pursue joy and also have compassion for those who commit such cruelties?

Bhante G: It is very difficult to imagine how cruel human beings can be. We cannot even say “bestial” since wild beasts don't commit the kinds of heinous crimes people do. When wild beasts kill, it's to eat. When full, they don't bother to kill other animals. So, beasts often behave much better than human beings!

Fortunately, not all human beings are violent and cruel. There are many kind, compassionate and good people. In fact, they are in the majority when we think about it. Yet only a small minority makes the news, the ones whose cruel-hearted, violent actions can shake up the whole world. So we have to cultivate loving-friendliness—metta—for them, along with all others. They commit crimes since they themselves are suffering. As a result, they are totally confused. I don't think any right-minded person, one who thinks and sees clearly, would commit such violence. People have to be very, very confused to be worse than beasts. We should not give up on them—we must try to share loving-friendliness with them. They need a lot of metta.

By sending our metta they will, of course, not suddenly change. Sometimes, a person's kamma is so strong that he cannot see the pain he's causing others or he doesn't care. So he commits more bad kamma and suffers yet more. We can at least have metta towards him. We can try to understand how much he must suffer to have become so violent and indifferent to other people's lives. Please keep practicing metta for yourself and share your metta with all: criminals, the victims of criminals, and their bereaved relatives. All deserve our metta. I can send my metta to all of them: May all learn to live in peace and harmony.

18. Question: What is rebirth?

Bhante G: People think there is something permanent called the “self” or “soul”, that separates from the body at death and heads into another body. The Buddha taught something quite different. “Rebirth” is a very close translation of the Pāli word, ‘punabhava’, or re-becoming. Whenever we use the word “becoming” there must be causes and conditions to come together to become something. So rebirth is a cause and relationship. There are conditions and causes; and when they come together, something will appear.

When we die we will be reborn—not in the same way, not as exactly the same person, not also 100 percent different. But because of this life's karmic force, another life will appear—reflecting the karma we have committed in this life. And that is what we call rebirth. This rebirth is dependent upon our greed, craving and ignorance—the karmic force we create. These forces keep repeating themselves in

various different forms of life.

Here at the Bhāvanā Society, all of us are meditating and generating very good kamma. What we do in meditation is to make an earnest effort to purify our minds, to wash away psychic irritants: greed, hatred, delusion and so on. So, we make the mind clean. Yet if we don't liberate ourselves completely from these psychic irritants and free ourselves from all suffering in this life, then because of our earnest efforts to cleanse the mind, when we die we'll be reborn into another life. It may be human, divine, or some form of life where we can continue our practice of meditation. This will go on until the mind becomes totally free from all the defilements and we liberate ourselves from all suffering.

Once we are liberated from all the psychic irritants—greed, hatred, delusion and all the other defilements—that will bring an end to this repetition of birth and death we call samsara. So we break out of the loop, so to speak, of rebirth. That is when we attain final liberation from suffering.

19. Question: What makes rebirth possible?

Bhante G: We do not have a permanent self that links this life with the next. Things are always in flux; “everything changes” literally means that every thing changes. Rebirth actually is possible only because there is no permanent self. Since all things are impermanent and changing all the time, we have hope we can liberate ourselves from psychic irritants and achieve freedom from suffering. If there is something that's permanent, we're stuck. There is no way we can get out of this loop—we'll just keep circling around on the merry-go-round of existence. And it won't always be so merry.

So while rebirth is possible, the way it happens is extremely difficult to explain. We sometimes use crude examples to explain it. I like to say it's like sending a fax. What goes from here to there? The entire message or document that you fax remains in your fax machine—not a single syllable went anywhere else. But that entire letter, every punctuation mark, appears in some other place. A carbon copy, so to say.

When we are reborn, what really goes from here to there is not some permanent, eternal soul. It is the transformation of one situation into another. The new life is not completely different from the previous one, nor is it totally identical. It's a transformation fueled by information collected from the previous life. So that new life carries a certain amount of identity forward.

You know, we recently ordained a 35 year-old man here at Bhāvanā Society this August. When he was only two-and-a-half years old, he was able to recite many, many Pāli suttas. We still have these tapes of him. His Pāli pronunciation was impeccable. Not even many adults could pronounce Pāli in that way. Yet this child could hardly speak otherwise, let alone even know his alphabet. But he'd sit there cross-legged, reciting Buddhist suttas and his stepfather would grab the tape recorder. He recited only when he wanted to. If someone asked him to recite, he'd run away. He has since been here in the United States several times and is training to be a meditation teacher. I've known him for many years. His skill as a child is evidence of his training in using Pāli in his previous life. So this kind of special ability or skill, we can inherit or bring it to this life from previous lives.

20. Question: You say you do not use the word “reincarnation,” preferring the word “rebirth.” Why? What is the difference?

Bhante G: Reincarnation is an idea that, in reality, is alien to Buddhism. Traditional Buddhists do not even use the term. “Carne” is flesh, “incarne” is getting into flesh. Thus, discarne is separating from it and reincarne is reentering into the flesh. That means that something first gets into the flesh and then comes out of it, to reenter the flesh. This is contradictory to the teachings of the Buddha. It implies there is a permanent, eternal substance we call “self” or “soul,” which Buddhists deny categorically. We use a different term with a different meaning: “rebirth.” The word “birth” doesn’t imply something coming from something and reentering something.

People ask the question how is rebirth even possible if there is no self or soul? Rebirth is explained in terms of “neither this nor that”—neither is the new life totally the same nor is it completely different. It means that because of certain things, certain things come into existence. Rebirth is the result of three factors: ignorance, greed and kamma. None of these are material. Although someone with flesh and blood commits and creates all these things, what remains is the power. The kammic energy—the energy of greed, the energy of ignorance, the energy of hatred. When these things combine together they can reproduce their image in the next life.

When we die this is the force that departs from this life. It gives sort of a kick-start to the next life. It will not be exactly the same as that which left the previous life. So, in that case, we cannot say something from here went there—nor can we say something from here did not happen for the next life to be initiated. So we don’t use the term “reincarnation,” since it signifies some unchanging, immutable, permanent entity moving from one life to another. Rebirth does not have that meaning.

Having said all this, I must tell you something: It is extremely difficult to comprehend this particular truth, this reality, until we have gained a very good understanding of the whole process of existence—from deep insight and wisdom, through the practice of meditation. The Buddha himself said karma is one of the most difficult things to explain because you need very clear insight and purity of mind to understand it completely.

21. Question: What is the role of faith in Buddhist practice? A common perception is that Buddhists don’t really believe in faith.

Bhante G: In many cases, the Buddha used words that had already been in use in his own time with his own interpretation—like kamma and dhamma. These are not new words. Kamma is an old word in the Vedic tradition (the word karma in Sanskrit is used). Similarly, the word faith is used. Since we don’t have a better term, we sometimes say “confidence.” But that doesn’t seem to give the impact, the full meaning of the word faith. Since it is used in other religious traditions, whenever we use the word faith people understand the meaning. And then we have to explain what we Buddhists mean by the word. In other religious traditions, faith refers to faith in some being—in some creator god or gods.

Actually, because of our attempt to translate the word faith into a Buddhist context, some people say Buddhism is a “faith-less” practice. Recently, an American politician said he wanted to support faith-based religions. Buddhism, by their definition, is not faith-oriented. What they mean perhaps is that these religions’ only base—their most important foundation and strength—is faith in their respective god. Whereas in Buddhism, faith is one of the factors, but the entire focus does not rest on faith.

We have faith in the path described by the Buddha. We have faith in his example. We are inspired by the teachings and have faith that what the Buddha said is true: if you do such and such, this will

then happen. Enlightenment is possible. An end to suffering is possible. But the Buddha also said, “Don’t just believe in what I say, taking it only on faith. See for yourself if this is not true.” As his final words he said: “Work out your own salvation with diligence.” So the word faith for Buddhists is not quite so simple!

22. Question: Is Buddhism compatible with Western psychology?

Bhante G: Certain aspects of Buddhism don’t conflict with Western psychology. Other aspects like kamma and rebirth would not be easy to explain. But I think that Buddhism, in general, doesn’t contradict Western psychology in its approach to the problem of suffering. That is, there is a very evident, irrefutable problem: suffering. Then, this suffering, this problem, this sickness, must have a cause. Then, in order to be cured, to be free from the suffering, the cause must be addressed. So long as the root cause remains, you cannot cure the patient. We all recognize this. And to be free from the suffering there must be a method, a system, a cure. Guidance is given and certain prescriptions are suggested. So, this is the system that Buddhism follows. Western psychology also offers insight into how the past may have affected your current mental state—and how healing the mind and spirit can create a more wholesome, happy life. This is very much in the spirit of Buddhist teachings.

Yet Western psychology is also very often based on treating this suffering neurologically: addressing the chemistry of the brain through medicine. Buddhism is based not only on just physical things—it deals directly with mental states, which is not always physical. There’s a physical base to the mind and yet the mind is not just something physical. Western psychology does offer guidance in how we may better understand the sources of our own suffering and cope with it. Yet Buddhism takes this approach far deeper and more systemically. The Four Noble Truths, after all, talk about the method and the path that will lead to suffering’s final end.

23. Question: The Buddha often spoke of how impermanent all life is. Yet how do I stop myself mourning the loss of loved ones? I know it is the natural end to things. But I still miss them—they are gone, not to return. Is this selfish?

Bhante G: Honestly speaking, yes. We may not like to admit that. We are so attached to our loved ones! I say it is selfish, because what is it that you are missing? You miss the person’s touch and appearance, you miss their voice, you miss the things you’ve done together, or that they did for you. All the support you got from that person is gone. All the benefits we got from that person—emotional and material, feelings of security and companionship—we miss all these things when someone passes away. And these are the things we’re attached to. That is why we mourn so deeply when we lose somebody: a mother, father, brother, wife, sister or children. And this is the very truth that the Buddha spoke about—he said it thousands of times. The more you are attached, then the more suffering, pain and mourning we will experience.

So—and this is not an easy thing to do—alleviating such mourning will not be easy without examining the sources of these feelings. I warn you, you may not like to hear this, but the Buddha said don’t cling to loved ones. From attachment and clinging arises pain, sorrow, grief, lamentation and despair. So what is the wisest approach towards our loved ones? We should, of course, have healthy, loving relationships with everyone—our relatives in particular. At the same time, we should keep in our minds:

This person will pass away. All unions end in separation. This is one of the things we must reflect upon often. One day we will separate from our loved ones. That is the truth! We must always remind ourselves of this truth. When we keep repeating this kind of thought we condition ourselves to accept this reality when somebody passes away. When it happens we are able to see: this is what I've known all along. It has finally happened. Nothing has changed, this is nothing unusual. We feel pain for awhile, but it slowly goes away. The tears will dry, the pain will not linger in our mind forever. When we train our mind in this way, when we rid ourselves of our clinging and attachment, then we will not experience the kind of grief you describe. So, it's a matter of mindfully training ourselves.

24. Question: Buddhism speaks of the “Middle Way” between extremes. Couldn't this also apply to activities like drinking alcohol and telling the truth all the time?

Bhante G: The Buddha referred to the Middle Way as the path between extremes of behavior—between asceticism and hedonism, between self-mortification and self-indulgence. Yet people can mis-translate or misuse the phrase Middle Way to justify compromises between unwholesome and wholesome actions, between good and evil. If you hear someone lying you may say, “No, it's not right to lie.” The person may justify it by saying, “It's OK to tell white lies. You just don't go to extremes—this is the Middle Way.” If someone drinks and you advise them not to drink, the person may say, “Oh, come now, I follow the Middle Way when it comes to drinking.” For this reason, sometimes we hesitate to use the phrase Middle Way in such a loose sense.

25. Question: Is it true there are no arahants—or enlightened beings—in the world today? If not, why not? And how can we have faith that enlightenment is possible in this very life?

Bhante G: I don't say there are no arahants. There may be arahants, because there are so many wonderful individuals living in solitary. So, it is not right for us to think there are none. The other thing is, as the Buddha said in the Mahāparanibanna Sutta: as long as the Four Noble Truths exist, arahants can exist. The Four Noble Truths still exist. So, it is quite likely that there are individuals who have realized these truths exactly as the Buddha taught. Therefore, it is possible for arahants to exist even today, in this very life.

Your next question is how can we have faith that enlightenment is possible in this life. You know, when you understand the Dhamma, you will have a very strong faith in the possibility of realizing enlightenment, because the Dhamma's path is very clear and straightforward. Depending on our comprehension and the effort and time we put into the practice, that attainment can take place. If we are not confused, if we diligently and honestly practice the Dhamma without hesitation, fear and doubt, then we can attain the stages of enlightenment. I sincerely and strongly urge you all to have this faith: that you can attain at least one level of enlightenment, if not all the stages of enlightenment, in this very life.

Upon a heap of rubbish in the road-side ditch
blossoms a lotus, fragrant and pleasing.
Even so, on the huge heap of ignorant mortals
the disciple of the Supremely Enlightened One
shines resplendent in wisdom.

Dhp 58-59

Who shall overcome this earth,
this realm of Yama and this sphere of men and gods?
Who shall bring to perfection
the well taught path of wisdom
as an expert garland maker would his floral design?

Dhp 44

Like a beautiful flower
full of colour and fragrance,
even so, fruitful are the fair words
of one who practises them.

Dhp 52

Meritorious Flag Bearer of Peerless Arahāt

*Bearing flag of peerless Arahāt,
Illuminating sāsana splendidous
You entered the sparkling Buddha Sāsana,
You spread loving friendliness,
To all the world.*

*Henepola Mahā Thera,
May you by the power of the Triple Gem,
Prosper long; to guide us.*

*Just as one penetrates,
A jewel one holds, in the palm of one's hand,
You teach the Dhamma,
With the knowledges you have seen,*

*You brought the beautiful Buddha Sāsana,
To America, with Compassion*

*Your rays shine forth across the world like the full moon,
On a lily pond,
Like a nectar sweet to swarms of bees,
That taste of honey, the Dhamma Sweet;*

*Esteemed Mahā Nayake Thero,
In thoughtful respect of
Your noble service,
Offering a thousand blossoms,
At your feet,*

We honour you.

