Talks by Ajahn Munindo

Unexpected Freedom

Dedicated to

Sue Warren

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Aruna Publications

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Glossary

Introduction

So often we are trying to follow the Buddha's teaching with the idea of becoming free from something – free from our desires, our personality, our anger, our suffering. It might then come as quite a surprise, when suddenly, in the middle of our striving to attain or get rid of something, we find our heart opening like a window, revealing to us the spacious vista of an unexpected kind of freedom: the freedom to fully meet ourselves as we are right now; the freedom to fully experience all the situations and emotions that seem to be obstacles to our happiness, without having to believe in or follow their apparent messages. What allows us to abide in that unexpected freedom, finding stillness and clarity in the eye of the storm, is a spacious, embracing awareness of the present moment, which for its liberating qualities lies at the heart of the Buddha's teaching. This collection of talks is formed around the theme of this potentially limitless awareness.

The inspiration to put this book together originated with a series of talks given by Ajahn Munindo at the beginning of the millennium in New Zealand. In those talks he characterised a practice centered on trust in a non-judgmental awareness of the present moment as 'source-oriented' practice, contrasting it to 'goal-oriented' striving. I was living at the monastery in Wellington where the talks were given and it was a great relief for me to hear his eloquent exposition of a theme I was struggling with myself, feeling intuitively

drawn to a source-oriented approach but at the same time keeping a half-hearted commitment to goal-striving. A predicament which led me into years of confusion in which I vainly tried to synthesize and reconcile the two approaches in my own practice. Finding myself encouraged by one of our senior monks to follow my own intuition was quite a relief, freeing up a lot of energy. Part of the newly kindled enthusiasm went straight into the effort to get the talks edited. With the help of a few good friends we merged them into one text called 'We are all Translators', the second of this collection. There was a particularly strong incentive for me to do this, having seen how many other people, particularly Westerners, shared the same response to the talks or the theme developed in them. And the reception of the talk seems to have proved its relevance, as it has now been reprinted in several languages.

Soon after coming to Aruna Ratanagiri, the monastery at Harnham, in the north of England, where Ajahn Munindo is the senior incumbent, a number of other talks sprang to my attention that seemed similarly significant, adding perspectives and themes that felt like cornerstones of Ajahn Munindo's way of living and presenting the Dhamma: 'When we fall in Love' with its appreciation of how to harness all of our enthusiasm for life into our practice; 'What is Renunciation?' explaining the need for a proper container in which our passions can be transformed; and 'Prayer and Devotion', concerning the engagement of our heart's longings and aspirations in a way that usually gets little attention in Western presentations of the Theravada teachings. Then, over a period of a few months I heard Ajahn Munindo give a whole series of talks illustrating the application of present-moment awareness to various difficult situations and emotions, culminating in the 'The Power of Paradox'. In this talk

he succinctly formulates the essence of a source-oriented approach to practice: "Patiently allowing utterly frustrating dilemmas to be present in our here-and-now, judgment-free awareness – this is the path of purification." With those talks fleshing out the theme opened up by 'We are all Translators', the idea of a book took on more definite shape, and after some initial hesitation ("Do you really think these things are worth printing?") Ajahn Munindo warmed up to the idea. Finally, through the bequest of his good friend Sue Warren, who passed away in 2003, there arose the opportunity to print this book and dedicate it to her dear memory.

In the first talk of the collection Ajahn Munindo shares his experience of his early years as a monk in Thailand and his relationship to and the teachings received from his first teacher, the late Ajahn Tate. The book then moves on to the theme of respectfully translating the teachings and the form of the inherited tradition into what is meaningful and workable for us. This is a task that, as is explained in 'We are all Translators', we have to face individually if we want to receive genuine benefits from our practice. In his own efforts to meet this challenge, Ajahn Munindo remains faithful to the instructions on awareness he received from his first teacher: to "realise the difference between the contents of the heart and the heart itself."

The main body of the book develops the theme of this awareness, the heart itself, its inherent freedom and its relevance for receiving and transforming the various passions and problems arising in our life. The aim is to show how it is that in this cauldron of awareness, if our connection to it is strong, stable and clear enough, all obstructions can be melted down into their raw energies which then become available again to manifest in ways that are wholesome and beautiful. As the Ajahn points out in 'Getting to Know our

Emotional Household', this is essential, as "we need all our energy for the work of purification", and whatever part of it we try to deny or repress for too long will go underground and eventually turn against us.

The talks towards the end of the book offer reflections and practices that try to provide a supportive framework to hold awareness in its place, investing it with the strength needed to undertake its transformative work. This arrangement of the talks, then, follows a certain logic; however, it should be possible to open the book at any page and find some relevant reminder or a fresh perspective on the challenges we face in our practice.

The talks were given at a variety of venues – at Aruna Ratanagiri monastery, during either the regular Sunday evening meetings or lay meditation retreats, during travels to meditation groups in Britain as well as in other countries – always to a lay audience, mostly with monastic Sangha presence, often addressing specific questions, and so in general trying to address topics of concern for both monastic and lay practitioners. They have, at least in part, been edited extensively to adapt them to the written format, to avoid repetitions or to clarify the argument where it seemed helpful.

The quotations at the beginning of each talk are taken from Ajahn Munindo's own rendering of the Dhammapada, published by River Publications. They introduce the theme of the talk and pay homage to the Buddha by offering a reference to the Pali scriptures, the most ancient record of his teachings. Thai and Pali words (apart from Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha and some proper names) have been italicised where they appear in the first instance in each talk. Their meaning can be looked up in the glossary.

It was a great pleasure to work on this book with the dedicated help of so many friends. We would particularly like

to thank Thomas Jones and Glenn Langdell for their very competent editing of the talks, the various proof-readers, especially Ajahn Candasiri, and Soph Moeng for offering his type-setting skills.

At times we felt that our enthusiasm for trying to include as much material as possible, trying to cover all the points we found particularly relevant to the overall theme, would result in a rather longish volume. Which reminds me of a story about the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso. Once Picasso was visiting the Louvre in Paris with an art critic friend. As they were standing in front of one of Rafael's masterpieces, expressing their admiration, the art critic pointed to one of Rafael's ethereal renderings of a Greek goddess, and ventured to say, "But Pablo, don't you think he painted this arm much too long?" which, technically, was true. However, Picasso immediately retorted straight from the heart: "Ah, no – such a beautiful arm can't be long enough!"

I hope you will enjoy reading this book as much as we enjoyed producing it.

Abhinando Bhikkhu
Aruna Ratanagiri, February 2004

Profoundly Simple

Those who build canals channel the flow of water.
Arrowsmiths make arrows.
Woodworkers craft wood.
The wise tame themselves.

Dhammapada verse 80

The abbot of 'The International Forest Monastery of Bung Wai' had expressed an interest in visiting our monasteries in Europe and spending some time here on retreat. Everything was in place for this to happen except there being someone to take over his duties during his absence. After living in Britain for twelve years, I was interested to return to Asia, so it was a joy when, in 1993, I found myself heading for Thailand for an extended stay in the place where I had done most of my initial training as a young monk.

Twilight was falling by the time I once again entered the monastery gates. Being greeted by old friends and new stirred feelings of nervousness, gratitude and wonder. So much had happened both inwardly and outwardly since I had lived there. The place was familiar and yet at the same time different. The dark all-encompassing silence of the forest, the fragrance of wild blossoms mingling with the scent of burning incense, took me back to being twenty-four years old again, full of hope for mystical experience and yet wonderfully empty of expectations. But now electrical sounds drifted

across the paddy fields from the lit village of Bung Wai, where every house, not just the headman's, had its own television set and stereo.

After a day or two I discovered that the monastery had not changed too much. Although the dirt road from Ubon, the regional town, had been upgraded to tarmac, and mechanical rotavators had replaced the buffaloes in the fields, the monastery water was still pulled by hand from the well; leaves were still swept daily; dye for the robes was still made with resin extracted by hard labour from the jackfruit tree; and reading at night was still done by kerosene lamplight. The message so characteristic of the Theravadin forest tradition, 'Keep It Simple', still sounded out, like the resonating temple gong heard for miles around, even above the new and modern noise.

The daily programme in the monastery was more flexible than I had anticipated, so there was time to reconnect with the other resident monks. There was also time to converse with local villagers. Miraculously, they seemed to remember those of us who had lived there when the monastery was founded in 1974. The older folk hadn't kicked their lifetime habit of chewing betel nut, nor had they lost their radiant toothless smiles. We exchanged stories about developments in monasteries around the world, some in countries that many of them had not heard of.

As fortune would have it, there was an opportunity during this period of residence to visit some of the meditation masters of the north-east, including my first teacher whom I hadn't seen since leaving his monastery eighteen years before. Venerable Ajahn Tate was a highly respected teacher somewhat senior to Ajahn Chah and had been a disciple of Ajahn Mun in the 1930s. Having become a monk at the age of fourteen, his whole life had been spent earnestly

in the practice and service of the Dhamma. He grew to be – along with Ajahn Chah – one of the pre-eminent leaders of Thai Buddhism, eventually establishing and living at Hin Mark Peng monastery. At the time of my visit to Thailand, he was residing in nearby Wat Tum Karm, the mountain cave monastery of the late Ajahn Fun. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have spent the first months of my monastic life with him, before I came to live under the guidance of Venerable Ajahn Chah.

When I first went to stay with Ajahn Tate he was seventy-four and had recently been diagnosed with leukaemia. Eighteen years later, he was miraculously still offering guidance to anyone who sought his help. So with no small amount of joy and anticipation I joined the party travelling the few hours north to pay their respects. "What shall I give him? Will he remember me?" – such excited thoughts, memories about the hard time I'd had in those early years, and a child-like anticipatory delight filled my mind.

Even at the time I'd lived with him he had had a beautiful grandfatherly appearance. Now, at ninety-three, he had little physical strength left, yet his eyes shone, his quiet high-pitched voice was clear and his skin glowed. I choked with tears as I bowed in respect and gratitude. Although normally I was quite able to communicate adequately in Thai, I needed one of the other monks to express my intense joy at seeing him again. He didn't recognise me and it didn't matter as I sat at his feet again. "How amazing!" I thought to myself, "All those years ago, I struggled so much in my new life as a forest monk, enduring the furious inner fires, yet here I am feeling such happiness! How wonderful!"

Ajahn Tate had been the meditation teacher of my preceptor Somdet Nyanasamvara of Wat Bovornives in Bangkok, and I'd been introduced to his teachings in the form of

printed translations. When I happened to meet some of Ajahn Tate's disciples in Bangkok I was impressed by their conduct and outward demeanour, and so, with the blessing of my preceptor, I moved up country to spend my first rains retreat (*vassa*) at Wat Hin Mark Peng. I travelled there in the company of another western monk I'd also met in Bangkok. We had coincidentally attended retreats around the same time in Australia, and now shared the same interest in spending time with this great teacher. Wat Hin Mark Peng was a remote monastery on the forested banks of the Mekong River, about thirty miles upstream from Vientiane, the capital of Laos. When I was there, the communists were invading Laos. My *kuti* was high on a cliff, directly above the river. When I first arrived we would go down to bathe each morning, but as conditions between Thailand and Laos deteriorated, Russian soldiers began patrolling the Mekong in their boats and there was too much shooting going on for it to be comfortable to continue.

Living in a war zone certainly added to the intensification of my experience. I was already trying to adjust to the food and climate, and I couldn't speak the language either. Where I came from in New Zealand, living in the forest was a treat – no snakes, scorpions or even ants to be troubled by. But in the tropical forest of Asia real care needed to be taken as you got into bed at night in case a snake had crawled in there first. There were times when I would wake up in the middle of the night with my body covered in stinging ants, and the walls of the hut apparently moving as they teemed over the entire building.

The Heart and the Activity of the Heart

On the occasion of the first interview my companion and I had with Ajahn Tate, he was keen to hear about our prac-

tice. Since we were going to be living in his monastery at least for the duration of the Rains Retreat, he wanted to know what our understanding of practice was, so he called us up to his kuti.

After asking a few questions, he spoke to us for some time, during which he said something that has stayed with me; something that still seems as significant as it did then. Through the translator, he said, "Your task in practice is to realise the difference between the heart and the activity of the heart. It's that simple." As I recall this now, I can almost hear him saying it; his voice gentle yet strong and full, clearly rich in experience and unshakeable understanding. I hadn't expected him to say something so straightforward. I suppose I had expected something more complex and difficult to understand, but my response when I heard what he said was, "Yes, I get that, I can relate to that."

To observe inwardly, to direct attention so that we come to know intimately for ourselves that which is the heart and that which is the activity of the heart: this was and is the foundation of my meditation practice and my enquiry. The words he used were *jit* and *argarn kong jit*. *Citta*, a Pali word, is shortened in Thai to '*jit*', and both words mean 'heart' or 'mind'. '*Argarn kong jit*' means 'the activity of the heart or mind'.

I had heard a lot of talk about developing *jhanas* – states of meditative absorption – and about attaining different levels of realisation and insight, but Ajahn Tate was pointing out that it is important not to be distracted by ideas of practice nor by the various experiences, sensations or mental impressions that we are subject to. We should view them all simply as the activity of the mind. They are all the content of the mind. If the heart or mind – the citta – is like an ocean, then the activities of the heart or mind are like the waves on that

ocean. Our practice should consist in seeing these waves as waves, passing on the surface of the ocean.

Most of us are usually caught up in the activity. I still get caught up in the waves, in the movements of mind, and I forget, I lose perspective. Practice means remembering perspective, and cultivating an awareness that distinguishes the knowing itself from that which is known. We can *know* the sensations in the body; we can know feelings, energetic movements, mental formations, ideas, impressions, concepts, memories and fantasies. All these need to be known as activity. If we don't know them as activity, what happens? We become the activity and get caught up in that activity. There is a poignant saying in Japanese Buddhism: 'Laugh, but don't get lost in laughter; cry, but don't get lost in crying.' We could also say, 'Think, but don't get lost in thinking; enjoy, but don't get lost in enjoyment.'

Sometimes people come across Buddhist teachings or Buddhist meditation and they get the idea that peacefulness means getting rid of all the content of the mind, making the mind empty. In meditation it sometimes appears that the mind is very open and spacious and that there's very little happening. However, this does not mean that we've made it, that we're enlightened. In that state of openness, clarity and spaciousness, we might experience vitality and pleasure, and if we're not properly informed and prepared, we can make the mistake of thinking 'This is it! This good feeling is the point of it all.' Ajahn Tate was saying that even this good feeling is also just the activity of the heart. The point of practice is to know this activity in relation to that in which the activity is taking place. What is it in which this activity is taking place? What is it that knows? We should cultivate an awareness that knows the knowing as well as that which is known.

The Effort to Remember

This teaching was the first gift I received from Ajahn Tate, a precious gift, and one that very much set me up for the practice that I have followed ever since. I was an enthusiastic beginner who'd had a bit of pleasurable experience in meditation. I was determined to get somewhere in my practice and I made a huge amount of effort. After having got up early in the morning and gone out on alms-round I would eat the one meal and, after a rest, spend the rest of the day sitting and walking. There were few books in English there, but the few I could find I reflected on seriously. The little talking I could do was with people whose language I could not speak. The other Western monk was meditating on death, an object of meditation frequently recommended by the Buddha and favoured in the forest tradition, and he did not seem to want to pay much attention to me. As it happened, as the months went by, I looked more and more like death myself, and I think he began to find me an interesting object of contemplation. I hadn't been getting on very well with the diet of sticky rice, pickled fish and chillies, and I lost a lot of weight. But I'd committed myself to stay for the three months of the vassa, and that commitment added to the intensity.

I certainly experienced some benefits from the effort I made during this retreat period of intensified practice. About halfway through the three months, I had an experience of clarity that I can remember vividly – it was a night or two before my twenty-fourth birthday. It was quite spontaneous; I wasn't doing any special practice. I was sitting there in *puja* one evening, surrounded by the other monks. Puja took place in a very basic, unattractive, open-sided wooden building with the usual grass mats rolled out over the polished concrete floor. We chanted in the same way as

every other day, with the same mosquitoes biting and my knees hurting as they usually did. Suddenly, without warning, I found myself experiencing the most wonderful clarity – unlike anything I had ever known before. I experienced an utterly natural yet at the same time extraordinary sense of well-being. It seemed as though this perspective on things should now last forever, because, in reality, things had always been that way, only I hadn't noticed it. When puja finished I felt so elevated that I mentioned it to one of the other monks, and he said, "Let's go and speak to Ajahn Tate about it."

There was a tradition in the monastery that eight or ten monks would go and see Ajahn Tate after evening chanting and massage him, all at the same time. Thai massage is gruesome. You dig your elbows in as deeply as you can. Those Thai monks would really get to work on Ajahn Tate. Somebody would be on his foot, someone else on his leg, someone else on an arm, all digging away. He'd go through this every night. On this particular evening, as we talked about what had happened to me, he stopped the massage, sat up and said, "I want to hear more about this." So I explained what I had experienced. That evening he gave me what I consider the second most helpful piece of advice that I've ever received on practice.

He said, "These moments of clarity, this mindfulness and presence that you have experienced, are very good. From now on what you have to do in your practice is just to remember like this more quickly." We were talking through a translator, which wasn't easy. If we had been speaking directly, he might have said, "Keep exercising mindfulness in the moment and learn to come back sooner to this clear way of seeing. It's that simple – make the effort to remember." Little by little, with the right kind of effort, with consistent practice, as I am sure many of you have realised, we can make a difference.

It was not for another seven years until, wrapped in a blanket during a winter retreat in England, that I was able to acknowledge more fully the relevance of what Ajahn Tate had said that evening. After that conversation I had fallen into hell. The profound, amazing experience I had had during that evening had soon been followed by horrendously unpleasant mind states, indescribably terrible states of self-doubt. This is why I often speak about how important it is to prepare oneself properly for practice. At that time I hadn't long been off the hippy trail. Only a few months before my time with Ajahn Tate I had left the commune in which I'd been living and had hitchhiked across the Australian desert. After that, I island-hopped through Indonesia, stopping for a little diving in Timor, batik-painting in Java, and then went on up through various beach resorts and restaurants in Malaysia to Thailand. And then, I found myself with a shaved head and in robes, doing this intensive practice. I definitely wasn't properly prepared.

Thanks to Ajahn Tate's loving-kindness and consistent caring attention, I survived those very unpleasant states. But it was about seven years before I was able more fully to appreciate what he'd told me on that occasion. Now I encourage people to make this effort to remember. Sometimes, when we forget what we have learned, we can devalue experiences that we've had, effort we've made, insights that have arisen. Ajahn Chah had an image for this. He'd say, "These moments of mindfulness and understanding are like drips of water coming out of a tap. In the beginning it's drip – drip – drip, with big gaps between the drips." If we're heedless during those gaps, if we're caught up in our thinking, caught up in the content of the mind and the sensations we are experiencing, we can think that our mindful moments were invalid and dismiss them as accidents. But Ajahn Chah

said, "Little by little, with consistent effort, these moments become drip, drip, drip then dripdripdrip and then they become a stream." With constant effort, you enter a continuous stream of mindfulness. The moments themselves are the same, but they're uninterrupted.

We forget, but the good news is that we can remember. We sit in formal meditation, gathering our heart and mind together, and we settle into stillness. We gain perspective, we remember. The mind wanders off. 'If only I hadn't done that,' we think; or, 'Why did they say that?' We wander into the future, thinking, 'Have I got my ticket for tomorrow? Where did I put it?' We get caught up, we get lost, but then we remember because our hearts are committed to remembering. If we simply remember, that's good, but if we come in with some sort of judgement and say, 'I shouldn't have forgotten, my practice is hopeless,' then we've lost it again. Remembering is the point. We don't need to dwell on our forgetting.

Being Careful

Ajahn Tate's advice was, "All you've got to do is remember more quickly." I kept making an effort during that vassa and I was very diligent, although by this time I was in such a state of despair, occasional terror, distress and thorough unpleasantness, that it was really just a question of survival. At the end of the vassa I wasn't well at all. They decided I needed to go down to Bangkok for a medical check-up and to rest. In fact I ended up in hospital. I saw Ajahn Tate before I left and he gave me a third significant and helpful teaching. He gave it with such kindness and wisdom; he wasn't just being nice to me. He was so aware of the nature of this path. He said, "Be careful." I still remember this vividly. He said, "The place you are at within yourself is very vulnerable – take care."

I often begin our evening meditation at Ratanagiri by guiding us together into our inner settling by saying, "Carefully paying attention…" I think in many cases we could substitute the word 'carefulness' for 'mindfulness.' In the poor condition that I was in when I saw Ajahn Tate, his words were just what was needed. I was so unhappy that I could very easily have been unkind to myself, or heedless. You know what it's like when you get a little miserable; you start blaming, thinking, 'Well, someone has done something wrong.' It's very difficult to feel unhappy without feeling that somebody, probably including oneself, has done something wrong.

If we are feeling unhappy, what is called for is a willingness to simply be with that unhappiness. If we're not careful, we say something's wrong, though it doesn't really help to say that. We say it either inwardly or outwardly. This projecting of blame is a consequence of having made an inner mistake of misperceiving our unhappiness, sadness or suffering as being something wrong. We don't receive it just as it is. We don't acknowledge it and feel it, allowing it to happen; we don't have the 'knowingness' to see it as activity taking place in awareness. Because we don't have that perspective, we struggle to do something about our suffering, to deal with it in some way. To say that something has gone wrong and that it's somebody's fault is a heedless way of dealing with our unpleasant experiences. The habit of consistently doing this is a symptom of what I call the compulsive judging mind. Ajahn Tate's parting gift to me, 'be careful,' alerted me to this, intuitively if not conceptually.

One-Pointedness of Mind

I received a final teaching from Ajahn Tate on the occasion of visiting him with the group from Bung Wai in 1993. Only

a few months later he passed away, at the age of ninety-four. We sat close to him so he didn't have to speak loudly. I felt almost too ashamed to attempt to engage him in talk since he seemed so frail and tired; just to be near him was enough. Yet with visibly keen interest and with great kindness he responded to the questions he was asked. All the other visitors of the day had departed; only our small group remained. As I recall, one of the young monks asked Ajahn Tate if he could identify the essence of Buddhist teaching. "Buddhism, you want a definition of Buddhism?" he said. "Buddhism is one-pointedness of mind." (Thai: *ekaggata jit*). A lot has been written and said about Buddhism, and that such a great being should give such a clear and simple presentation of the path was a precious gift.

For those who don't yet have a foundation in practice it would be understandable if Ajahn Tate's definition of Buddhism didn't make sense. Even for those who do, for the most part we don't yet know how to abide clearly, consciously and mindfully in a state of one-pointedness. If we do have an appreciation of one-pointedness, even to a small degree, then we will know that a mind that is distracted and fragmented is a mind that is confused and which misperceives the way things are. In this condition the natural well-being that we feel when there is one-pointedness is obstructed.

Many of us went through years of our early lives being chronically obstructed. We were trying to sort out the right philosophy, the right political statement, the right lifestyle, the right type of relationship, the right social arrangement, so that we would feel good about life. It wasn't until my first meditation retreat, during which I learned to focus attention on the breath and to inhibit the tendency to follow distractions that I discovered, or uncovered, the natural state

of well-being that comes when the mind is concentrated. Up until that point I thought I had to do something or imbibe something to feel good. When we remember or reconnect with the natural goodness of the heart – which is still, calm, peaceful and clear – then, through seeing clearly the nature of the world, our relationship with the world is changed. The world remains what it is and what it has always been. There is still pleasure and pain, both intense and mediocre. There's still injustice and struggle, disappointment, joy, delight and happiness. But when we see with clarity that all of this comes and goes, when we see with awareness all of experience arising and ceasing, we no longer, from conditioned preference, invest ourselves in any experience in particular. We invest instead in understanding the nature of experience.

So the fourth teaching from Ajahn Tate that I recall is that what is really worth developing is not a sophisticated understanding of Buddhist theory or lots of retreat experiences and insights but an appreciation of how to abide more freely and more frequently with one-pointedness of heart and mind. When we know this state and it is rightly focused on the Way we will be best placed to progress in practice.

For these four simple yet wonderfully relevant teachings I will remain eternally indebted to Ajahn Tate and I am happy to share them with you.

Thank you for your attention.

We are all Translators

Truly it is ourselves that we depend upon;
how could we really depend upon another?
When we reach the state of self-reliance
we find a rare refuge.

Dhammapada verse 160

On this occasion I would like to discuss the effort that we are all making in our work to translate the practice of Buddhism. Maybe it hasn't occurred to you that you are a translator. I would like to suggest that we are all translators in the sense that the teachings which we have inherited from our Asian brothers and sisters cannot be simply uprooted and then replanted in another place on the planet without due attention to the differing environmental conditions. While we gladly recognize there are certain universal principles in the teachings, there are obviously also some aspects that are relative to culture and tradition. So the manner in which we are taking up Buddhist practice and the kind of effort we are making is our contribution to this shared task of translation. This is as important as, if not even more important than, the work of translating texts. Can we become more conscious of our contribution to this task as we make it?

I have often spoken about identifying what pertains to form in the teachings and what is in the domain of spirit. Mixing up these things can mean that we put emphasis in

the wrong place, and in so doing we end up with results that we didn't expect. But sorting out such matters is far from easy. The sparkling radiance of these exotic teachings and techniques readily dazzle us, especially since we have been in the dark for so long. We might feel contented to settle for that initial bedazzled response to this new-found light. However, the Buddha was consistent in his encouragement to not be fooled by the way things appear to be; only after careful scrutiny should we fully accept something to be true. The point of this encouragement was that we should come to know directly for ourselves the benefit of the teachings. On the other hand, it is not suggesting that we dismiss things because we don't see the sense in them straight away. So how should we approach this matter of discerning the spirit of the teachings?

Discerning Essence

The point of our taking up the Buddhist Way is to find support for our heart's yearning to be free, and it is natural that we begin by observing the way in which others engage in practice. But although a particular technique or system has been applied successfully by one person, it does not mean that it will work for everyone. It is wise to ask, 'What is important to me? What is it that is quickened in me when I see a teacher, or hear a teaching?' I like to think about religious forms as being like conventions around eating. If we are hungry, the point of eating food is to become free from the discomfort of hunger. Whether you go to a Japanese restaurant and eat with chopsticks, or a Thai restaurant and eat with a spoon, or a place where you use a knife and fork, the conventions are not the point. The point is that we are fed. So it is with practice. The point is that our hearts no longer feel hungry. So our task is to identify what it is that

is nourishing, and to focus on that. This is identifying the domain of spirit. If we give this task priority, whatever this may mean in our case, then I feel the forms that support the spirit will evolve rightly. Not to give spirit due priority means we might be missing out on what is of most value in a religious tradition.

Something we could miss out on is a creative participation in our enquiry. If our translation is going to be relevant, we have to be creatively involved with it. Yes, we respect the forms that we inherit; we have to begin with learning that which has been tried and tested. At times this requires that we simply do what we are told; at this stage, learning the form is the priority. For example, if we are learning T'ai Chi, we don't question the master because the movements feel uncomfortable, and then on our third lesson make some suggestions as to how the form could be altered. No; although in the beginning we might feel awkward and look a little silly, we simply learn the form and humbly accept that it doesn't yet feel right, remembering that these forms are supports for spirit – in this case, working with the Chi. If we practise the form with commitment then we eventually learn to relax into the form. Then perhaps the Chi – spirit – starts to move, and we are grateful.

So we are not dismissing forms. We take up the form and wait very patiently until we are settled into it. Then we feel for the spirit moving. When we are fully familiar with the spirit then that becomes the priority. Now we are in touch with the essence. This way, we will be able to change the forms without compromising or obstructing spirit. If we attempt to adjust things too soon, based on our likes and dislikes, we could be creating obstructions.

A friend of the monastery relates a story about a valuable lesson he learnt during his first year of training under a

highly reputed cabinet-maker. Starting out on his apprenticeship as a young man, this friend had been given a brand-new, top-of-the-range hammer as a gift from his father. It was perfectly balanced, with a wooden handle – just what an aspiring cabinet-maker would dream of. His master instructed him numerous times on how he was to hold his hammer towards the end of the handle so as to gain the best swing. But although a beginner, our friend thought he knew better. If you are new at carpentry, it does feel easier to hold the hammer nearer the head; you feel like you can be more accurate. After a number of reminders, the boss one day took hold of our friend's beautiful hammer and preceded to saw half the handle off, declaring that, since he was not using that half he obviously didn't need it.

Holding Rightly

We respectfully look at the practices that we take on, feeling for the spirit. The teacher says practise this way, don't practise that way. We do what the teacher says but, as we proceed, we are checking and feeling. We do not just believe. It is necessary to trust our teacher but trust is not mere belief. There is a big difference between trusting in what teachers are offering, and believing in them and their techniques. Many of us came into this path with conditioning from a different religious tradition; one which holds up belief as the whole point. Such an approach cannot be applied in Buddhist teachings.

In Buddhism, beliefs are functional. We believe in things like rebirth, for example; we believe that when we die we are reborn. But most of us don't know this to be objectively true. I don't know that it's true. I believe it, but the way in which I believe it means that if somebody says it is all nonsense, then we don't have to quarrel. I don't need them to agree

with me. I choose to hold a belief in the process of rebirth, but I hold this belief lightly. The belief is not the end point.

When our teacher tells us to practise in a certain way, we take this teaching on trust. The Buddha used an image of a goldsmith purifying gold to describe our effort to purify our relationship with the teachings; it's a process of removing the dross over and over again until we get pure gold. We purify our relationship to the teachings by cultivating enquiry, feeling into how they work for us. When we are practising various exercises and techniques and we find something is not working, we start having doubts. That's fine. Doubts do not have to be an obstruction in our practice. Doubts can also indicate that the spirit of enquiry is alive within us.

Enquiry is something that comes naturally to us in the West, and we should value it. This capacity for enquiry is one of the contributions we are able to make to the task of translation. We shouldn't automatically assume that, because our experience appears to be contradicting what someone else is saying that they are right and we are wrong, or vice versa. We listen. We feel for what is being said. We patiently enquire. And if we proceed with a willingness to go gradually, translating everything we experience into practice, then I trust that an organic and lasting understanding will be borne out of our effort.

As we discover for ourselves what works and what does not, a confidence grows, bringing benefit to us individually and to the community at large. Discovering our own true way of practice is like finding a good restaurant; the first thing you want to do is take your friends along. My sense is that if we arrive at such confidence in a gradual way by respectfully questioning as we go along, we spontaneously find our own ways of expressing it. We are not just using

other people's words. Such confidence will spill over – we won't even notice it happening – but others will.

The Two Orientations of Effort

One way of illustrating this task of translating the practice is to look more closely at how we internalise the teachings. If the kind of effort we make is not coming from a place of confidence, not only are we wasting energy, but we could actually be doing ourselves harm. I see a lot of confusion in the way many meditators relate to the different types of effort required in practice. There is sometimes quite a naïve hope that by endlessly plugging away, doing what they have been doing for years, something good will come out of it.

These days I feel convinced that there are basically two different and distinct orientations of effort – goal-orientation and source-orientation. For many years I tried to practise by having a goal 'out there' to strive towards. My understanding of the teachings as I heard them was that this was what I should be doing. I received instruction in various techniques, which were oriented towards realisation of this goal. The goal was called 'enlightenment' or 'the deathless' and so on, but it was always 'out there in the future'. I was encouraged to make great effort to achieve the goal and to break through those things that obstructed progress towards it. And even when the words didn't directly say that the goal was 'out there', that was the message that I heard. Eventually I found myself in a terribly frustrating knot. At one point I felt that my whole commitment to practice was seriously challenged. Gratefully, with some help, I came to realise that the struggle I was caught in was about the very feeling of having to get somewhere. I had internalised a sense that I had to 'fix' myself somehow, change what I was and get somewhere else. Clearly it wasn't working, so I gave up. In giving up I exper-

ienced a feeling like that of beginning a journey home. What a relief! Just as I was beginning to wonder if the journey itself was about to come to a sudden and sad ending I felt I could settle into something perfectly natural. And with this shift came a feeling, initially unnoticed, of being genuinely personally responsible. This was new.

From this experience I developed a practice characterised by a strong sense of trusting in that which already exists. This was altogether different from striving towards achieving some goal. The effort that this new appreciation spontaneously called forth was 'not seeking'. My attention was – and is – looking and feeling in this moment; enquiring, 'Where and when do I decide this situation is somehow inadequate or wrong or lacking?' I found that I was able to notice quite clearly when I was imposing on life some notion of how it should be, thinking, 'it shouldn't be this way, it should be that way'. My practice became that of simply, but resolutely, being with this awareness. Now I refer to this as source-oriented practice – in which a trusting heart intuits that what we are looking for is right here, not anywhere else, not somewhere out there.

Faulty Will

Many of us start meditating with a faculty of will that is not doing its job properly. In trying so hard and for so long to wilfully fix ourselves up, we have abused the very faculty of will. If you abuse alcohol for a period of years and become an alcoholic, you can never again have a social drink. In our case we have over-used the will. Now we can't help but habitually overdo it and interfere with everything that happens. We often feel unable to simply receive a situation and gently apply will to direct and guide attention. If we find something we think is wrong we tend to automatically

slam an opinion on it – that 'it shouldn't be this way', and then we set about wilfully trying to fix it.

For those of us who suffer this dysfunction, engaging the will as the primary tool of meditative effort just doesn't work. Whereas, if we disengage from willing and abide in a mode of trusting in that which already exists, trusting in reality and truth, if we simply stop our compulsive interfering, then an accurate and conscious appreciation of that which already exists will reveal itself.

If you follow a path of practice that is goal-oriented, you can expect to have a clear concept of what you should be doing and where you should be going. There will be appropriate actions to take for any obstacles that you might encounter. But if your path of practice is source-oriented it is not like this at all. Here you come to sit in meditation and you might begin by checking body posture, making sure the back is upright and the head is resting comfortably on the shoulders, chest open, belly at ease; and then you sit there, bringing into awareness the sense that you don't know what you are doing. You simply don't know. All you know is that you are sitting there (and there may be times when you can't even be sure of that). You don't hang on to anything. But you do pay attention to watching the tendency of the mind to want to fix things. You focus interest on the movement of the mind towards taking sides, either for or against.

Usually when I sit in meditation I do nothing. I assume a conscious posture and simply observe what's happening; maybe the mind is all over the place thinking about the liquorice I had the other night at somebody's house, or about how it's a pity the sun has gone in, or about how I will be in Beijing this time next week, or about how the monks at Harnham sent an e-mail asking whether they should use gloss paint for the doors in the monastery kitchen, and so

on. Such thoughts might be going through my mind; they're nonsense, but I do nothing with them. Absolutely nothing, until I start to feel a little bit uncomfortable, and then I watch to see where that discomfort is coming from. It is always coming from the same place: 'I shouldn't be this way. I should be . . . My mind should be clear, I shouldn't be . . .' Once this movement is identified, a settling occurs. When we identify that which takes us away from our natural feeling of centredness, we come home. This is not the same kind of effort one would be making in goal-seeking practice.

Knowing for Yourself

Most of us have a natural tendency to incline towards one of these two orientations of effort. Some people are contented and confident when they have a clear sense of the goal – that is where they are supposed to be going. Without a clear idea of where they are going, they become confused and anxious. Others, if they focus on the idea of a goal, end up depressed, feeling like they are failing; trying to stop thinking, they fail, trying to sit properly, trying to make themselves happy, trying to be loving, trying to be patient, trying to be mindful, they are always failing. What a terrible mistake! The worst disease of meditators is trying to be mindful. Some quit, feeling they have been wasting their time. However, if we realise that we don't have to do anything other than be present with an awareness of the tendencies of the mind to take sides for or against, then we settle.

These two orientations are not mutually exclusive. It is useful to understand how each of them has particular merits at different stages of practice. In the beginning, to build up some confidence, it is necessary that we have a good grasp of techniques. Even though we may relate more readily to source-oriented teachings and practices, if we haven't yet

found a firm foundation on which to practise, or if we have found that firm foundation but our life is very busy, it can still be appropriate at times to make effort to exercise will and focus.

I encourage people in the beginning to be very disciplined and to count their breaths, one to ten, ten to one, every out-breath, one, two, three, up to ten, ten, nine, eight, down to one, being quite precise in the effort made. This way we get to know that our attention is indeed our own. We are not slaves to, or victims of, our minds. If our attention is wandering off and we get caught up in resentment or desire, then we need to know that we are responsible for that. Our practice, whether we are goal-oriented or source-oriented, is not going to progress until we are clear that we are responsible for the quality of attention with which we operate.

To reach this perspective it may be necessary to exercise a rigorous discipline of attention for a long period of time. Yet we may reach a point at which we sense that in continuing to make this kind of effort we need to refine the techniques and systems to pursue a goal. But if we encounter a deep conviction that to do so is no longer appropriate, then we need to be ready to adjust; to let go altogether of seeking anything. If it is right for us to make this choice, then, when we hear someone talking about their differing way of practice, we can say, 'Oh, okay, that's fine.' We won't be shaken. It is really important that we don't keep letting ourselves be shaken by somebody else's enthusiasm.

As we settle more comfortably and confidently into making our own 'right effort' it becomes easier to recognise the various strengths and weaknesses of different styles of practice. In goal-oriented practice, for example, it is probably easier to generate energy. With a clear concept of what

you are supposed to be doing, attention narrows, all distractions are excluded, and you focus, focus, focus. By being so exclusive, energy gathers; this way you readily observe yourself progressing along the path. This in turn supports faith. As with everything, there is a shadow side to this, which is directly related to this strength. In being so exclusive you risk chopping out things that could be useful or need to be addressed; there is a danger of denial. If old neurotic habits of avoidance have not been addressed and you follow a goal-seeker's practice, then these tendencies become compounded. This is the origin of fundamentalism. And despite popular belief there have been, and there are now, Buddhist fundamentalists.

One of the strengths of source-oriented practice is that as we release out of the striving and the aiming for something other than here-and-now, a balanced, whole body-mind relaxation emerges. And this draws out our creativity. We have to be creative since by not excluding anything, everything must be translated into practice. There is no situation that is not a practice-situation. However, unwise creativity can harbour delusion. If we are so happy and relaxed that we are getting lazy or heedless with the precepts for example, then we need to recognise what is going on.

Another danger in source-oriented practice is that when we really do get into a pickle we could feel disinclined to do anything about it. This tends to happen because we no longer relate to structures in the way we used to. Faith for us is inspired, not by a concept of what we hope lies ahead, but by a sense that what we trust in is already essentially true. However, if the clouds of fear and anger overshadow the radiance of our faith we can tremble badly, and possibly even crumble. In this case it is important that we have already cultivated spiritual friendship. To have the blessing

of association with others with whom we share a commitment to conscious relationship is an incomparably precious resource. When we gather in spiritual companionship, a special feeling of relatedness is struck up in which we rightly feel safe. This relative security can be for us what concepts and goals are for goal-striving spiritual technicians.

As we progress in our practice each of us has the task of checking to see whether we are moving into or out of balance. But how do we assess how things are moving? If we are moving into balance, it means we can handle more situations, we can accommodate states of greater complexity. If we are moving out of balance, it means we can handle fewer and fewer situations: instead of spiritual practice liberating us and opening us up to life, it makes us exclusive and painfully cut off.

So it is wise to examine our practice and see if we can find in which direction we feel we move most easily, which orientation of effort comes most naturally to us, what sort of language works for us. We need to prepare ourselves with the understanding that teachers of these different approaches use different ways of talking. So listen to the teachings you receive, contemplate that which you read in books, and see which orientation of effort makes sense to you. Once you know, I suggest you go with what inspires you.

Hopefully you can see how this contemplation is an important part of our contribution to the shared task of translating practice. May we all feel encouraged to investigate the contribution we are making to this task at this stage in its unfolding in the West. I am confident that our careful enquiry will show up our weaknesses, individually and collectively, and when we become quietly aware of our deficiencies we will become more creative. We will be able translators of the practice. Adaptation will happen where it

is necessary and it will be in the service of Dhamma. Possibly we won't even notice it. We will just know that the spirit of the Way is alive within us and that our hearts are more at ease.

Thank you very much for your attention.

More than our Feelings

Beings free from addiction to sensual pleasures
know a unique form of delight.

Dhammapada verse 99

As followers of the Theravada Buddhist tradition we might feel like we have heard so much and read so much on the subject of mindfulness that any more on it could put us to sleep. If we have such reaction, however, it is because we assume that we already know as much about mindfulness as we need for the work in which we are involved. On this occasion I would like us to try to put all assumptions aside and consider anew our understanding of this spiritual faculty.

I should say from the outset that in talking about this area of practice, I don't feel confident that any one English word really does the job of translating the Pali word *sati*. This important word has many subtleties of meaning. Accordingly I sometimes use the words 'mindfulness', 'awareness' or 'attention' synonymously. Sometimes I use the word 'knowingness'. Although this last word is clumsy, I find that it adds a helpful dimension of meaning that can be missing from more orthodox translations. It might also be helpful to know that the word *sati* originally meant 'memory' or 'recollection'.

However we choose to translate this word *sati*, it refers to a faculty that the Buddha often spoke about as having profound spiritual significance. Other spiritual faculties – faith,

energy, concentration and understanding – are taught in various great religions of the world; but the Buddha was unique in making it clear that the practice of mindfulness was essential to our liberation. In the scriptures there are many images given as an aid for us to grasp the essence of this aspect of the teaching. We are encouraged, for example, to cultivate a quality of attention in the present moment as though we were walking around with a barrel of boiling tar on our heads. It is necessary to be awake and alert, with the faculty of awareness fully activated, so that we are not waylaid or confused by any thoughts and feelings that we may experience while going about our daily business.

Being mindful, we are aware of the world just the way it is. This sensitive organism encounters its world through the various impressions it receives through the eyes, ears, tongue, nose, body and mind, and all of this we remain aware of. We are also taught to maintain an awareness of the nature of this sensory existence, being subject as it is to constant change. The Buddha wanted us to understand that if there is the right kind of mindfulness, or right quality of attention, then we don't mistake these impressions for being more than they are. It is because we mistake these impressions for being more than they are that we suffer. If we don't want to suffer, if we don't want to be confused and unhappy, then what we need to do is correct the way we understand our lives.

With various metaphors and words of encouragement the Buddha taught how to cultivate a particular quality of attention that can be applied in every moment. He advised us to apply this attention while sitting or standing, walking or lying down, in short, in whatever posture we find ourselves. We might think that spiritual practice is something that we do in a special place, like a Dhamma hall or retreat centre, or that it's a special activity, like sitting on a meditation cushion.

Of course, these things play an important role in the formal aspect of practice, but properly speaking our ongoing spiritual practice is being fully present in every moment, whatever is happening. It means not dividing up our experience into that which is worthy of mindfulness and that which is not.

Identifying with Pleasure and Pain

In his own lifetime, the Buddha experienced the limitation of being identified with and caught up in his sense-impressions. The traditional story is that he spent the first part of his life cultivating pleasure in every way possible. Then around the age of twenty-nine he encountered old age, sickness and death, and these really unsettled him and he fell into despair. Having been caught up during his early years in defining himself in terms of pleasurable experience, he went to the other extreme and became an ascetic. He found a new identity by defining himself in terms of painful feelings, to see how much pain he could put up with; he embraced the popular religious view of the time that self-mortification would purify and liberate you.

These sorts of attitudes are not unusual, even today. People try to get as much pleasure as possible from sensory experience in order to define themselves. How pleasant can 'I' make 'my' house? How much pleasure can 'I' get out of 'my' relationship or the environment in which 'I' live in? I'll have nice fragrant smells in the bathroom and agreeable sensations, textures and experiences in my life. This attitude is based on a perfectly natural and understandable preference for pleasure, and to varying extents we've all experienced it. But it can be taken to an extreme whereby if we are not feeling pleasure then we feel like we're failing.

We all know on some level that pleasure comes and goes. If we maintain an awareness of this, then whenever we have

a pleasant experience we simply know that the experience is agreeable. We do not become lost in or cling to the pleasure of that experience. For instance, in the last few weeks the weather here has been very agreeable indeed. As summer draws to a close and autumn arrives, living here in Northumberland can feel quite wonderful. The fragrances of the countryside, the mellow colours of the late summer evenings, the harvest, the blue sky, the birds and the fruit are glorious. And with such nice people around and friendly visitors to the monastery, one can experience a comfortable, pleasant feeling of well-being. If there is presence of mind in the moment, however, then when there is this good feeling, there's also a 'knowingness', an awareness of the pleasure in experience. And this knowingness doesn't detract from the pleasure.

Just as we can define ourselves in terms of pleasure, we can also do so through pain, with disagreeable physical or emotional sensations. For the Buddha-to-be, identifying himself with pleasurable sensations hadn't liberated him, so he thought that identifying himself with pain might do the job. He became an ascetic. His self-mortification consisted in fasting, not drinking and even in not breathing for sustained periods of time, as well as other forms of asceticism that increased the sense of physical frustration.

Most of us don't attempt the extremes of asceticism to which the Buddha-to-be subjected himself, but we do much the same when we allow ourselves to become lost in depression or anger. I meet many people who for years have been dwelling in anger – their resentment is painful to see. These people may say they want to let go of their anger, but it is sometimes quite clear that they have a commitment to dwelling on it. They find a sense of security in defining themselves as unhappy or angry – at least some sense of

safety-with-the-familiar can be found in it. We can even get addicted to feeling afraid, if it gives us the sense of being somebody. Without any other perceivable way of establishing ourselves in a feeling of safety we are unable to let go.

In the absence of informed awareness, when we encounter pleasure we tend to define ourselves in terms of the pleasant feelings that arise. We become addicted simply to being our feelings. Even having a bad feeling makes us feel like we're somebody. Not feeling anything can appear very threatening.

The Buddha-to-be's own investigation into his relationship with his feelings eventually showed him that indulging in painful feeling took him to the same place as his years of indulging in pleasurable feelings – unhappiness. He realised this wasn't a way to liberation either. Instead, he discovered a Middle Way between a life identified with pleasure and one identified with pain, which involved this quality of awareness he called Right Mindfulness – regarding all of experience with a presence of mind that meant that he wasn't deterred from investigating experiences, mental, physical, emotional, subtle, coarse or anything else.

On this Middle Way, we are encouraged to cultivate mindfulness so that we don't misperceive things. When pleasure comes along there is 'knowingness' – 'this is pleasure.' We don't get lost in that pleasure. When there's pain and misery, or disappointment and a sense of failure, or we are visited by fear or anxiety, we feel it but we don't identify with it. In the short term we may wish to 'escape' from the reality of that pain – feeling perhaps that we cannot bear it, that we don't like it, we don't want it, we don't *deserve* it – yet the Buddha teaches us to experience the reality of that pain out of compassion for our long-term well-being. We are not diminished by the experience of that pain.

Alienation

Sometimes people mistake the teaching on mindfulness, confusing it with a psychological state of being out of touch or being split off from experience. A reason for making this mistake could be that there was a lack of predictability in early-life experience. Given the mobility of families these days and the various other forms of instability, children often fail to learn a healthy, trusting way of relating to their peers. If this disposition remains unaddressed such children grow into adults whose underlying response to life is one of mistrust. Such individuals don't know how to fully surrender themselves into experiences of any kind. It's as if they're standing back and looking at themselves living life. 'This is me doing this, this is me doing that.' Spontaneous self-surrender is not a possibility; there's always that standing back and watching oneself.

This is not an uncommon perspective to have. Many people grow up with such a sense of limitation, desperately wanting to be able to engage fully with life but having a paralysing self-consciousness. Hence many Westerners approach the Buddha's teachings from the perspective of feeling once-removed from life. And unfortunately they read the teachings of mindfulness as endorsing this alienation. They try to turn this dysfunctional aspect of their mind's watching itself into a spiritual practice. But certainly this is not what is being advocated. Right mindfulness does not mean that we split off from our experience; it means that we experience it more fully and accurately – without any obstruction. Feelings of pleasure we really feel as pleasure. When we eat a good meal, we know that there is pleasure. If we experience pleasure and we are in a state of 'not-knowing' that we are experiencing pleasure, we can be storing up problems for ourselves. The next time we experience something that is

not pleasant the 'not-knowing' state is there again and this is where our suffering expresses itself. If we have the presence of mind to receive experience as it is, undiluted, uninterrupted, then everything can teach us. If we always stand back and relate from our 'safe' perspective of 'watching' everything we are going to find it difficult to learn.

Pleasure and Pain in Perspective

We might think, 'I am willing to be mindful of pain, but I don't want to have to spoil the experience of pleasure by being mindful of it.' This is a common misunderstanding of practice. If we hear what the Buddha is saying clearly then we understand that when there is pleasure we just 'know' and don't allow ourselves to indulge in it. Similarly when the situation has changed and there is disappointment, we don't get overwhelmed by that either. In the practice of Right-Mindfulness we learn to not get thrown by the extremes of pleasure or suffering.

This kind of 'knowingness' means that we are able to appreciate things in new ways. We are learning to see and hear more deeply. We know for example the impermanence of sensations, of perceptions, of feelings. Somebody turns up whom you haven't seen for a long time and it is such a pleasure to see them. We feel it in the heart, in the body, feel a real joy and delight at seeing an old friend – we experience the warmth and friendship of good company. Now, if there's right knowingness and developed attention, then there's also a not-getting-lost in the experience. There is a silent inner knowing that eventually this person that we're so pleased to see will leave. We appreciate the reality that the pleasure of this meeting is an impermanent condition.

It's difficult to talk about this subject without it seeming that mindfulness somehow detracts from the experience. As

if, when we meet that dear friend again, being mindful of the transitory nature of experience means that somehow we can't fully enjoy the meeting.

Often, when teaching about mindfulness, the Buddha would use another word, *sampajañña* in Pali, in conjunction with sati. Sampajañña means 'clear comprehension'. Each of our experiences – pleasant or unpleasant – we understand with wisdom, knowing, 'This experience will not last for ever.' It is important to get a feeling for the subtleties of the quality of mind being encouraged. Mindfulness is a quiet knowing, a quiet presence, and clear comprehension is the aspect that sees things in perspective. The gentleness and balance of mind fostered in this practice actually enhances the beauty of pleasant experience. And in the face of that which is unpleasant, it equips us with the right kind of strength to endure.

Free to See Clearly

An image that's often given to help us develop the right understanding of practice is that of a vast empty room with an open window, through which a shaft of light is passing. In the shaft of light we can see specks of dust which, although floating everywhere in the empty space, are highlighted in the light. The shaft of light is the light of attention. The vast empty space is the nature of the mind. The specks of dust are the sensory experiences of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and mental impressions. The dust floats through empty space and if there's right awareness, right mindfulness, we see it in perspective. Even if it's gold dust we can't afford to get it into our eyes, or we'll become blinded by it. If it's foul objectionable dust we don't get lost in our reactions to that either. We know the dust for what it really is. This is part of the function of mindfulness and clear comp-

rehension: to know things the way they really are, to see the relativity of things – to see things in perspective.

After hearing this advice, we may ask what use this teaching is with respect to the bigger issues of the world. No doubt it is very subtle and good, but how does it all relate to the fact that such and such a country might be building up for another war with yet another foreign country? What good does it do to know that sensory experiences are specks of dust floating through the empty space of the mind? Well, this practice can have a very positive effect on these wider issues. Thinking about a build-up for a war can produce strong emotional responses. Not only might we feel inner anxiety, fear or indignation, but we might also have all sorts of thoughts directed outwards about the various leaders of the countries involved. I'm sure we all know how enraging the subject of politics can be. If we get caught up in such thoughts and feel righteous, we find ourselves convinced by them. 'We shouldn't go to war!' we think; 'War is bad, and generosity, kindness and peace is good.' If we don't have these feelings with mindfulness and right understanding then we lose perspective. If we get caught up in them, we *become* them, and then our emotional reactions tend to be excessive. Our thoughts, words and outward behaviour are determined by our stance, and our lack of mindfulness leads to wrong action and wrong speech. It goes like this: wrong view, wrong thought, wrong speech, wrong action. I mean 'wrong' here not in the moral sense but from the perspective of reality. When things are like this, our passionate nature functions in service to fixed and limited views, not in service to sensitivity and understanding.

If there is a cultivation of rightly informed mindfulness, we may continue to feel indignant without any harm being caused to ourselves or others. We can feel what we feel about

the very real risk that there may be a war in the near future. We can think whatever thoughts come into our head about this or that leader. We can think what we think and feel what we feel, but we know these thoughts and feelings as thoughts and feelings – we don't lose ourselves in reactions. We stay in a position of optimum responsibility. We are not trying to stop feeling things or thinking things.

We might find in reflecting on the possibility of war that we think, 'So and so is a rogue and a monster. We should just nuke the guy, get rid of him, get him off the planet. And we should execute all those terrorists.' Then we catch a glimpse of ourselves and react with, 'Oh my goodness, how could I be having such thoughts?' We then start feeling guilty and think, 'I shouldn't be having thoughts about wanting to harm other people.' If there is right mindfulness then even if we start having biased, one-sided thoughts or the guilty thoughts that come afterwards, we can let them be, without interfering with them. By experiencing them in such a manner we can come to understand their nature and what lies behind them. It is certainly not okay to act on them and promote war or hatred, but when those thoughts arise we don't have to be upset by them. We don't have to blindly react and try to block them off. In fact we can learn from them. If they are received with mature awareness they teach us how to empathise with those we might otherwise call our enemy.

One of the greatest teachings that I ever heard is that there is only one thing that we need to be afraid of and that is the length of time it takes for us to be mindful. I encountered this teaching in my first year as a monk during a period of particularly intense struggle. Instantly it made tremendously good sense to me; I believed it, I trusted it. And I still do.

It doesn't matter what passes through that empty space; the nature of those specks of dust is that they are all specks

of dust. Right understanding, right speech and right action will come, so long as we remember to become rightly aware of our experience.

Balancing the Faculties

It is good to practise morality and to develop concentration. It is of benefit to study wise teachings and to develop energy for practice. All these spiritual activities are very important, but the Buddha made it clear that mindfulness was supremely important. Without it we lose balance, even with the virtue that we cultivate. If we are heedless we can start to smell badly of becoming very good. If there's mindfulness then there can be a recognition of where we're going out of balance. For instance, if we are cultivating generosity, morality or kindness – or any of the other forces of goodness – and we have mindfulness, then there is alertness and recognition when conceit starts creeping in, when the perception arises that 'I'm generous' or 'I'm better than them'. With mindfulness well developed we can see such taints developing. Without mindfulness we might cultivate the virtues but lose perspective, get lost and spoil the results of practice.

With right mindfulness one recognises the relativity of experience. We don't have to take sides with our experiences; we don't have to take sides for or against pleasure or pain. Because we are experiencing misery and a sense of failure it doesn't mean to say that we are a failure. We don't have to become a failure because we are experiencing the perception of failure. We may fear humiliating ourselves in public, but without mindfulness we can really get caught up in that fear. With mindfulness we can feel the feeling of fear of humiliation; or even feel really worthless and disrespected and allow it to be – allow it to highlight the next step we need to take towards freedom or balance.

Learning from Criticism

I received a letter today from a young monk I know who is currently living out in Asia. He wrote that his whole practice these days is just to feel what it feels like to be totally disrespected. He's living in a situation where he's misunderstood, where people are not supportive of him, and yet he's committed to staying there for the three months of the *vassa*. He can't get out! He's not starving or going without, but it is humiliating him. In his letter he writes with equanimity and clarity, "My practice is just learning what it feels like to feel disrespected." This is not a situation that one would set up for anybody, but learning how to feel what it feels like to be disrespected will be invaluable. If he becomes a respected monk and teacher, he will undoubtedly receive a lot of praise, with people telling him how wonderful he is; but there will be well-informed mindfulness of what it feels like to be respected. He won't get so lost in being respected.

So it is with praise and blame. When people blame and criticise us, we can ask ourselves what it feels like to be mindful of blame and criticism. If someone praises us, telling us how wonderful we are, we may lose our sense of proportion. They butter us up, we buy into it and then they can manipulate us, and we feel conned and used. We don't like ourselves and we also resent them. But why did we get caught up in the first place? Through a lack of mindfulness, a lack of perspective. So the next time we are blamed and criticised, if we can be mindful and feel the feeling of criticism, even feel what it feels like to fail, then the next time we are succeeding or being praised we'll be able to maintain mindfulness in that too.

Sometimes there is clarity and confidence and at other times there's chaos and confusion. If we give priority to the cultivation of mindfulness, not to what's passing through

the mind, not to the specks of dust, then, when we're experiencing clarity, there's a sense of presence there too. If we are feeling confident and together, thinking, 'I've really got it sorted' then we can be aware that that's what it feels like right now. We are riding a wave but we remember the ocean. We don't become the wave. There can be clarity and order in our lives, but we are aware that it's not a sure thing, because everything is constantly changing. The encouragement we have from the Buddha in support of mindfulness is to reflect on the reality that everything is changing. So when clarity and confidence changes, for whatever reason, and instead there is chaos and confusion, disorder and lack of confidence, we don't get lost in it. We realise then that that was the point of our effort.

Inhibiting Unmindful Tendencies

Often when we are making an effort to be restrained in our attention, not to just heedlessly follow things, we can't really see the point of doing it. It's only later on that we realise the benefit.

A young monk once went down to Bangkok to renew his visa and while he was there he was asked to speak at one of the biggest universities in Thailand. To his surprise he handled the talk and the question-and-answer session with confidence and ability. On returning to the forest monastery he asked Ajahn Chah, "How can it be that most of the time when I am here my practice seems like rubbish? I feel like I am wasting my time. Then, in a situation like that, I can come up with the goods?" Luang Por Chah answered saying, "Our practice is like being a gong. Most of the time you are just here, doing what you do, being mindful of the simple things like sweeping leaves, pulling water from the well, walking up and down on your meditation track, feeling like

nothing is happening. You are simply doing what you need to do to stay mindful of the present moment. Then someone comes along and strikes this gong and the sound is beautiful. However, we are not supposed to be sitting there worrying about what our sound may be like."

When, in formal meditation we're focusing attention on the sensation of the breath, so many interesting things come along for us to think about. 'I could be developing this, I could be building that. I could rewrite that program like this,' or 'I could arrange for that deal'. While we're sitting in meditation, some of these creative ideas can seem so inspiring and attractive. We are encouraged to learn how to say no to them, to learn to inhibit our tendencies to follow them. Only when we can choose not to follow our tendencies, can we know we are not compelled and driven by them. Meanwhile, we inhibit the tendencies and come back to the meditation object of the breath, the simple, clear, neutral sensation of the body breathing.

We want to think about things and follow our attractive, profound thoughts so that we can develop them. Can we say 'no' to this tendency? There is often a fear that manifests that if we say 'no' to this profound thought or this beautifully, exquisite creative fantasy that is just emerging, then it will die and we will lose our wonderful idea forever. We'll lose our intelligence and the consequences of that could mean losing our self-esteem and dignity. We'll lose our potential, we'll lose our superior ability to think profound thoughts. This is traditionally understood as *Mara* coming in, threatening us, and saying, 'Whatever you do, don't practise restraint.'

We shouldn't ignore Mara. The Buddha didn't ignore Mara; he just said, 'This is Mara.' In our case we can call such thoughts Mara, or we can say, 'There is a fear that I will lose my creativity if I inhibit this tendency to follow this fantasy,

but I don't really know.' We don't blindly or forcefully return to focusing on our meditation object. We carefully restrain our mind, attending to it with patience and return to the meditation object. We learn to say 'no' to distracting impulses so that we're in the centre of our lives. This practice means that we can choose to offer attention to the heart; we can give ourselves into something without the mind being compulsively distracted this way and that.

Later we may discover that suddenly, without our expecting it, there is a complex problem that arises in everyday life – a challenging conversation or a difficult decision that needs to be made – but we're really right there. There is a strength of mind there that has come directly and proportionately from our good practice. We may not have seen that strength building up in the moment of restraining our attention from following its habitual tendencies, but all that effort we have made to restrain the mind – over and over again coming back to the meditation object – has generated real strength of presence, strength of mindfulness, sati. When we need that strength, it spontaneously and selflessly manifests.

In this way, we become inspired and encouraged to keep on cultivating mindfulness in this discipline of attention. I use the word discipline not in some brutal regimental way but in a sense of giving direction to something that's dynamic and alive. So long as our minds are still swayed by deluded preferences, if we give no direction to our attention then it will just go anywhere and everywhere.

Mindfulness and Confidence

With feeling, with skill and with sensitivity, we learn to apply the discipline of attention, and so we discover for ourselves a naturally increasing strength of mindfulness. Experiencing this brings with it an increase of faith and confidence. Even

when there are very difficult and challenging situations, whether global, individual, inner, or outer, there is a feeling of strength there with which we can meet those situations. When we have developed mindfulness we won't turn away from them. We won't necessarily like them of course, but our conditioned likes and dislikes will no longer determine how we respond.

If we discover this power of mindfulness, we won't feel so threatened. It's like having a back problem; your back is giving out all the time, and there are lots of things that you can't do because of this weakness in your back. You find yourself a good physiotherapist who teaches you some exercises that give you just the right sort of strength in the right place, and you find that you've got your confidence back again. You can do things that you weren't able to do before. As you experience physical strength, so you feel confidence. So it is with spiritual strength. Through the cultivation of the spiritual faculty of sati or mindfulness, confidence and trust in life grows.

Getting to Know our Emotional Household

Just as a sweet-smelling and beautiful lotus
can grow from a pile of discarded waste,
the radiance of a true disciple of the Buddha
outshines dark shadows cast by ignorance.

Dhammapada, verses 58 – 9

Somebody has asked the question, 'What is emotion?' I can't say I know how to answer that question directly. I'm not even sure it would be very useful to try and say what emotion is. It's like asking, 'What is gravity?' If we were to look in a physics textbook, we would find detailed mathematical descriptions of how gravity works, but they still don't explain what the force of gravity actually is. It can be described in terms of its effects, and accurate predictions can be made about how it affects matter. Similarly, it might not be difficult to come up with psychological or neurophysiological descriptions of emotional activity, but I suggest that they probably wouldn't be all that helpful.

However, I'm pleased the question has been asked, since I'm sure most of us have found out that we can't really apply ourselves to the practice of awareness without encountering strong emotions. We quite rightly feel a need to understand this dimension of ourselves.

A useful way to approach the understanding of emotions is by considering not what they are but rather how we can

discover an unobstructed relationship with them. By that I mean how we can get to know ourselves intimately; how we can learn by way of first-hand investigation to see where and how it is we find ourselves blocked or obstructed in our ability to receive emotion, our own or those of others. So I would recommend instead of asking 'what' that we ask 'how'. How does it feel, to *feel* what we feel? How freely can we feel what we feel, when, for instance, we feel regret or disappointment? Do we escape up into our head and start analyzing ourselves, asking what is this regret, this disappointment, trying to create an explanation?

Related to this, a doctor friend who rings me from America from time to time was sharing his understanding of what he thinks is going on when Buddhists talk about transmigrating through the various realms of existence. According to him, this talk is about creating a mythology as a way of processing information that has been stored up in the brain. He gave a very sophisticated description that I confess I couldn't really understand. But more important than my limited ability to grasp his abstraction was that I didn't get any sense that this interpretation took him to a place of resolution. And surely that is the point of our practice – to take us to an experience of completeness.

It is quite valid to interpret the traditional Buddhist depictions of the Six Realms of Existence in terms of inner realities that we experience here and now, not only as referring to possible past and future lives. Yet we still have the task of finding out for ourselves how to remain conscious and calm as we ascend to the heavens or descend into hell realms. It is very easy to become attached to intellectualisations as a way of avoiding a more direct apprehension of ourselves. If we have a tendency to do this, we could be failing to make use of the valuable opportunity to face our

strong emotions and passions in their raw reality. Unless we get to the root cause of our painful and unpleasant feelings, we will become lost time and again in pleasure or in pain, falling for their convincing appearance of permanence. Ultimately we need access to much better-rooted resources than abstract descriptions.

One of the things that inhibit our turning directly to face ourselves in the midst of emotional flare-ups is the fear that to do so will increase the suffering. We might think that if we stop resisting the threatening energy, it will take us over and be the cause of all kinds of humiliation. Contrary, however, to what we might have feared, if we stop this resisting and investigate how able we are to receive the emotion just as it presents itself, we will find an increased sense of confidence and self-respect, as we contact and develop our capacity for staying present with whatever arises. Little by little, this will take us into a relationship that feels much more appropriate, more humane. From the perspective of a willingness to fully allow this dimension of ourselves, we will see directly that stuffing emotions out of sight is an unkind, even an abusive thing to do. No wonder we didn't feel like our own best friend!

Sadly, it is often the case that we haven't had adequate examples of people who knew how to be accommodating of their own emotional household. The guardians and mentors who were responsible for our education and upbringing were often themselves suffering from the consequences of their own unawareness, and this inevitably rubbed off onto us. We learned the patterns of behaviour of the people that we lived with and picked up their habit of forcing that which we don't like or are afraid of into the basement, hoping it will disappear.

But as the years went by we may have started to feel

like there was something missing. A big empty feeling in our stomach or in our heart makes us feel that there is something lacking. The existence of this feeling in society at large is a significant factor as the driving force behind our consumer culture. It runs on this perception of something lacking. But no matter how much we try to assuage this feeling with 'retail therapy', our sense of personal integrity does not increase. We can feel like we are living someone else's life and in constant fear of being found out.

Whenever I have read the colour supplement of the weekend newspaper – sometimes people leave us newspapers at the monastery – there are always these eye-catching pictures of food. I find myself wondering if people really eat like the pictures encourage them to. I mean you couldn't live on those little weenie portions in the middle of that stylish plate. It looks more like a piece of graphic art than a meal, which often, of course, is what it is. It's a designer exercise whose purpose is distraction. The same principle holds for various sporting activities. I recently stayed with a friend of the community in Leeds and watched a television programme on extreme sports. 'Extreme' is a good description for much of the activity we engage in. But what is it that is driving such activity?

Instead of attempting to cover up the empty feeling with food or perfume or extreme sports, the practice of Dhamma encourages us to trust that, if we discipline attention carefully and skilfully, we can turn around and receive that feeling without reacting or shying away from it. How does it actually feel to feel, 'I want something and I feel this sense of lack, this sense that I'm not all here'? If we really listen to this, what we can find, instead of an increase in our suffering as our perceived enemy takes us over, is a genuine, naturally arising, warm sense of joy.

When I allow this feeling of lack – often in the belly – to be received, I feel more honest and more genuinely alive. Related aspects of the experience start arising – memories and sensations – and if I track them, if I follow them and listen to them, not getting lost in them, not getting into arguments with them but simply receiving them with kindness and patience, I start to feel that there is all this unlived life, emotions that I didn't want to live through, didn't like, didn't agree with and therefore stuffed them in the basement. We feel like we're lacking, because we are lacking. There's all this unacknowledged life of ours that has been driven into unawareness, that's unreceived, unlived through and it's getting very antsy.

Sooner or later in practice we come to a stage where we can no longer ignore the fact that we feel that something is not right; a stage when affirmations and the various other devices don't work any more. We always have the option of giving up, of course, and indulging our beliefs in the possibility of fulfilment offered by sense gratification. However, we also have the possibility of continuing on our path of practice: that of listening deeply and receiving our emotions with increased willingness.

We might hear all these growling noises coming from down below and think, 'Oh my goodness, what's going to happen if I lift the lid off that?' There can be a very real fear that arises when we find ourselves starting to encounter our unlived life. Habitually there might be thoughts of wanting to reach for the bottle, roll some weed or put on some good music – of doing *anything* but feeling this terrible feeling that we're going to be taken over by something unknown and terrifying.

But what is there that would take us over anyway? This is England, for goodness sake! This is not some unfortunate

country full of tyrants oppressing us; this is England, sweet England. Thankfully for us there isn't anything 'out there' that will harm us. The only thing that could possibly take us over is our own wild nature. And since that is our energy, surely there is nothing to be afraid of. Of course it can, and at times does, feel like there is something to fear, but let us remember that, just because we feel afraid, it does not mean anything terrible is about to happen. How many times have we been fooled by the way these beguiling emotions appear?

Rather than asking what emotions are, let us try asking, 'How freely can I receive myself in this domain of experience?', and then let them teach us about life, about reality. If in asking that question we come upon a feeling of obstruction, let's get interested in that. 'How and where do I feel obstructed? Is it in the belly? Is it in the throat? Is there a sense that I am not allowed to feel these things? Is that what causes the feeling of being blocked or not allowed to know myself?'

If you were brought up in a rigid and repressive manner perhaps you were taught that it wasn't okay to feel certain feelings – guilt for instance. Or if you did feel guilty you were told you had to go through the formula of asking for forgiveness to get rid of that feeling. If you continued to feel guilty that meant you were not, and could not be, part of 'the club' – you were out, you were going down. In my early life I found that no matter how hard I tried I couldn't stop feeling guilty. I certainly didn't want to stop doing the fun things that were making me feel guilty, so what was left to do but deny it? Feeling guilty about living is so irrational that the rational mind decides to ignore the feeling. Big mistake! As a result we end up developing a habit of denying whatever it is we are feeling, in this case the feeling of guilt.

In doing this we deny an entire domain of our lives – not just the painful feelings but even good feelings we are not free to feel. Now that's sad.

Feelings of guilt, like all emotions, are forms of what we could call 'heart-energy'. And when this energy, which in its nature is dynamic, is denied, it will come out in one of two ways; either as excess or as perversion. What might have been a healthy sense of moral shame can thus become a distorted sense of unworthiness. This peculiarly Western mental obstruction is a complex of anger and fear – a sense of righteous anger directed towards ourselves in an attempt to feel good by hating ourselves for being bad. And at the same time there is a gut-wrenching fear of eternal hell.

The good news, however, is that this whole drama is simply waiting to be received into awareness. With sensitivity and strength of heart born of constant mindfulness practice we can eventually find a readiness to turn around and meet ourselves. What we discover is the wonderful truth that there isn't anything to be afraid of – nothing at all other than the lack of well-prepared mindfulness.

This line of investigation can be applied to all emotions. If for instance we push down anger, if we've been taught that 'good boys and girls don't get angry' then we might grow up to be afraid of anger. We can be terrified of something that is totally natural. That which we experience as anger is actually our own hearts' energy. It is something that we need to be intimately familiar with. We need all our energy for the work of purification. We can't lock away portions of our hearts because we find them disagreeable. We can't afford to entertain feelings of alienation and fear of our passionate nature. If such conditioning goes unrecognised for too long, the energy – hidden and difficult to uncover – will become toxic.

We might have to go through a humiliating outburst of anger before we start to suspect that it is there. Or perhaps we experience night after night of violent dreams. If the energy remains unreceived then the only alternative is a descent, as I mentioned, into perversion or excess. For the more introverted types, in which category most meditators fall, self-loathing is often the norm. 'I'm worthless, I'm a hopeless case, and I've failed everything. I just put on a face and pretend, but basically I'm damaged goods. I hate myself so much.' Or paranoia: 'Everybody hates me, everybody is out to harm me.'

The more extroverted character is likely to fall into expressions of excess like violence and aggression. We can see this in the way people go out on drinking binges, or become violent in their relationships or families. Is such ugliness a symptom of people's inherent badness? Not at all; it's a sign that anger has not been understood. Anger, in not being received, is uncontained and dangerous, but the issue is with the relationship we have with the energy, not with the energy itself. As meditators we really need to understand this. And I believe such understanding can come if we are interested in the actuality of what we call emotions, not merely in conceptualizations of them.

If we embark on such an investigation, we will not only come to a greater personal sense of contentment, but we may also find a clearer appreciation of why our world is such a strange place and what we can do to help it.

Thank you for your question.

When We Fall in Love

There is no fear if the heart is uncontaminated
and the mind is free from ill-will.
Seeing beyond good and evil, one is awake.

Dhammapada verse 39

I have been asked to talk about falling in love. I want to approach this topic from a consideration of love as that which happens in our heart when all fear falls away. Perfect love is the absence of the heart-contraction experienced as fear. Now, can we contemplate this absence as presence?

Love as Undivided Attention

What does it feel like to be loved? What does it feel like to be loving – as it is happening? To receive love from another is to receive somebody's undivided attention. They're not preoccupied with anybody or anything else; they have forgotten themselves and are wholeheartedly attending to us. There's a tremendous beauty, richness and fullness in so receiving the heart of another.

If we were to consider the experience of our own undivided attention directed inwards, we would come upon 'one-pointedness', the essence of formal meditation. Cultivating this one-pointedness is our *samadhi* practice. In samadhi we experience a sense of profound beauty and fullness, an incomparable aliveness directly related to the quality of

attention involved. However, as important as the cultivation of this unified inner state may be, this evening's question is about the same undivided heart-quality directed outwards, towards another person.

It's natural that we want to know the truth about love. It is such a mysterious and unfathomable experience, and yet our hearts yearn to fathom it. Various objects and situations can draw us into this state of being undivided. If we've consciously experienced our ability to offer such attention, we know how it feels in the company of another individual, but we might also have experienced it unexpectedly on a mountaintop or alone out on the ocean. There might also have been occasions when we felt lifted into an altogether different reality through proximity to a particular individual who has fully realised the heart's capacity for being loving. Simply being in their company might have induced us into a state of love that we had not known before. In these various ways it happens that conditions sometimes conspire to free us from fear; and when fear ceases, when for some magical reason fear is not happening, love is.

Having become aware through personal experience of this tremendous quality of undivided attention, it becomes possible for us to enquire into how, where and when attention becomes divided. Our attention is usually divided, and we soon recognise how difficult it is not to be divided – not to be taking sides for and against our experience. It's not easy to make ourselves be loving; in fact we can't do it; 'I' can't make myself be loving. Being loving happens. However, we can, through developing an interest, direct ourselves towards an awareness of the divided state; we can investigate it and become familiar with its dynamic. As we make this investigation, we start to find that we can undo the compulsion to be divided. Accordingly, as we are freed from the compulsion

to be divided in our lives, we begin to realise the heart's capacity to live free from fear. Slowly but surely we once again uncover the natural ability to be loving, and in doing so we emerge from reactivity into responsible living.

The Wound of Separateness

To say that we uncover a natural ability might make it sound like being divided is all wrong. It was not all wrong. In childhood we grew gradually from a state of undifferentiated identification with our parents and the sensual world into a perception of separateness, or relative selfhood. The child development theorists describe how an individuated sense of being a separate somebody is constellated by about the age of seven. By that stage a personality of sorts, an ego, has become established together with the perception of 'me' and 'you' and 'the world out there'. Along with these perceptions come all 'my' desires; from the age of seven onwards there's a lot more substance to the demanding of a child. Accompanying this developing ego, there's 'my' ability to say 'no' to 'you' when you want something from 'me'; there's more solidity, and the ideas of 'my rights' and 'my boundaries' develop.

This development of 'my way' is natural and necessary for us as humans. But it is very useful to understand how, as this momentum increases, there's a diminishing capacity for abiding in the happiness of the undifferentiated state – the state of simply being at one with what is happening. The pleasure and freedom of 'at-one-ment' that we knew as children become less and less accessible to us as we grow up.

Then as we approach early adolescence we start to look for ways to escape the discomfort of this perceived separateness, with its agonies of loneliness and dividedness. And, not surprisingly, around this time we have our first experience of falling in love. Something happens, we don't quite know

what it is, but we become incredibly interested in somebody else – and it's not mum or dad! It's magical, it's frightening, and there's an excitement and enthusiasm that promises to free us from all our unhappiness.

So we have fallen in love, but we still carry the wound of separateness that occurred in childhood. That wound means that there's no longer the opportunity simply to be one with life. Now we find that there's 'me' and 'you' as well as the 'world'. When we fall in love there is the first major disturbance of our separate identity, and the first hint of the task ahead of us: as if out of instinct we passionately desire to return to at-one-ment. 'How do I return to that beautiful state I used to be in, where there wasn't a care in the world? I feel obstructed, I feel cut off, I feel only half alive…'

In presenting this particular perspective on falling in love, I am not saying that this is all there is to it. This is one pathway of contemplation into an important and complex area of our lives. Falling in love can appear extremely attractive to a person at one time yet terrifying at another. What is called for is a way in which we can ask the most challenging questions of our hearts while feeling free and able to listen to the response.

Initially it might appear that by following our passionate desires we will get what we want; and what we want after all is to be happy. We think that by following our desire to be happy we will become happy. We believe that there is such a thing as true happiness and that falling in love is a way to get it. Most of these beliefs and thoughts are totally unconscious at the time.

The difficulty which we encounter during these initial efforts is that, as we follow the impulse to gratify desire, the momentum of 'my way' increases. 'I' feel more and more that 'I' must have that which 'I' long for. With this comes a

corresponding intensification of the fear of not getting the object of my desire. The increase in force of the compulsion of 'my way' gives rise to an absolutely equal increase in the fear of not getting my way. With the increase in the force of the fear of not getting 'my way' there is the painfully diminished capacity for simply being loving.

Tragically, we don't notice this happening. All we know is that the passionate longing is increasing and that we feel trapped. It is rare that we receive the kind companionship of others who would guide us through our adolescent struggles to wisdom. Hope for true love and lasting meaning increases yet the clouds of loneliness roll in and our hearts grow cold.

Our life continues to unfold in myriad ways. But now we've got this divided consciousness – we believe strongly in right and wrong and good and bad. We have the ability to make judgments about how things should and shouldn't be, and about how I should and shouldn't be. And it doesn't stop. Years go by; the momentum of it all seems to increase, and yet there is still this inkling that somehow this business of love is terribly important. We write poetry about it, sing songs about it and from time to time we experience something that we call 'falling in love'. Yet we are not freed from our increasingly chaotic dividedness.

In fact everything about us becomes divided, even our professional lives. We talk about 'being at work'; there's who we are at home and there's who we are at work. Even if you're a professional meditator, a monk or a nun, there can be dividedness. I hear people talk about 'the real practice', which means there must be the unreal practice. The real practice, they say, is when we're meditating. They say that when we're doing 'the real practice' – that is when we're on retreat – there are no problems. As soon as we start talking and relating to others, doing work and so on, then we get all

these problems. But if there is our real practice and our unreal practice, then we are living in a state of fragmentation; relationships, talking to people and being at work appear as obstructions to well-being. Who is responsible for that division? Where does the idea of real practice and unreal practice exist? In our divided minds, in our divided hearts.

Sometimes we're sitting in meditation and the mind is not how we want it to be. Perhaps we're filled with longing for intimacy that is causing an inner struggle as we sit there on our cushion. If we look carefully, we'll find that there is a voice that says, 'It shouldn't be this way, I shouldn't be like this.' Where does that division of what should or shouldn't be exist? It exists in our own divided minds, our own divided hearts. We are the ones who are setting conditions up against each other. We need to know this.

Falling in Love

It's possible that if there is an absence of love in our lives, we try with our divided minds to become more loving. We think of our unloving traits as things that we have to 'fix'. However, when we look at what is – without any sense that it should be some other way – we can sense this very tendency to divide ourselves off from what is. If we approach our lives in this way, cultivating undivided attention to the present moment, we are capable of being loving in each moment.

If we live this way, and one day a person appears, and that special magic happens whereby fear falls away and the beauty that we call loving manifests, then maybe we won't divide our hearts and minds and start struggling to hold on to this experience. Maybe we won't spoil it; we will be loving, we will delight in and be strengthened and even transformed by the intensity of that experience. The intensity of that beauty and that joy has the power to transform

the habit of selfishness. The momentum of 'my way' can be dissolved, by the radiant warmth of love with all of its intensity and all of its enthusiasm and all of its beauty, undenied.

However, for most of us, most of the time, this spontaneous capacity for loving is not the reality that we live with. We find that we are not able to abide as that loving reality, and so it is that we fall in love. What happens then, when we *fall* in love? The intensity and enthusiasm of that moment when fear falls away and when the natural, undivided state becomes conscious, turns our lives upside down. From the point of view of 'me', from the unawakened personality's perspective, that enthusiasm is totally threatening; it feels like it could shatter me. It becomes intolerable – we can't sleep, can't eat and feel we're being driven mad. If we're not suitably prepared for such intensity then the very pleasure of loving itself triggers the habit to grasp and contract. The pleasure is so beautiful that I feel I can't help but want it to last. The momentum of 'my way' is thus expressed as a default mechanism of narrowing attention. Instead of opening in wonder at the beauty of the experience and simply being it, we default to the momentum of 'my way', to the 'How can I have it?'

Pointing this out is not to judge that momentum, but to help us consider it and recognise it as a habit. To try and grasp at pleasure is not an obligation, it's a habit; it's a choice that we make, and therefore we can also choose to exercise the heart's ability to inhibit that contraction.

When we contract around desire, grasping its object, thinking, 'I want to make this pleasure last,' we condition the arising of the exactly equal and opposite experience of 'I'm afraid it won't last.' These two experiences, of wanting the pleasure to last, and fearing that it won't, go together, like the front and back of the hand. We can't have one without the

other. The sadness of this situation is that by grasping the desire to make it last we lose the loving. We lose the loving in its pure, natural form; the contracted heart no longer has the capacity to contain our enthusiasm and so it leaps out and lands on the other person.

This is the subjective experience as the open-hearted beautiful state is lost. Because of the habit of desire and the consequent fear, the heart-energy leaps out and lands on the object – whether it's a thing in a shop that we feel we must have, or another person, or an ideal, or a state of mind. Assuming that it's another person, the consequence of this leaping-out is the thought, 'I can't live without you.' And that's true; 'I' can't live without 'you', because I don't have my heart anymore; you've got half of it at least, so I'll do anything to have you – that's what the heart feels and what the mind tends to believe.

The unawakened personality cannot live without the other, for it feels like death, though from the perspective of the awakened personality all this would be seen as a state of diminished responsibility. Now, to say this is not to diminish the experience; we all have the experience and we all have to learn from it. But we should also recognise that in this experience we betray ourselves and project our hearts' passion and enthusiasm onto another object or another person. Subsequently we have to suffer the consequences of having betrayed ourselves. Believing that, 'I cannot simply trust my own heart's capacity for loving, so I will project it onto you and expect you to carry it for me,' we *fall* in love. This is losing ourselves, and there's an intoxication in this experience. If we make a contract with each other – two unawakened personalities deciding to collude with this delusion – then, when the two of us get together in equally deluded states, it can feel like one whole.

Love and Transformation

Often I am asked whether it is possible to deepen practice in the context of a committed relationship. My hesitation to say much about this is not because of a view that progress on the path towards realisation can only be furthered in the context of monastic life; such fixed views scare me. But since I don't have the experience of living in relationship with one other person with any degree of long-term commitment, I can't presume to know. Just as I wouldn't rely on someone without many years experience to teach me how to live the celibate renunciate life, I don't wish to instruct others how to live their lives as householders, only to encourage asking questions of themselves. I believe that all of us, whatever our lifestyle commitment, can use every situation we find ourselves in to deepen practice.

One thing I have heard from some who view their partnership as practice is that there is as much, if not more, to learn from falling *out* of love as there is to learn from falling in love. What is essential is commitment and interest in going beyond the initial high. I have heard various lay teachers, who know about this business from their own experience, that inevitably every relationship reaches the point where at least one of the partners feels, 'I made the wrong choice.' And it is precisely at that point that the relationship becomes really interesting as an aspect of spiritual practice.

There are ways of contemplating the dynamic of being loving so that we can prepare ourselves to benefit from our susceptibility to falling in love. As the possibility of the Way dawns on us, we can start to see that it is wisdom that calls us to prepare ourselves for such wild encounters with life. Experiences such as falling in love appear threatening, at least on some level – they don't just threaten to destroy our ego, our subjective personality (they do that for sure); they

also threaten to ruin our lives. If you're a monk or a nun and you fall in love, and you're not prepared for it, the consequences can be very difficult. Similarly, if you're married and you fall in love with someone other than the one with whom you have made a commitment, the consequences can also be very difficult. But we can prepare ourselves, so that we don't have to be afraid of it happening; we don't have to be afraid of the intensity.

If we contemplate in this manner, we can ask ourselves, do I want to be able to withstand the tension that arises as a consequence of an as-yet-unawakened relationship with my own heart-capacity? When we fall in love, what's really taking place is that we are challenged to own up to the consequences of our limited way of engaging with experience. We feel like saying, 'I can't handle it, I can't handle this,' but we can decide to handle it, to say 'I'm interested in learning to handle this; I'm interested in learning to handle all of my heart's enthusiasm for life; I'm interested in being loving, fully, purifying the heart's capacity for being loving.' If we've investigated and considered this matter, and then decide to exercise this choice, we are already preparing ourselves, so that when the passion arises, fear, contraction and limitation is not the default, but instead an interest in the reality which is unfolding takes its place. We're interested and enthusiastic because we see the potential that such energy has for dissolving the rigidity of our frozen hearts. It feels impossible from one perspective, for sure; from the perspective of the ego, it's definitely impossible; but from the perspective of facing the Way, it's a profound power for transformation, and it does not have to become an obstruction. It can deepen our commitment to being free to live all of our life as it comes to us and goes from us, without fear.

No Blame

But the worst stain of all is ignorance.
Be purified of this and you are free.

Dhammapada verse 243

Can we contemplate together what happens when we get caught in blaming? Several times recently I have heard used the expression, 'a culture of blame'. Strangely, some of those using this expression appear to feel that someone 'out there' is responsible for the existence of this culture.

From the perspective of practice we begin our investigation into blaming by looking first for what it is that we ourselves are contributing to our suffering. Once we are able to acknowledge our part, we are then in a position to perceive the causes for the arising of this suffering more accurately.

Let us consider some examples. Last week, the driver of the JCB, working on the building site which will become our retreat centre, dug up the mains water-pipe, so that the monastery and surrounding houses were without running water for four hours. There was quite a bit of blaming going around in response to that. Some thought it was the driver's fault for not being more careful, others the project manager for not doing sufficient research, some the site manager for leaving the workers to carry on without supervision. There was even the suggestion that the neighbours brought it upon themselves with the bad *kamma* they had created by being so difficult!

Then there has been all the talk about the awful weather we are having. The blame, it has been suggested, rests with those responsible for global warming. And that can't be Britain because she is too small. It must be the Americans; four percent of the world's population generating twenty-five percent of the pollution! It's easy to blame the Americans.

But where does this blaming get us? On a superficial level we can feel better if we have someone to blame; we can feel right when we think we know who is wrong. Being able to label people as responsible also deals with the anxiety which comes from always wanting to know things are under control. But does having someone to blame – and that someone might be ourselves – free us from suffering? It gratifies something momentarily, but is that the same as finding satisfaction? Now we have created an enemy, which is another kind of suffering. And if it is ourselves we have blamed then we become even more hurt and inwardly divided than we were before.

Right Motivation

Surely our motivation to uncover causes for our problems is a natural interest in being free from suffering – and there isn't anything wrong with that. Yet the kind of blaming we're discussing does not come from pure-hearted interest. In these cases the healthy impulse to seek out the causes for suffering became poisoned by the untamed passions. Our life energy experienced as our human passions, flared up and invaded hearts and ignited minds.

This life-energy is not in itself either good or bad; it is neutral. But the way in which it manifests gives rise to perceptions of good and bad; it is in how we relate to our perceptions that we can begin to take responsibility for our suffering. How we view our experience determines whether

we live our lives blaming whenever we suffer, or whether, when suffering arises, we are strengthened in our commitment to being free.

So what can we do? In our contemplation of falling in love we investigated how, in the height of intensity and aliveness, we might tend to default to old ways of contracting the heart-awareness, thereby losing the beauty and freedom of 'being loving'. We considered how this happens as a result of our inability to accommodate the fullness of life with all its energy. This inability arises out of habitual fear, which results in our becoming chronically limited in our capacity for whole-hearted living. Instead of being liberated by that which promises to give us everlasting happiness, we end up spoiling it and becoming dependent on each other through attachment.

Isn't it similar with blaming? When we don't get what we want, or get what we don't want, or lose that which we enjoyed having, we suffer the pain of disappointment, sorrow and despair. The energy flares up and we start to burn. Our initial reaction turns into indignation and rage. As the storm intensifies and moves upwards into our heads, we start imagining where we can place the blame. Through a perceived inability to hold the pain – like a volcano that cannot be contained by the earth's crust – our energy bursts out and lands on the object of our blame. Because the pressure of frustration feels intolerable, we project our heart-energy out.

Just to notice this is to see the very point where things can change. If we have prepared ourselves for these reactions it is possible that instead of becoming more rigid in our clinging to what we want, we open up to accommodate the passions. To prepare ourselves with this kind of contemplation is to increase the likelihood of mindfulness being there when we need it.

Right Preparation

We all know what it is like to become caught up in the passions, so we do not need to wait until it happens to do something about it. Right preparation is the way to protect ourselves from our own harmful habits. By establishing in advance this kind of understanding, we are much less likely to fall into old ways. The force of habit is inhibited by mindfulness. This kind of considered restraint is not the same as a blind repression that we might fear will lead to the energies returning in a more potentised form in the future.

In exercising such restraint we create the conditions for seeing through the appearance of suffering. We develop the capacity to overcome that state of inertia which binds us into the humiliating condition of 'losing it' time and time again. When we experience the state of fearlessness that we know as love, we are tempted to grasp at its beauty – believing that this will make it last. But with right restraint insight arises, outshining old painful habits, and love is purified. By comparison, when we are hurting, we tend to react by rejecting, seeking someone or something to blame. But shooting our passions out onto an external figure makes us weak and dependent. If we can stay with the energy long enough, refusing to succumb to the temptation of trying to release ourselves from it, the energy builds up until the walls which held us imprisoned and chronically limited, crumble. The awareness we occupy opens up. Being restrained with informed awareness is the work of transformation. Mindful holding back is the dynamic that frees us.

After consciously going through such an expansion of awareness, we know for ourselves that we are not hopeless victims of our inner fires. A transformation of the wild passions through awareness means that we feel altogether differently towards their flaring up. We find that there is a little

more space for them – at least until we find ourselves limited again. They are no longer seen as enemies against which we must forever brace ourselves. From this point onwards we can view suffering differently. The teachings that tell us that 'mindfulness of suffering leads to freedom from suffering' become true in a new way. Henceforth when pain such as disappointment arises, we have a sense that inhibiting the impulse to blame is the way itself – not torturous endless endurance. Allowing the pressure of the passions within us to increase while staying steady and focused in an interested manner is the path to a new understanding. In other words, our suffering, held with such a view, becomes the key that opens the doors that have kept us feeling locked in.

There is a further point we should consider, and that is how, when we taste the fruits of our practice and delight in the spaciousness of increased awareness, we are at risk of being infected by the blight of conceit. We might feel, "I have transformed my anger." This is to lose ourselves again. The energy that actually liberated us out of the cramped space of a contracted heart is not the energy of our deluded personality. It is not 'me' that did it. It is nature. It is Dhamma. Laying claim to it is the habit of grasping raising its head once more. But we can learn from this too. We come to see more clearly how the unawakened ego continually seeks to find security by grasping. The impulse to awakening, however, only seeks the truth: there is no freedom in clinging.

I hope this contemplation helps us all learn to be careful.

Meeting our Anger

As rain cannot penetrate
a well-thatched roof,
so the passions cannot invade
a well-trained heart.

Dhammapada verse 14

The passion of anger is something that most of us are tripped up by, at least from time to time. For some of us it is a source of major struggle in our lives. It is useful to acknowledge that it is only when we have some degree of calmness, some perspective of coolness, that we are in a position to effectively reflect on such matters. When we are all fired up with passion, of whatever sort, we simply don't have the perspective or the clarity. Of course, we are capable of some sort of thinking under such circumstances, but such thinking is likely to be driven in conditioned ways, desperate to find an escape from the pain of being caught up. Whether it is by anger, lust or fear, we can be driven in narrow, habitual directions in order to release ourselves from the agitation of being possessed. Let us take this opportunity to reflect on the nature of these passions.

Reconsidering the Enemy

In late 1987 a hurricane raged across the south of England and France. Millions of trees were uprooted. In the forests

belonging to our monastery at Chithurst about one third of the oak trees were brought down. It was a sad sight, one that caused everyone to feel disheartened. Yet a mere five years later the woods were welcomingly beautiful again, more open and brighter than before. Not only that, but here at Harnham we have benefited from the hurricane in that we have this lovely solid oak floor in our Meditation Hall.

The hurricane gives me an image of what tends to happen when we are faced with things we don't like. We readily perceive such things as the enemy and tend to see them as evidence of something going wrong. Because we follow this initial perception, we don't give ourselves the opportunity to reconsider our assessment; the result is that we behave in ways that can have serious and often tragic consequences.

Nature can teach us to develop wisdom by encouraging us to reflect on our habitual initial reactions that make us feel threatened and judgemental. When we are feeling hurt or threatened by circumstances we can easily react in short-sighted ways. Our untrained and untamed passionate nature is such that when anger arises we get caught up in it and misperceive situations. This wild energy, if not wisely contained, moves us to want to cause harm and to hurt others. We may recall the Buddha's words, 'When we hold fast to such thoughts as, "They abused me, mistreated me, molested me, robbed me" we keep hatred alive.' The heat comes up from our bellies so that the anger can possess our hearts and then go all the way up into our heads. If we are heedless, anger starts coming out through our mouth or through our limbs, or it can whirl around our heads and drive us crazy with ideas and fantasies. All this can go on until the energy has been spent.

Degrees of Passionate Distraction

How did the Buddha teach us to approach these things? Something he often encouraged is called in Pali *yoniso manasikara* – wise reflection, or wise contemplation. Moral restraint and wilful control have an important place in learning to transform our anger but to make them really effective, it helps to prepare ourselves more thoroughly. We are not to wait until we are caught up in anger before we contemplate it. Contemplating our moods or responses of anger is very different from being caught up in anger, when there is an ongoing proliferation of the angry feelings and thoughts. The difference between proliferation and contemplation is that when we contemplate, we can stop the thinking without struggle and comfortably return to silence – we can listen to silence. We are able to disengage from the momentum of mental activity. We come back to feeling what it feels like in our guts, in our heart, on our face. If it's proliferation, we're driven by anger, and we lose touch with the body.

In support of this skilful contemplation the Buddha gave a specific model of the different degrees of intensity of moods and mental disturbances. There are some obstructions, he said, that arise in the mind that are of little significance, such that by simply ignoring them they will go away. There is another sort of obstruction that will disappear, if after noticing them, we intentionally return to the meditation object. This type of disturbance has only a little energy in it.

There is a third sort of distraction of a higher level of intensity which we cannot effectively just turn away from. To try to do so doesn't work – the distraction keeps returning. We therefore have to leave our meditation object and look directly at the phenomenon itself and generate a counter-force. If, for instance, the mind is caught up in anger, what can help is to generate the forces of loving kindness and compassion.

There is a further degree of obstruction in which we need to analyse the distraction before the mind is released from it. We have to ask, 'What is going on here? What is the nature of this anger anyway?' We have to really consider the passion and its energy, and bring to mind the contemplations on the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self.

Finally, there are some disturbances which come to us about which the Buddha said that all we can do is push our tongue up against the roof of our mouth, grit our teeth and endure until it passes. This level of intensity is such that we can't deal with it at the time of its arising.

I have found it very helpful to become quite clear about these differing levels of intensity of distraction. It is not the case that we should be applying the same kind of effort towards every distraction that arises in meditation. To know that sometimes we can't deal with a distraction right now is important. When strong passion arises, sometimes all we can do is endure it, not act on it. We don't allow it to go up into our head and fuel compulsive thinking. Carefully and mindfully we hold the experience of anger as and where we first notice it, in our body and our mind. This is not repression – which is a blind reaction – so we don't need to be afraid of this practice. This is a conscious choice to withhold our tendency to indulge. If we do indulge in it and act with body, speech or mind, we are creating *kamma*, which, like throwing a stone into a pond, creates ripples. We might think at the time that to release the tension will make us feel better, but the reality is altogether different, and so the Buddha's encouragement was that we should do whatever it takes to endure it. We can consciously choose to meet our rage. We can choose not to act it out or repress it. We can choose to endure it.

In the case of coping with truly overwhelming passion, a simile the Buddha used was that of a strong man pushing down a weaker man in a fight. We are actually holding something down. It's as though we were dealing with someone who is deranged. Imagine you are in a public place where everybody is calmly going about their normal business, but a mad person turns up, drunk or unhinged, behaving in a dangerous manner – someone really out of control. In such a situation we just pin them down to the floor and hold them there. We don't introduce ourselves and say, 'Shall we share our feelings? Let's talk about it together.' What is called for is to restrain them and hold them until they recover their senses. Only then can we relate in a more civil manner.

So mindful restraint is the first line of defence against an attack by wild anger. We don't make it worse by following it. Although it may test our ability to the point of feeling like we might crack, it will eventually pass.

Believing in Anger

Another aspect of wisely reflecting on our anger is to consider whether it is really the case – as we can believe when we are fired up – that following such passion will make things better. One evening after giving a talk on anger at the monastery somebody asked the question, "How can I let go of anger when it feels so good to follow it?" They said, "I just love having a go at one particular person who I think is really stupid." I didn't know what to reply to them. If we are convinced that it is good to indulge in aggression, then there is little that we can change. However, if we are committed to meditation practice and have some access to the peaceful heart, we can know how beautiful a heart free from anger is. It is because we don't know about this possibility that we become caught up. From the perspective of identifying with

our bodily senses we experience the passions as who and what we are. On that level it can feel good to feel this power of anger. When we get passionately righteous and indignant, our rage feels so energising. Our sense of self is potentised and this leads us to conclude that anger is good. We believe that we are going to get something out of following it. So long as we haven't deeply investigated this aspect of ourselves we can be fooled into thinking that acting out our anger is somehow going to benefit us.

Sitting here now talking about it, it sounds crazy, doesn't it, but this is what happens. This is why people commit the most awful atrocities that, from the perspective of those of us who have never been in a war situation, are utterly incomprehensible. If we were not there in the former Yugoslavia a few years ago, or in Rwanda before that – or who knows where next – and we hear of all the slaughter, the rape and torture, the unbelievable horror, it is very difficult to take any of it in and make sense of it. However, the reality of such atrocities becomes at least conceivable if we have enquired into our own experience of getting caught up in passion to the point that that passion possesses us. We can see how, when this happens, when we become possessed by hatred, when we allow ourselves to be convinced that acting out this hatred will solve the problem, how then we are capable of absolutely anything.

Facing the Consequences

Sometimes, after we have experienced an outburst of passionate rage, and the fires have subsided, we just go on to distract ourselves, trying not to think about it any more. That approach to dealing with our faults does not work. The reason we have become caught up in anger in the first place is because there is something in us we have not yet recognised.

At such times we can also go against the inclination to avoid what we are feeling and instead turn towards it and fully receive it. Something within us might fear that to do so will involve the risk of being taken over by it. It is true that we need to approach this task sensitively and skilfully, but with right practice we can equip ourselves with the ability to fully face the consequences of our heedlessness. Those consequences are painful. If we are consistent and non-judgemental, these same painful feelings gradually give us the message that to allow ourselves to follow this energy, no matter how tempting it appears, leads to making things worse. We are losing out. When we begin to get a feeling for the integrity of this practice we become more willing to open to our weakness. Having survived the humiliation of losing our composure, we can afterwards stop and reflect and get to the point of acknowledging with humility, 'I actually lost it there, didn't I? – I got caught up in the heat.'

It can be helpful at this point to mentally rerun the drama. I might notice that the fire gets stirred up in the belly, and because I miss it there, it continues upward and invades my heart, then my head and then starts coming out through the mouth. Just this kind of contemplation can prepare us, so that next time we are about to be swept away in a firestorm, we remember ourselves. We can recall what happened the last time we followed the passion, and this time around find other ways of channelling it. Go jogging – jog until you are exhausted. Take a cold shower; do some yoga; do walking meditation – quickly if necessary; do anything rather than acting on the anger, letting it control you, letting it drive you into making more unskilful kamma. If we try to contemplate what is happening before we have cooled down properly, then we might become caught up again and continue to dwell on the event, thinking, 'I was in the right, I was per-

fectly justified!' and so on. But even that is something we can learn from, if we are willing. Some physical activity might be necessary initially as a way of dissipating the energy so that we can be in a suitable state to consider what happened.

The Benefits of Consistent Effort

Another useful way of viewing anger is to see it simply as energy. This is energy that is to be purified and transformed. It is not something just to get rid of or to vent. This is something to be understood, and in order to do this our relationship with it also needs to be purified.

The first level of purification is containment or restraint. We restrain ourselves from acting out the motive forces that are gaining momentum within us, no matter how uncomfortable that experience is for us. There is power in such mindful restraint and this leads us to being able to engage the energy intelligently and creatively.

A good friend once suggested to me that home visits were the best barometer for practice in this area. I think he was right. I know that whenever I used to go back to New Zealand to see my family there couldn't be a more fertile source of opportunity for restraining my emotional reactions. There were seemingly endless opportunities for becoming indignant. While other family members, who were having more children or earning more money, received praise and recognition, the fact that I had been enthusiastically and consistently committed to the life of a renunciate monk for twenty-odd years received no appreciation. When I was younger, this stony indifference to my spiritual orientation was a cause of considerable upset and hot-temperedness on my part. Of course my reason came up with rational explanations for my family's behaviour, but inside I could hear the voice of my indignation, saying, "But what about me?

Doesn't it count for something that I have been getting up every morning rededicating my life to all sentient beings and working hard to help others? And, and..." I would regularly come down with a sore throat, an eye infection or some disease that was symptomatic of the inner struggle I was having with my rage. As I grew older, both physically and in the training, those inner voices became much quieter. I have learned how good it feels to not have to react, so that I can go away with my dignity intact. I cannot say that the voices are never there but the relationship I have with them is very different from what it was. I find I can respect them. At the very least I can endure them! With this inner shift, home visits have become more harmonious.

With this practice I learn to see such thoughts as, 'what about me?' as expressions of our heart's precious energy. We are free to allow that energy to be kidnapped by the deluded conditioning of our minds and be wasted on indignation and blame if we wish, but we are also free to engage that same energy in the cultivation of strength of heart. Patience is nourishing; compassion is nourishing; and ill will, anger and resentment are not the enemies of these virtues. This raw energy is an indicator of where our heart is.

At times I stand by the monastery compost heap and consciously register how thoroughly unattractive it smells. I then go on to reflect how this bad-smelling muck will soon be giving nourishment and beauty to the garden. Just because our hearts manifest in unrefined and unattractive ways, it does not mean we are bad people or that the energy itself should be disposed of. We would be wise to withhold our initial reactions and look deeper.

This cultivation is hard at times but it does bring benefits. When I was a young monk someone once threw a tomato at me, and it took several days for me to recover from the hurt

feelings. What I can say now, some years later, is that it takes less time. Not that tomatoes are thrown at me every day, but occasionally a little abuse is hurled my way. I mention this as an example of what changes. I am not so interested in never feeling anger. What is more interesting is being free to own up to the energy in my reactions and take full responsibility for them – not to be driven by them. This is the only energy we have. This is the energy of practice. Our task is to train so as to be able to recognise this passionate energy for what it is, not mistaking it as our enemy.

To view our passionate nature as something we have to either indulge in or project out limits the possibilities in life. If, for instance, we have suffered abuse and remain locked into the state of resentment, feeling unable to forgive, we sooner or later need to recognise that it is we who are doing the resentment. One reason we continue to do it is that we believe that to do so will be beneficial to us. But there is no benefit, only increased suffering for all involved. By reviewing this way of approaching resentment with mindfulness and wise contemplation, we can learn to withdraw our investment of energy in it and uncover the first seeds of forgiveness. To forgive, as we have often heard, does not mean to forget. But it can mean to be free from wasting our heart's energy on negativity. We are not obliged to invest our energy negatively. It is a choice. If we wish, we can direct it in ways that lead to increased freedom from suffering.

From the perspective of Buddhist practice there is nothing wrong with feeling anger. In the discourses the Buddha gave on mindfulness of breathing, he teaches us to feel whatever we feel, but to feel it *mindfully*. If we feel pleasure – it is just so. So likewise, if we feel anger, we feel anger – it is just so. We are not going to see our anger transformed overnight, but as we become more familiar with it, we will experience

the freedom that comes from not fighting it.

This change will not, however, always feel good. There will be times when it will feel wonderful not to get so regularly burned, and there will be times when it will feel like we are dying. We have been feeding on this wild energy, either by indulgence or repression, for a long time. Coming off our addictions takes its toll. The process of going against our habitual reactions to the passions is challenging and should not be underestimated. For this reason there are all the instructions in the spiritual traditions and the support of good companions on the path to encourage us in releasing out of our habits until we grow in confidence. This confidence emerges out of finding our sense of who we are in awareness, instead of in the limited identification with the tumultuous conditions of the body and mind.

This natural emergence leads to the insight that sees 'the false as the false' as the Buddha put it. When we see the false as the false we can then see the real as the real. As we renounce the various false ways of getting energy, like indulging in anger and greed, we move naturally into a new relationship with life – a more real relationship with life. The focus of our attention will not be so outward. What we will be feeling for is our own inner motivation – whether we are coming from a place that is intending to cause harm to others or not. In that knowing we can have strength and confidence.

The Buddha himself said that he didn't have any enemies. How could that be, since even a relative of his, Devadatta, had someone try to kill him? Not to mention all those monks who sided with Devadatta's attempt to take over leadership of the Sangha. The Buddha said that he didn't have enemies because he was speaking from his inner experience of being fully at one with his own heart. Since he didn't allow his heart energy to flow into heedlessness, thoughts of ill will

never occurred to him. For him everyone, even someone who tried to kill him, was a friend. It was from this understanding that the Buddha said, 'As rain cannot penetrate a well-thatched roof, so the passions cannot invade a well-trained heart.'

Thank you for your attention.

Who Says it's Wrong to Feel Afraid?

Seeing the false as the false
and the real as the real,
one lives in the perfectly real.

Dhammapada verse 12

As our retreat draws to a close and we start talking again, several people have mentioned how during the retreat they've had to encounter a lot of fear. Although on the outside there was nothing to be afraid of, and we couldn't have been with a nicer and safer group of people, this didn't stop fear arising. Amongst all of us here, I wonder if there's anybody who hasn't experienced fear at some time on this retreat? I wonder what our reaction to that fear was? Was there anyone amongst us who didn't ascribe a negative value to that fear; who didn't say to themselves that it was wrong to feel afraid?

So who is it that says that it's wrong to feel afraid? When we experience fear, and we hear a voice within us saying we shouldn't be afraid, who is saying that? This is an important question and I would like this evening to look into it.

Listening Carefully

When we first hear this question, we might hear the emphasis as, '*Who* says it's wrong to feel afraid?' as if we could find out who it is that says 'it's wrong' and teach them to say that

it's okay. This would be an understandable kind of reaction. When we find something disagreeable, our initial reaction is often to try and find the responsible agent. But what happens if we change the emphasis of the question to 'Who says it's *wrong* to feel afraid?'

If we feel afraid, I would suggest that what is called for is to feel it fully, to feel fully afraid. We need to understand that this same character who says 'It's wrong to feel afraid' also says that it's wrong to feel all sorts of other things. He or she is endlessly judging and condemning. This is the one that is getting off on the world, consuming the world, feeding on the world through praise and blame.

The Buddha said that to feed on praise and blame is like feeding on other peoples' spittle, on that which is better spat out or vomited up. This compulsive condemning mind feeds on taking the position of judge, on judging things as right, wrong, good or bad. Part of us really enjoys being so superior in handing down this judgement.

This same one starts laying on the praise when things are going well and we find our experience of life agreeable. A voice says, 'You've really got it together; you're doing really well. In no time, all sorts of people will want to listen to your pearls of wisdom. You're flying; you're on the way home.' This character feeds on praise and blame, gain and loss, success and failure. This is the part of us that the Buddha said was a slave to the world. The energy it lives on is false and unsustainable.

We don't need to feel bad when we come across this way of getting false energy. We don't need to condemn it. We just need to see it for what it is. That which sees this false way is itself real. The Buddha said, 'Seeing the false as the false, we attain to the real; mistaking the false for the real, we stay stuck in the false.' When we see ourselves consuming false

energy, which is what we are doing when we are being judgemental of our fear, we see that tendency for what it is. Finding identity in judging and condemning is a very limited identity, and it's also an exhausting identity. It means always having to try to succeed and win. We will always have an enemy to try to get rid of. By contrast, the one who walks the way beyond right and wrong and good and evil abides as the awareness which sees, which listens, which knows, and which receives all experience willingly.

Fear is Just So

So our practice is a way of moving out of the tendency to indulge in habits of condemning, of being for or against our fear or whatever else it is we're experiencing. Our practice is that of assuming the disposition of one who receives into awareness that which is, silently listening, and feeling freely. Fear is just so – no judgement. Fear, in the beginning means, 'I feel afraid.' But if we keep listening to it and feeling it, the 'I' falls away and there's just feeling fear. Fear. And there is awareness, a presence in the middle of our experience, not pushing nor pulling, not accepting, not rejecting, neither for nor against, neither not for nor not against. But it's not that I then have a new-found fixed identity as awareness, because I can't own this presence. Any feeling of wanting to own and be secure we can also simply receive.

Then we start to recognise that our desire and fear go together, that they are inextricably joined. When we see this connection between desire and fear we don't want to get lost in desire any more because we see that whenever we get lost in wanting we're building up fear for the future. Fear is the other side of desire. If 'I' am caught in desire, what 'I' don't see is how much I'm caught in the fear of not getting what I'm desiring. If we live freely with our feelings of wanting and

desiring and wishing, if we live seeing clearly, knowing accurately, then the fear of not getting what we want is just that, it's just so, it's not a problem. But when we grasp at the desire to get, we also grasp at the fear of not getting, even if we don't see it. We wonder where so much of our fear comes from. Why is it that more extravagant people, people who live more opulently, have more fear? Because they follow desire more. Fear and desire go together. As we work on being true with one, we discover a more true relationship with the other. If we want to be free from excessive desires then we need to look at how we feel about fear. When we feel afraid, we receive the fear into awareness. If it's really strong fear, which it can be at times; if it's terror even, or panic, at least let's try and remember to inhibit the tendency to say this is wrong. We're not saying that it's right; we're not trying to feel good about it. But we're bringing into relief those voices within us that are saying that it's wrong to feel afraid. It's not wrong to feel afraid, it's not right to feel afraid. When we feel fear we want to feel it fully, freely, without judgement. We are neither for nor against fear.

As we open into a broader quality of awareness, and we are able to receive our experience of fear into that awareness, we can study it clearly. We can study it deeply, in our own way, not through reading books or merely through thinking about fear. Thinking doesn't do us any good at all when we really feel afraid. We can listen, feel, observe the whole body-mind contraction that we experience as fear.

Fear is not a thing; it's an activity. Fear is the activity of constricting and contracting the heart energy. When we are challenged with some dangerous physical situation, the blood vessels in our body constrict and contract, we tense, we get more energy, and we can move out of that situation fast. That's what's supposed to happen, that's an appropriate re-

action. But often the same thing happens inappropriately for some imagined reason or threat. We develop very complex patterns of avoiding the knowledge that we're doing this fear. We somehow feel a victim of it. And in our state of helplessness the only thing we are able to do is judge it as wrong, decide that we're failing. But it is possible for us to expand beyond these contracted reactions with our well-developed radiant awareness, free from judgement and even from the need to understand. Awareness is simply willing to receive accurately.

When awareness outshines these shadowy reactions of denial and avoidance, the dynamic activity of fear that we are doing reveals itself. We feel it happening, we feel ourselves doing this constriction that obstructs the feeling of life, that obstructs the possibility of beauty, of intelligence, of love. Maybe we come to see that the possibility of loving is always here. In fact, it's the most natural condition. We see that the only thing that obstructs it is this contraction of fear that we're performing out of unawareness. And maybe if we come to see this for ourselves, we give up trying to become more loving, we give up trying to not be afraid. It's a waste of time trying to be more loving. It's like trying to make money when you've got a fortune in the bank.

Why Pretend about Reality?

If we see that we're obstructing the heart's radiance, then we can begin to feel what's behind that tendency to obstruct that we're habitually involved in. If we do this, then that tendency to obstruct is what we become interested in, not some new improved image of ourselves that we're trying to synthesize. A non-judgemental, non-condemning, all-forgiving, always loving, thoroughly acceptable, agreeable, rounded, nice, improved me appears as an altogether unattractive fantasy;

both unconvincing and uninteresting. What is interesting, what is genuinely attractive, is the possibility of experiencing the reality of being in the centre of our own reactions. Not pretending to not be afraid, not pretending to not get off on praise, not pretending to not dislike blame. But when for instance we feel blame and we dislike it we receive it fully. Why pretend about reality? When we're feeling good about being praised and appreciated, we know it as it is. When we're feeling afraid we say, 'Yes, I feel afraid.' We feel what we feel until there's no distance, no split within us, and we're one with what we're feeling.

In attempting to do this there is the real risk that we tap into more passion than we know how to contain. And if this is the case then we must acknowledge that we need to develop more strength of containment, more stability of character. We humbly recognise it, without trying to push past, without trying to overcome anything, without trying to bypass any stages or any experience, without trying to become enlightened or something. We own up to the limitations that we are experiencing, and we come back to exercising the discipline of attention, engaging with interest in the practice of mindfulness of breathing. We want to do this not because it's good or it's right or it's what some expert told us we should do but because we want to have the strength and the skill to be able to surrender ourselves into the reality that at this stage we intuit is at least possible.

If we approach our samadhi practice with this kind of wholehearted interest then it won't lead to fighting ourselves, it won't lead us into heedless judging of ourselves when we come across our limitations. It's inevitable that, as we intensify the heart feeling through such exercises as observing silence and focusing the mind, we're going to move through areas of experience that we don't feel so complete

in, so whole in or so safe in. It must be that way. Fear can be a healthy reaction as we move into dangerous territory. To say that we feel afraid doesn't mean to say that we're inadequate. Ajahn Chah used to say, 'Well if you're going to cross the motorway to get to the other side, you should be afraid; it's dangerous!' So let's be careful if we come across reactions in the face of fear such as, 'You're wrong, you're failing because you're feeling afraid.'

Let's see if we can listen with greater patience and deeper willingness.

The Power of Paradox

There are those who discover they can leave behind confused reactions
and become patient as the earth;
undisturbed by anger, unshaken as a pillar,
unperturbed as a clear and quiet pool.

Dhammapada verse 95

Question: How do I balance social action with dispassion and acceptance of things as they are? A sense of injustice is often the motivational force to act and persevere. Given that it is my job to challenge core practice in organisations how do I balance these different aspects of my practice? Not to act feels like collusion in wrongdoing, plus I'd probably lose my job.

Ajahn Munindo: It is true that we can feel caught in a conflict between, on the one hand, actually doing something about the ills in society that we live in and, on the other, the way we hear the Buddha's teaching about cultivating dispassion. It feels like a paradox – a painful paradox – and it seems there's some sort of contradiction. We hear the teachers telling us, 'It's just the way things are'. Perhaps you feel angry and frustrated about this. Perhaps you say, 'This isn't good enough.'

The world we live in is full of injustices, and there are things going on that are simply wrong. Most of us have a clear sense that there is right behaviour and wrong behav-

iour. What we struggle over is how to honour the values we hold at the same time as deepening our contemplations. What I find helpful is to appreciate that the consideration of the rights and wrongs of the world – the outer world – is happening in one particular dimension of our minds. Yet there are other dimensions in which we are not necessarily thinking in such a discursive manner. Probably you have experienced what it is like when the mind is silent and yet there is still a clear knowing operating. In this dimension of our minds we are called to consider in a different manner. Here we can learn, for example, to recognise the underlying views that we hold – the views that inform a lot of our more surface thinking. We need to be aware at these deeper dimensions so that there can be a readiness to respond confidently in any given situation. Much of our formal practice is concerned with creating suitable conditions for becoming acquainted with the underlying views and tendencies of our minds.

Compulsive Judging Mind

I was speaking earlier today with somebody about an underlying tendency that most of us have – what I call the 'compulsive judging mind.' There is a tendency in the mind to be always taking sides for or against things. It is like a sports commentator incessantly going on: 'This is good, this is bad; this is right, that is wrong; you're doing well; you're making a fool of yourself, you should be like this; you shouldn't have said that, he shouldn't have said that, he should have said this, she should be here…' It is an endless stream of 'shoulds' and 'shouldn'ts', and the tendency to think like this has been there for so long that we probably don't know how all-pervasive it is.

When we are on a retreat we have the good fortune of practising in an ultimately simplified situation. There are al-

most no distractions. It is conducive to the inward focus of our attention, its becoming increasingly subtle through the medium of quietness. If we pay careful feeling-attention in the right way and at the right time, we can identify this tendency to judge everything, and begin to look at it objectively.

To take an example, let us say a desire arises in the mind to seek out praise or recognition. You feel it is about time you were recognised for your talents and qualities and you wish to hear someone praise these attributes. So you think, 'I'll just go off and perform in front of somebody so that they give me a little praise.' Now, perhaps I'm putting things a little crudely, but the fact is, our minds often work in such ways. So this desire arises, but then when you recognise it you start thinking, 'Oh how awful! That shouldn't be happening; I should be beyond wanting affection and praise. I've been practising all these years and I'm still having this kind of state of mind.'

Once when I was complaining to Ajahn Chah about how unfortunate I was with all the health problems I was having, hoping to gain some sympathy, he said to me sternly, "If it shouldn't be this way, it wouldn't be this way."

Everything that happens in our life happens as a result of causes. There are causes for every phenomenon that arises, inwardly and outwardly, so without doubt those phenomena *should* be there. There are causes for you to think those thoughts. There are causes for you to feel those feelings. The curious thing that we neglect to understand is that our problem is not that we are having such thoughts – the causes for which lie in the past over which we have no control – but that we are judging ourselves for having them. By saying to ourselves, 'I shouldn't be thinking these thoughts or feeling these feelings,' we are putting obstacles in the way of our self-knowledge. We are, in effect, polluting our awareness.

So in order to understand what is going on at the deeper level of our minds we can use a retreat situation to get subtle and refined enough to go into that dimension and see it in a different way to that which we are used to. If we are careful and skilful enough we can learn how to undo those habits which are a cause of affliction for us.

This is an example of addressing the underlying view we have of life; the way that we approach life. If we go through life with a compulsive judging mind, it keeps us in a divided state. We will always feel like there is a challenge; we have no inner peace. This tendency has been conditioned so deeply into us that we think it's natural. But it isn't natural; it is something that we have learned to do. And, fortunately, we can unlearn it so that it no longer consumes our energy in such an unproductive, unhelpful way.

Judgement-Free Awareness

There is a church in the middle of Newcastle that has painted on the front doors, 'Hate all Evil. Love all Good.' If you were brought up with that sort of conditioning, as many of us were, you will inevitably have been led to this inwardly divided state. According to this teaching – which I am sure is entirely contrary to the Way of Jesus – God loves good and hates evil. The good ones he embraces and takes up to heaven where they have a good time forever, and the bad ones he chucks into hell where they have a bad time forever. With this kind of conditioning, when, in the face of recognising our faults we want to be virtuous, we start playing God; we set up this almighty tyrant in our minds that's sitting in judgment all the time. We end up eternally taking sides for and against ourselves – and it is terrible, it tears us apart.

The good news is that taking sides is not an obligation – we don't have to do it. We don't have to follow these com-

pulsions. With simple, careful, kind, patient attention we can recognise them as a tendency of mind. They are not the mind itself! They are not who and what we are. And having seen them, little by little, we are less caught up in them. As long as we don't start playing their game by judging the judging mind, saying, 'I shouldn't be judging,' we take away the counter-force which gives these tendencies their vitality. We come to know the judging mind as it is. The judging mind is just so. There is nothing inherently wrong with the judging mind. Its ability to evaluate and discriminate is an important part of the intelligence that we as human beings use for our safety and survival. The problem is that its influence has become disproportionately large in our day-to-day living, and it never wants to be quiet! Through careful feeling-investigation we can come to see this hyperactivity for what it is and allow the discriminative function to resume its proper place. We experience whatever is happening with our full attention but with calmness and some degree of equanimity. In each moment that we see the judging mind objectively – just as it is – we purify the underlying view that we have of life.

In the deeper dimensions of our being there's this kind of work to do. I would suggest that if we have the agility to move in and out of these various dimensions we will become adept at addressing very complex issues. In our daily life we can usefully set time aside, perhaps thirty minutes each day, to sit in formal meditation, and this agility will grow. Even ten minutes of well-spent sitting, being still and going back to the basic feeling of a total non-judgemental relationship with life, to perfect receptivity to the moment, can be of great benefit. Call it meditation, call it contemplation, call it whatever you like! It is a way of putting some time aside to value this part of life, to keep this faculty alive. And I trust that, as

we emerge into the more mundane workaday activity of our lives, in which we engage with people in situations and make decisions and so forth, we will find that we have a firmer foundation. The decisions we make will be informed by an underlying clear view.

Opening to Paradox

And so, even though there can appear to be a paradox or conflict, somewhere within us we know that it's an apparent paradox, and that with mindfulness and restraint we can allow it to be, without feeling driven into a reactive way of trying to solve it. This is why it's so important to purify our awareness of compulsive judging tendencies. So long as we're still habitually judging everything that comes up into our awareness, chronically judging, 'I shouldn't feel this way, I should feel that way,' we are significantly obstructed in our ability to contemplate anything clearly. Even if our thoughts go in the opposite direction, if we're having a good experience and the mind is rejoicing, 'This is wonderful! This is how it should be. I'm doing great now,' if we don't see this running commentary for what it is, then it's only a matter of time before we swing to thinking, 'It shouldn't be like this,' and become lost again.

So long as we're caught up in the compulsive judging mind, our capacity for meeting the paradoxes of life with clarity is very limited. Paradoxes will inevitably arise in our lives as human beings and if we haven't discovered the heart's capacity for judgement-free awareness then we are likely to turn towards outer forms for support. We will remain overly dependent on conventions and techniques, club membership and beliefs. But with a real interest in developing our hearts and minds and freeing them from the type of conditioning that I have been describing, we won't shy away

from what others might call a dilemma. We will approach it with a view to finding the awareness that can receive the experience – an all-embracing, non-reactive awareness. When we come across a paradox, instead of automatically turning to some external structure, or clinging to some particular point of view to make us feel safe again, we actually engage with the paradox in a manner that increases the capacity for accommodating frustration. Frustration leads us to finding that increased capacity. Frustration is our friend in practice. If we get that message early on, it's a great blessing. Because sooner or later all of us, not just once but probably a good number of times, will reach a point of utter impossibility, where it seems there's nothing we can do about our situation. We reach a point where we feel all our techniques have been exhausted; we can't fix it and yet we can't stop trying either.

Ajahn Chah wrote a letter to Ajahn Sumedho after he'd been in Britain for a year or two. In this letter he wrote: "The Buddha Dhamma is not to be found in moving forwards, nor in moving backwards, nor in standing still. This, Sumedho, is your place of non-abiding." That's a truly helpful teaching. The numerous forms and techniques that we are taught have their place, but they are limited. If we don't understand the relative function of forms, and we give them too much value, we run the risk of feeling betrayed by practice. We might think, 'I've been keeping my precepts and meditating. I've been going to the monastery and going on retreat, but I just can't help feeling betrayed and let down by it all. Buddhism has failed me and well, it's a foreign religion anyway, I shouldn't have messed with it in the first place!' I've heard this said on more than one occasion. The truth of the matter, however, is that Buddhism is not a foreign religion. As you encounter Buddhism, you will undoubtedly find conventions and cultural forms that are Asian in character,

but the outer forms are not the point. The point of Buddhism is truth. And truth is neither Asian nor Western.

As we become acquainted with this possibility of living life without always taking a position on everything, a correspondingly increased sense of freedom emerges. To the degree that awareness is liberated from compulsive conditioning there is an increase in the feeling that we have more room in which to move. And with that we can think more clearly and feel more sensitively. The mind is not always afraid of being wrong or obsessed with being right. We have learned that those two go together and feed off each other. This somewhat more liberated mind can welcome difficulties and frustrations, seeing them without judgment as the natural way of the world. Such awareness knows where and when to skilfully apply structures and when to trust in the spirit of practice.

Unobstructed Wisdom

Regarding this specific question of knowing just when to act and when to sit still and go inwards, we will find that gradually we develop the possibility of allowing such conflicting concerns into the mind, acknowledging them fully, as they are – with all the power and passion contained in them – and waiting until our own clear confident resolution appears. And we will not feel compromised in the process. We will feel that we are doing what we can do. We won't feel driven to get it right. In our hearts we know we already want to get it right so we can trust in that. With strong developed awareness we are free to let the tension build. In fact, the energy generated by allowing these two apparently conflicting possibilities simultaneously into awareness, is the energy that slowly but surely drives 'me' out of the picture.

The view I find most constructive is that the wisdom that knows the right action in every situation is potentially already here within us. Unobstructed wisdom is not something that we have to get. Such wisdom is the natural activity of our hearts when obstructions have been removed. I believe we can afford to trust it. What creates obstructions is the sense, that comes out of fear and confusion, of 'me' and 'my' trying all the time. It sounds strange to say, but we need to learn to genuinely respect that which challenges us. Patiently allowing utterly frustrating dilemmas to be present in our here-and-now, judgment-free awareness – this is the path of purification. This practice will gradually lead us to a very different, yet perfectly natural, way of viewing the difficulties of our lives.

Thank you for your attention.

Truly Comfortable

It is wisdom that enables letting go of a lesser happiness
in pursuit of a happiness which is greater.

Dhammapada verse 290

During my High School years I received regular encouragement to enter the annual speech contest, organised by the local Rotary Club. I think my parents' encouragement was partly to do with preparing me for my hopefully taking up the family tradition of becoming a Protestant preacher. Whatever the motivation, I benefited from the challenge. There were two years in which I recall doing quite well. In one I spoke about a hero of mine at that time, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, and in the other I spoke on the subject of whether religion should be comforting or challenging. I remain interested in both of these subjects but on this occasion I would like to take up the latter as the subject of my talk: should religion be comforting or challenging? This concern warrants consideration whatever stage in practice we may be at. What is it that we are looking for in our experience of religion? Are we looking for comfort? Are we looking for a consoling message? Or does our religion challenge us? And what do we think that it ought to be doing? My own commitment has been born of an enthusiastic interest in both of these things – in finding real comfort and skilful challenges.

Finding Comfort in the Dhamma

How is the experience of religion comforting, or how should it be so? In the Buddhist scriptures as well as in everyday experience we find that the impulse to engage with the inner life, the spiritual life, is often prompted by suffering. This was as true in the time of the Buddha as it is these days – dissatisfaction or unhappiness causes beings to look for something more than the happiness that comes with sensual gratification. We are told that it wasn't pleasure that inspired the Buddha to take up the life of renunciation in pursuit of liberation. It was the despair that arose out of seeing old age, sickness and death. Seeing these took the Buddha-to-be into a state of despondency as he thought, 'Are these things going to happen to me too?' And then inspiration and hope arose when the Buddha-to-be, the *bodhisatta*, saw a renunciate, a seeker, somebody engaged in a life concerned with seeking an alternative to pain and despair.

It must be understood, however, that the reason the bodhisatta was able to embark on the arduous and life-threatening task of uncovering the path to liberation was because he was *ready* to do so. In the records of the Buddha's own comments on his path of practice we are told that he spent many lifetimes cultivating patience, loving-kindness, renunciation and many other virtues so he would have the strength to take up this task. One of the things I take from such stories is the encouragement to cultivate the necessary strengths needed on the journey. Learning to be comfortable with ourselves is one aspect of cultivating strength.

Finding Comfort with Friends

Today a group of people came to the monastery to inter someone's ashes. There was great sadness because it was a young man who had died. It was a tragic death, and there

was real grief felt by family and friends. We all know that Buddhism teaches that we suffer because we are attached. But it would be altogether inappropriate to confront people who are suffering at such a time with this teaching. If you have lost somebody dear to you, and you go to your Buddhist friends for some solace and comfort, and they tell you, 'Well, you shouldn't have got attached to them in the first place! Everything is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not self!', it would be grossly insensitive.

We look for comfort when we are suffering, and I feel that it is right to look for it in the various skilful means and practices that are offered as part of Buddhism. Besides the pain that comes from loss there is a lot in the world around us that causes us to suffer. The current global environmental situation, the various military conflicts, the ongoing struggles we see in peoples' lives – acute crises or just everyday mediocrity – all this can leave us feeling terribly saddened. If, with the heart burdened by sadness, we attempt to turn towards the deeper causes of suffering before we are ready, we could sink further into despair. Sometimes what we need is to find friends and companions who are not going to condemn us for suffering. Our suffering is not a sign that we're failing; it's not an indictment. However, it is only too easy to fall for the worldly perspective that says if we are suffering we are failing. If we are upset then we're supposed to get over it. But there are some things we just don't get over. Some pain doesn't heal in the way we wish or at the time we want. At such times, to have a friend, somebody who shows a willing receptivity to our suffering, is a very great comfort. Spiritual companions, *kalyanamittas*, are one of the most important comforts in life.

Sanctuary

It's also important to have places that we can go, places like this monastery, which are sanctuaries. I feel strongly that to have a place like this to go to, a place consecrated to truth and reality, is a great solace. You don't have to be famous or popular or good-looking or wealthy to go to a monastery; the doors are open, and there's no charge for staying. You can bring your suffering, offer it up and feel it received. This is a great comfort and a skilful way of dealing with suffering. And as one teacher I lived with told us, "Don't wait until you have a problem before establishing a relationship." He was talking at the time about relating to a teacher but the principle holds true for a place of sanctuary as well. Just as when we move into a new town we would sensibly find ourselves a good doctor and not wait until we were sick, it is likewise sensible to become acquainted with places and groups that might be available to us before we find ourselves feeling challenged.

The Place of Ritual

The ritual practices that we're encouraged to cultivate are also skilful ways of finding comfort in practice. Dedicating *puñña* or merit is something that one can do, particularly at funerals and such sad occasions, when we might feel helpless in the face of our suffering. The people who came today – there was nothing they could do to bring back their son, their brother, their friend, who had passed away. But to be able to do something wholesome, to generate some goodness, is comforting. A traditional Buddhist way of generating goodness is to come to the monastery, a place dedicated to reality, and to make a gesture of support to the place and to the monks and nuns who live there. And then one can dedicate the goodness or merit of this act to the person who has died.

This idea may not feel immediately appealing or comforting because it's not something that we are familiar with, but when one does such things as skilful means there can nevertheless be a surprising sense of comfort when the heart exercises its ability to generate goodness. We can do good deeds by way of body, speech and mind; through acts of kindness, through restraint, through generosity, through cultivating honesty and impeccability – these wholesome actions generate a storehouse of goodness that we can then dedicate. The last act I perform each day before going to bed is to dedicate to all beings whatever goodness I might have created by way of body, speech or mind. I spend some time going through 'all beings' – from my teachers, parents, companions, friends, rulers, enemies … Sometimes it can take a while and when I am tired and want to get to bed I might cut it a bit shorter but I rarely, if ever, miss out the practice. It is very important to me.

There are also the meditations on loving-kindness and compassion. These clear, concrete practices generate a tangible sense of comfort that strengthens us inwardly. We do need to know that we have things we can do to generate such inner well-being. It is not the case that we are always ready to turn around and ask of ourselves the deepest questions regarding the causes of suffering.

Chanting is another profoundly comforting thing to do. In times of great despair or grief we can still chant. When I knew my father was in hospital, having had a series of strokes, I felt painfully helpless in being unable to offer any meaningful support at a time when I really wanted to. It was made worse in finding that there was nothing I could do to settle my mind in meditation. However, chanting did help. On that occasion I felt very grateful that I had been encouraged to learn to recite some of the *suttas*. Even though I

wasn't seeing reality, I could recite these verses about reality, about truth. The act of recitation was a source of real comfort.

The Buddha taught that we need to exercise discernment in choosing the appropriate time and place before going deeper into the true causes of suffering. If someone is hungry, for instance, you should feed them before teaching them Dhamma. He instructed the monks that they shouldn't teach people with empty bellies that the cause of their suffering was their ignorance of the Four Noble Truths! The decent thing to do, of course, was to feed them first. If we maintain a clear awareness of what is going on in each and every situation, with the right motivation in our heart we will intuitively know what the appropriate way to behave is. Appropriate action follows from seeing the correct context of things and then acting accordingly. Although the Buddha's teaching encourages us to challenge ourselves to enquire into how we are creating our own suffering, this sometimes arduous work can only be undertaken in the context of inner well-being.

First Comfort, then Challenge

So certainly it is the place of religion to offer comfort and solace to people when needed. But herein lies a paradox: We need to know how to make ourselves feel good and strong in wholesome ways, but attachment to those very good feelings is what keeps us stuck. We make our lives comfortable by according with our natural preferences. We prefer not to be sad, not to be uncomfortable, hungry, miserable, depressed or lonely. Having good friends, physical health and emotional comfort are natural ways of being happy, but the practice of purification means going against our preferences, countering the belief that we need these comforts to be happy. If we don't understand how these

different dimensions of spiritual practice function – if we don't understand the place of comfort through having our preferences met, and the place of challenge that comes through going against our preferences – then we can get confused. If we try to engage with the teachings of the Buddha or any great spiritual master who challenges our usual preferences, yet while doing this we feel inwardly depleted and diminished, without confidence and well-being, we can make ourselves feel a whole lot worse.

Going Against Preferences

The practice of purification requires our coming to see the reality of preferences very clearly. And this inevitably involves the challenge of countering our desires. There needs to be a context of contentment for us to do this, but at the same time going against preferences is not going to be comfortable. It's important to understand this, because when we apply ourselves to practices that challenge us, and we feel unhappy or discontented, we can think that something is going wrong.

I have many times quoted to people something I read in a book by Thomas Merton during my first years as a monk. As sometimes happens, hearing a description of the process one is involved in from the perspective of another tradition can bring about greater clarity. In his book, *New Seeds for Contemplation*, Thomas Merton writes –

What a holocaust takes place in the steady burning to ashes of old worn-out words, clichés, slogans, rationalisations. The worst of it is that even the apparently holy conceptions are consumed along with all the rest. It is a terrible breaking and burning of idols, a purification of the sanctuary so that no graven thing may occupy the place that God has commanded to be left empty: the centre, the existential altar which simply "is".

For contemplative life to deepen we do need to be willing to have our comfort challenged.

… Let no one hope to find in contemplation an escape from conflict, from anguish or from doubt. On the contrary, the deep, inexpressible certitude of the contemplative experience awakens a tragic anguish and opens many questions in the depths of the heart like wounds that cannot stop bleeding. For every gain in deep certitude there is a corresponding growth of superficial doubt. This doubt is by no means opposed to genuine faith, but it mercilessly examines and questions the spurious 'faith' of everyday life, the human faith which is nothing but passive acceptance of conventional opinion. (Thomas Merton, *New Seeds for Contemplation*, New York, New Directions Pub., 1974)

Making Preference Conscious

The wise way to relate to our preferences is to recognise that everyone has them but that, when they are not understood, they limit our experience. We all prefer to have agreeable sensations – it's completely natural to have bodily preferences. In meditation for example, we are encouraged to be still, to discipline the body, to focus attention until body and mind are in harmony and we attain to one-pointedness. In the tranquillity of such *samadhi* one is able to read the mind's reality quite differently from when body and mind are distracted and dissipated. We are encouraged to cultivate this one-pointedness, and when we experience it there is no doubt about its value. Yet to reach such stillness, there has to be restraint. When we sit still, the body often feels uncomfortable, and this discomfort doesn't accord with our preferences. If we don't understand that our preferences need to be countered, then we won't be able to get to this one-pointedness with which we can more accurately read reality. We will feel uncomfortable, get distracted and move.

We don't go against our preferences because there's anything inherently wrong with preferences. In truth that which is causing the problem is the way we relate to our preferences. We counter them so we are not pushed around by them. Our enjoyment of pleasure is natural and yet we get ourselves into all sorts of tangles in our pursuit of it. If we are suffering as a result of our pursuit of pleasure, an initial attitude might be to take a position against pleasure; we interpret the Buddha's teachings as saying that our preference for pleasure over pain is in itself the cause of suffering. If this is our motivation for practice, again we could cause ourselves more troubles. We should remember the exhortation to exercise extreme care in how we pick up the teachings. In the chant we recite together in the monastery every two weeks after the recitation of the *Patimokkha* rules there is a verse that says: 'This training wrongly held will lead to increased pain, just as kusa grass wrongly-grasped will cut the hand.' Kusa grass is a tough grass they have in India that has a sharp edge. I'm sure you get the picture. More immediately we could talk about going out to cut the grass along the edge of the walking meditation tracks in the walled garden and, instead of picking up the sickle by the handle, heedlessly picking it up by the blade; we'd cut our hand. Not only will we have increased our suffering, but also now we won't be able to cut the grass.

The Buddha's metaphor for picking up the training on restraint rightly applies especially to the training in celibacy. Making the choice to renounce intentional sexual activity is not a recipe for an easy life. Buddhist scriptures and our own European monastic records are filled with stories of tragic misadventure on this path. So our training is always emphasising mindfulness in our efforts to be restrained. Feelings of sexual interest are not to be blindly controlled with will, nor are they to be dismissed with habitual judgement as 'wrong'

or 'right' as the case may be. Rather they are to be fully received with awareness and sensitivity, as they manifest. They are simply to be known but not followed. In this way restraint of the untamed passions is exercised, energy is contained and made available for the process of purifying the heart of greed, aversion and delusion. We are going against our conditioned superficial preferences, but in a way that leads to freedom, not more stress.

Another Type of Comfort

So the tools of spiritual discipline must be picked up in the right way. The challenges to our preferences need to be grasped with right understanding. If we always cultivate feeling comfortable, if we always give ourselves what we want when we want it, then the chances are that we will never get to see preferences as preferences. We will never get to see our likes and dislikes as merely conditioned tendencies of mind. If we always follow our preferences then we will always feel like they are 'me'. Every time I give myself what I want, 'I' feel gratified, and this 'I' grows a little bigger and a little happier. And every time I succeed in avoiding that which I don't like, 'I' feel a little more pleased with myself. But the way of the Dhamma is not always to give ourselves what we want, and not always to turn away from that which we don't like. In this way we go against our preferences in order to see their conditioned nature. By practising according to these principles we discover the possibility of another level of comfort.

There is an initial level of comfort or happiness that comes from gratifying our desires and according with our preferences, and there is another level of happiness which comes as a direct result of our willingness to go against desires – from knowing that we don't have to gratify our desires –

from understanding that all our preferences are conditioned. That's why I say that purification, the primary spiritual activity, means opposing preferences in order to learn about the greater comfort that is the heart being at ease with itself. Such comfort is not merely physical, mental or emotional, but is a contentment in the core of our being that arises with understanding, with seeing clearly.

Some years ago I accepted an invitation to visit a friend in Beijing with the aim of going together with him to Kyoto in Japan. I had wanted to go to Japan for as long as I could remember and since my friend was working in China and I was en route from visiting family in New Zealand back to the UK, it wasn't too big a deviation to stop off in China. The thought of going there occupied my mind for a long time in advance. The idea of getting to Japan at last, and seeing those beautiful gardens and temples in Kyoto, was wonderful. But as it happened my connecting flight from Shanghai to Beijing was cancelled. I found myself alone in the airport without any money and with nowhere to stay. It was quite an ordeal, with teams of angry Chinese travellers competing for empty seats on later flights. Almost nobody spoke English and they were not at all impressed with my commitment to the holy-life! Eventually, after nearly losing my passport and standing outside on the tarmac for a long time in the freezing February night, I boarded a very cramped plane and made it to Beijing. But then our baggage was mislaid, and it was not until two the following morning that I got to bed. Meanwhile my friend had returned from a meeting in Hong Kong in which he had been subject to a flagrant betrayal of trust by a co-worker, and his flight had also been delayed. When we woke in the morning we both had sore throats and were thoroughly miserable. When we broached the matter of going to Kyoto it became obvious that neither of us was

feeling up to it. After so much planning and anticipation, the thought of not going should have appeared unthinkable. With so much momentum I expected it to be so. But to my surprise and pleasure it was perfectly thinkable. So we decided not to go to Japan.

In meditation that evening I had such a happy feeling knowing that I didn't have to get what I wanted. There was a clear recognition that the pleasure that comes with the gratification of desire was inferior to the pleasure associated with the freedom of not having to get what I want. There is a verse in the Dhammapada that reads: 'It is wisdom that enables letting go of a lesser happiness in pursuit of a greater happiness.' That evening I came a little closer to understanding this aspect of the Buddha's wisdom. As things worked out, by the following morning we both felt fine again, made a dash for the airport and had a marvellous time in Kyoto.

The Point of Balance

If we pick up in the wrong way the Buddha's teachings about going against our preferences, by thinking that there is some inherent virtue in following our dislikes, then we can hurt ourselves. The Buddha himself, before he was enlightened, followed the path of self-mortification for some years. It made him very unhappy and he nearly died in the process. In the end he realised, 'Well, that's not the end of suffering.' He had already concluded that gratifying his desires and making his life as comfortable as possible didn't lead to true understanding, because when he had encountered old age, sickness and death, he had become depressed and miserable. But practising asceticism and deliberately frustrating his desires hadn't solved the problem either. In the end he committed himself to settling the matter once and for all and, seated resolutely under the Bodhi tree, made his final

determined effort to awaken. Relying on the accumulation of goodness over many lifetimes, he was able to come to the point of seeing for himself that taking any fixed position for or against his likes and dislikes creates suffering. Learning how not to take a position for or against anything is freedom. The Buddha called his discovery the Middle Way.

This Middle Way, the Buddha said, is born of right understanding regarding the nature of things. But to understand this nature we need to go against our preferences. In the training of *sila*, we make the effort to refrain from following heedless tendencies. In formal meditation we train ourselves in not moving whenever there is an impulse to do so, and we restrain our minds, containing our attention when the mind's tendency is to follow some preference. We want to know, 'Can I choose not to compulsively follow this desire, this preference?'

In the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* the Buddha describes the meditator who, experiencing pleasure, just sits with awareness, simply knowing that there is pleasure without adding anything to it or taking anything away from it. But how do we reach the point of knowing there is pleasure without indulging in it, pursuing it and working out how we can get more of it? We get to that point through restraining ourselves. When pleasurable sensations arise, our habits are such that we usually just want to have more of them. There's an impulse to seek pleasure, based on a preference for pleasurable experience. But if we habitually and blindly follow such a preference there is an unfortunate consequence: when there is suffering, we are not able to restrain ourselves from contending with the pain. If we indulge in an habitual preference for more pleasure, we will habitually make a problem out of pain. But right understanding arises when we become interested in the reality of our preferences. When pleasure arises,

are we able to inhibit the tendency to seek more pleasure? – not because we have any opinion about desire, but because we are interested in the reality of desire? Rather than being driven into gratifying our desires we then start to feel drawn towards a freedom from blind habit.

If we don't understand that Buddhist practice requires us to challenge our preferences then we will feel that pleasure is either something to follow or something to resist or judge. We won't suspect that there is a middle way between these two options. The teaching of the Middle Way is an encouragement for us to challenge our preferences, to undermine the agreeable and disagreeable appearances of things.

Sometimes we experience real pain and suffering. I don't mean just a little pain in the knees; I mean the sense that the bottom has fallen out of our world. The apparent reality is that this pain is going to last forever. We think, 'I can't stand this, I can't handle it.' And of course, we would prefer it not to be this way. But the Dhamma invites us to inhibit the compulsive tendency to be driven into trying to change the situation. Instead, we willingly receive the way this pain expresses itself, just as it is. This is the path of insight practice into the reality of the way things are.

If we remain convinced by the apparent nature of things, if we don't have faith in this path of practice, then this pain, disappointment, despair, sadness, grief appears permanent and real, and we will believe that we have to do something to solve it or get out of it; anything would be better than being with it. But lacking the commitment to stay with pain, in awareness, we can't see through the way it appears.

The Body's Natural Preferences

The Dhamma encourages us to generate the understanding we need in order to go against our preferences out of an

interest in seeing through into their conditioned nature. There are bodily preferences and mental preferences, and sometimes there isn't much we can do about changing the body's preferences; they're programmed in the body. I prefer peanut butter and Manuka honey on toast for breakfast rather than fermented fish, as people seem to prefer in Thailand. As long as I live, I am sure that I won't find fish and chillies more agreeable than peanut butter and honey on crunchy toasted brown bread, at any time for that matter. But this level of preference does not have to be a problem, so long as we know it is simply a bodily preference. It is merely due to our upbringing. What we can change though, is how we see our preferences.

If I had an uninformed ignorant relationship to my preferences, and an *anagarika* came into my *kuti* in the morning to bring me nice toast for breakfast, then I might get lost in my pleasure. I might pay the anagarika compliments, telling him what a fine anagarika he was and how well he was doing. And I would encourage him to bring such toast again the next morning. Then, if the next day he brought me fermented fish for breakfast, I might well fly off the handle and say something hurtful. My uninspected preferences being frustrated would lead to my being upset. If 'I' habitually get what 'I' want, 'I' can get caught up in my preferences. That's an ignorant relationship to preferences.

In the breakfast situation, were I to remain true to my commitment to going beyond attachment to my preferences, practice would stimulate the willingness to simply feel what it feels like to be disappointed when I don't get what I want. Then we see that such willingness to receive pain leads to increased presence and clarity in the context of pleasure. We find we are not getting so lost in pleasure and pain. Encountering our preferences is a way to strengthen cultiva-

tion of mindfulness, not merely a strategy of driving out unsuitable desires.

If there is a wise and informed relationship to preferences we will be willing to inhibit our tendency to believe in the way things appear for long enough to be able to see through them. We will see that desire is a movement in the mind. It arises, it appears, it can be felt, it can be received into awareness without judgement, and it will disappear, like a piece of dust floating through space. The space doesn't interfere with the dust nor is it disturbed by the dust floating through it. A wave rippling across the ocean doesn't change the nature of the ocean; it's natural for an ocean to have waves moving across it. But the wave doesn't define the nature of the ocean. Likewise a desire passing through the mind does not define the mind. If we have seen this, if we have inhibited our tendency to follow our preferences for long enough to see through the way desire arises and passes away, then we have a much freer perspective on preferences.

Whether toast and honey or fermented fish turns up for breakfast, whether this is agreeable or disagreeable to one's bodily preferences, the heart will not become elated or depressed. That's the important principle: that we are able to see through our preferences so that the heart remains free. If we understand and accept this principle then we can be willing to endure whatever is disagreeable to us. We won't always look for life to be agreeable. We won't say, 'I had a really good meditation,' just because it felt pleasant. I often hear people asking, 'how was your meditation?' Their friend then replies something like, 'hopeless, really terrible.' If I ask them, 'what was hopeless about it?' they say, 'Well, the mind wouldn't settle. There were no peaceful feelings, no clarity.' And I ask, 'Did you know that it wasn't peaceful? Did you know that there wasn't any clarity?' Then they say, 'Yes, I knew.'

So what makes such a meditation terrible? Only that it didn't agree with their preferences. If someone says to me, 'The meditation was very good, the body alert and energetic, the mind bright and clear. My practice is going really well,' what they usually mean is that it agreed with their preference.

Training

Training involves a conscious willingness to go against our preferences. It does not mean merely upholding a philosophical opinion that gratifying our desires is wrong. This would be only a conceptual approach to training. Training means discovering a willingness to go against our preferences for the sake of understanding, so that we can find freedom from them. We might not manage to change our preferences, but we find a freedom from being driven by them.

I would prefer that the world be harmonious and that everybody got on with everyone else. The reality is that there is a lot of conflict. My preference is frustrated, but does that mean that I have to fall into despair? If I do fall into despair, from the Buddha's perspective, that's the result of an ignorant way of relating to preferences. A wise way of relating would mean that we still feel sadness and disappointment, but they do not obstruct inner clarity and calm. Our discernment is not compromised; our capacity for contemplating the predicament we're in is not compromised by the way we feel.

When we have truly settled into practice and internalised this principle of training ourselves to go against our preferences, we don't approach life looking for it to be agreeable or perceive it as a failure because it is disagreeable. We don't approach our meditation expecting it to be pleasant. If we go on retreat and we don't have the profound insights we hoped for, we won't feel the retreat to be a failure. When our

relationships feel strained and we're not getting on with each other, we won't say it's all going wrong. We feel pain, and this is disagreeable, but to think that there is anything wrong with this is to add something unnecessary to the experience. It might be painful, but if we have a willingness to approach that pain with interest, to challenge our preferences, then from the Buddha's perspective we're on the path that leads to understanding.

There is a happiness that comes from seeing through something that used to appear threatening. When you experience a clarity that is born of understanding that desire is not the way it appears to be, that pain is not the way it appears to be, then you can allow all sorts of previously uncomfortable phenomena into your mind. In the beginning of practice, when you were a little sensitive to what goes on in the mind, you might have noticed that it was full of all sorts of unwholesome desires. Perhaps you started to feel ashamed about some of the tendencies of your mind, but that's because you were still caught up in them. If we practise rightly, restraining the tendency to follow these things, and if we study them and observe them, then maybe one day we will see through them. Desire or ill will or fear can arise in the mind yet we will remain clear, confident and open as we sit with awareness. We abide as the awareness in which these states are taking place. They pass through awareness; they arise, they are there, and then they cease, but we're not disturbed by them. When we begin to experience this, the heart is learning to abide in another level of comfort altogether.

Thank you very much for your attention.

What is Renunciation?

Just like birds that leave no tracks in the air,
there are those whose minds do not cling to temptations
that are offered to them.
Their focus is the signless state of liberation, which to others is
indiscernible.

Dhammapada verse 92

Renunciation – *nekkhamma* in Pali – is one of what are known as the ten *paramitas*, 'perfections' or 'forces of goodness'. Personally, I feel convinced that renunciation is one of the most important, and at the same time least appreciated, aspects of spiritual life. I am not saying this to justify my life as a monk. You might expect me to say that renunciation is good, given that I've been doing it for twenty-five years! Rather, I, along with many others, choose to live this life because of the understanding that there is tremendous benefit in being able to give up that which is *extra* – to be able to let go of that which is not necessary and to live a simple life.

Now, I am not merely talking about giving up outer physical things like, for instance, eating in the evening. There is nothing moral or immoral about not eating in the evening – you go without a glass of milk in the evening, big deal! I don't even mean the more difficult areas like music and sex. These things that monks and nuns may give up are not in themselves the real point of renunciation. These outer ges-

tures of renunciation are forms for encouraging an inner letting go. The gestures in themselves are functional, aiding the cultivation of a strength of heart that sustains us on an inner journey. And surely all of us, not just monks and nuns, need this ability. It is true that the monastic community chooses to emphasise this aspect of the Buddha's teaching, even make a lifestyle out of it, but the training is relevant for everyone who is interested in inner freedom.

Up until a few decades ago, the Roman Catholic Church used to require that her followers refrain from eating meat on Fridays. When the Pope lifted the prohibition I thought it was rather a pity. Although the relevance of that particular form of abstinence was perhaps questionable, at least it encouraged to some degree a formal practice of giving up. I'm even old-fashioned enough to think that Lent is still a good idea. It is a time of year that provides the opportunity to say, 'Okay, for this period of time I'm going to put some energy into seeing how able I am to give things up.'

The reality is that if we don't know how to say 'no' to our conditioned desires we are easily conned – by the outer world and by our inner drives. If you can't say 'no' to yourself when you go into one of these supermarkets that have everything, you are likely to purchase more than you intend. Leafing through exciting catalogues or shopping on the web, you can be turning over your credit card details, acting out according to the drama of the market place, and only afterwards start thinking, 'What did I do that for?' We're all familiar with something like this – the inability to say 'no' to things that are extra.

We can recognise this on the external level: we buy new clothes that we don't need, food we don't need or CDs that we might never listen to. But what is more difficult to see is how this pattern pertains to our inner world, to see the

mental compulsion of perpetually adding onto experience: good, bad; right, wrong; should, shouldn't. This tendency to react, judge and add on to our experience prevents us from being able to receive reality in a pure, undiluted form. The point of living a life where one renounces certain options is that by cultivating a conscious willingness to say 'no' to things that we might otherwise want to have or do – things that are not really necessary to our well-being – we use outer conventions to learn how to let go at a deeper level. We learn the art of letting go. We call this process of learning a 'training' because it takes some skill in applying effort. Unskilled effort in this area readily leads to blind and potentially damaging repression.

Picking Up the Training

If we want to understand renunciation then we have to try it out. No amount of talking about this practice takes us there. We only see what it really achieves when we make an effort and observe the result. Sometimes we are surprised at how good it feels to know we can say 'no' to ourselves; it can even be intoxicatingly good. I recall translating for a newly-ordained young monk who was full of the inspiration that can come from having been recently received into the renunciate Sangha. He was asking Ajahn Chah for advice on how to apply the various methods for cultivating renunciation and determination. This bright-eyed and energetic fellow was telling Ajahn Chah how he wanted to make a determination to spend the following three months of the rains retreat observing the practices of not lying down to sleep, not accepting food other than that gathered on almsround, eating only one meal a day, wearing only the bare minimum of clothes, and so on. He listed lots of the *dhutanga* (ascetic) practices that the Buddha encouraged. Ajahn Chah

listened and then commented that the best thing would be if he simply determined to keep practising for the three months, whatever happened, and take on nothing particularly special. Ajahn Chah was well aware of how inspiring the renunciation practice can be when we first get a feel for the power it generates.

Sometimes we might even become a little evangelical about it – preaching to everyone and anyone who will listen to us about the virtues of renunciation, even enforcing it on others. This tends to be the aspect that gives the whole subject a bad reputation. Some years ago Ajahn Sumedho had to intervene to tone down the enthusiasm of a newly appointed senior incumbent at a small branch monastery. This particular monk had set up a system whereby all the food that had been prepared and offered at the midday meal was poured into a big plastic bucket – rice, curry, cakes, the lot. He would give it a stir, then take a few ladles for himself before passing the bucket down the line. No doubt this gesture of renunciation served to challenge preferences around food in a worthy manner, but there was evidence that not everyone in the community found it equally helpful. Ajahn Sumedho in his wisdom sent up a large box of beautifully wrapped, delicious-looking biscuits with a note saying, 'Not for the bucket.'

Even without making any specific outer gesture of renunciation we can learn from seeing how difficult it can be to let go of all that is extra in our minds. An example is when we sit down to meditate for a period of time. We know how the practice of concentration can steady the mind, open the heart, and bring greater clarity and understanding – we know how suitable and agreeable that state of mind is; and yet when we decide, 'Okay, I'll put thirty minutes aside and sit in meditation,' and try to focus, the mind goes off every

which way. We think, 'Why is that? Why is the mind going off? It's not necessary, I have finished with that stuff, I want to be quiet.' This is what I mean by extra. So can we let go of the extra? Do we have that ability, that strength that enables simply saying 'no' to the force of compulsion?

Different from Morality

It has to be understood that we're not talking about moral issues here. Sometimes these two aspects of practice – morality and renunciation – become mixed up, and that is not helpful. We're not talking about the five precepts that we all know about: no killing, no stealing, no irresponsible sexuality, no false speech, and no intoxicants. These are moral matters that, if we neglect them, cause harm to ourselves and harm to others. When we take up eight precepts, the three more that are adopted are precepts of renunciation. The sixth precept is refraining from eating in the evening and the seventh and eighth precepts are about giving up entertainment, distraction, music, jewellery, and sleeping heedlessly. In addition, the third precept becomes a renunciant one, changing abstention from irresponsible sexuality into celibacy (no intentional sexual activity whatsoever). These are not issues of morality. Traditionally lay Buddhists are encouraged to take up the eight precepts for certain periods in order to cultivate this faculty of renunciation, to release out of habits of holding to that which does not pertain to the goal. This is addressing matters of skilfulness, not morality.

If you're inspired by this possibility and want to try it out I would encourage it but would suggest that you don't tell anybody else that you are doing it. Let it be a force for lessening the load rather than for boosting a false sense of ego. You could decide for example that once a week or once a month you're going to exercise saying 'no' to something. You

might say 'no' to your wish to watch a particular program on television – not for any moral reason but simply for the cultivation of the ability to renounce without falling into inner argument or blind repression. As a result of your experiment in renunciation you will discover something interesting - *you will get your energy back*. You will, guaranteed. If it doesn't come the first time, say 'no' a few more times. Initially this energy may manifest as anger or restlessness. When you experience this agitation, you may decide that such practice is not suitable for you. Or you may feel that you are beyond it, in which case you won't have any doubts whatsoever around energy and equanimity – you will already be perfectly balanced. But if you are not quite there yet, I would recommend persisting with it, sensitively and consistently, learning from these initial reactions.

Sometimes this practice can lead us to discover resources we didn't think we had. We might be surprised to find that we are able to hold true to something, when in the past we might have caved in under pressure. To take an example: I have a general mistrust of the mass media and yet at the same time I can find their journalists and programme producers extremely persuasive. The editors for television and newspapers clearly send out their most charming interviewers in order to secure the material, but what they eventually broadcast can be something completely different to what was anticipated at the time the material was gathered.

Some years ago when I had been left in charge of the monastery at Chithurst, some television people from Brighton were pressing for permission to film a group of school children who were coming on a Religious Education visit to the monastery. It wasn't difficult to come up with a justification for saying 'yes' to the programme producer, yet my gut feeling was to mistrust their motivation, and to doubt

whether they would be sensitive enough to avoid distracting the children from the purpose of their visit. So I said 'no'. They called back many times in an attempt to get me to change my mind but to my surprise I found it quite easy to remain with my original answer. I confess I was somewhat worried that the school might have been disappointed but still it felt true to say 'no'. As things turned out the head teacher got in touch to say how delighted the school staff were because they hadn't wanted the television crew along on the trip either but nobody had ever said 'no' to them before.

Strategic Frustration

If we feel unable in this area we can easily be distracted, inwardly and outwardly. It is my observation that this not only makes us excessively vulnerable but leads to dullness. If we let ourselves get what we want all the time, we go flat, we lose the edge. In our present day culture of affluence and comfort we are often disinclined to consider this dynamic. The reality is that I like to get what I want and yet there is a part of me that knows that complying with this arrangement fails to give me the deeper contentment for which I long.

I refer to this area of our practice as 'strategic frustration' – we set out to engage frustration in a constructive way. The Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism has formalised frustration into a meditation technique called *koan* practice. The meditator is instructed to ponder on an ultimately frustrating predicament or is given an apparently impossible question that is specifically designed to 'undo' the thinking mind. In this process tremendous energy is built up prior to the release that comes with the 'resolution' of the koan. It is totally frustrating, and is supposed to be that way. We can observe this process for ourselves. Without attending a Zen retreat or becoming a celibate renunciate, simply observe your energy level

as you choose to either follow or restrain your desires. Compulsively following desire dissipates so much of our energy.

What is the condition of the mind before wanting arises? It is actually quite okay, isn't it? The mind that is not disturbed by wanting anything at all is peaceful. It is when wanting arises that we feel the itch, but if we scratch the itch straightaway – gratifying the desire immediately without stopping to investigate – we won't notice how irritating desire can be. When we are ruled by desire, we fail to see what it really is. Desire is, in reality, simply a movement in consciousness – a wave upon an ocean. However, that is not generally our experience; when desire arises we are usually unsettled by it.

After wanting has arisen three options are available to us. We can gratify the wanting, which momentarily gets rid of it, such that the relief from the irritation of desire may be perceived as pleasure. The more often we follow this option, however, the more we increase the momentum of wanting and gratifying. In the long run we tend to become less peaceful. The next option available is to repress the desire and pretend we do not want anything – which is to impose a blind judgement on it. The third option is that we choose to hold this wanting in our awareness. We can *hold* it. As a result of doing this, something wonderful happens. The energy that is experienced as desire returns to being raw energy. That energy can truly motivate practice and lead us to a much greater happiness than that associated with the gratification of sensual desires. So frustrating desire is not something for a few weirdos or perverts who live in monasteries because they don't know how to enjoy life. Renunciation is a way of actually learning how to tap into our deep inner well of energy.

When people ask me about renunciation, I encourage them to investigate for themselves and not merely accept

unexamined opinions from others – including me and my opinions. Try it out and see. If you're struggling inwardly with something that is difficult – like sadness, for example – and you find it hard to let go, notice the characteristic of the struggle. You feel that you want to let go but you can't. You ask yourself, 'What is this holding on that I am doing? What is all this extra baggage that I am carrying?' A lot of it is just habit that comes through not really taking the time to get to know desire as it really is, as a movement in our minds. We too readily assume that we must take sides for or against our desires without first inquiring into their reality. Desire is not the way it appears to be. We can ask ourselves, 'Do I want to live according to the patterns of desire with which I have become conditioned and limited? Or do I want to live in a state of freedom by maintaining here-and-now judgment-free awareness?' I never cease to find this an inspiring contemplation. Renunciation, like desire, is not what it might first seem. Skilfully going against our desires is not going to make us less happy!

Please don't think that this practice is especially difficult or only for a few individuals. We all need to know how to live consciously with the authority to follow that which our heart tells us is true. We are all potentially able to direct our attention towards what we personally feel really matters. We do not, as it might appear, have to be intimidated by other people's persuasion. If in our own experience we recognise something as worthy then let's give ourselves to it wholeheartedly and single-mindedly. Renunciation, developed with right understanding, becomes the guiding principle that sustains us on our own true path when we might otherwise have fallen into distraction.

So thank you for your question this evening.

Prayer and Devotion

Although it is difficult to cross over the storm-swept sea of passion, those who live in accord with the well-taught Way, arrive at the beyond.

Dhammapada verse 86

Question: Does prayer have any place or any part to play in Theravada Buddhism?

Ajahn Munindo: I am happy this question has been asked. Although prayer might appear to belong to forms of spiritual practice quite different to this one, it is a dimension of spiritual work that personally I feel we are not wise to dismiss. I can say for myself that for many years now hardly a day has gone by when I haven't offered up some prayers. Although I may not have sat in formal meditation every day, I never forget my prayers. In other words I consider prayer life to be essential. I can't imagine living this life without a conscious engagement in this way.

How does one talk about something so mysterious and intensely personal? It is difficult to say what prayer is, or how we learn about it. During my Protestant upbringing there was a general assumption that everybody knew how to pray. We sang hymns, I heard the Bible readings and the prayers during services, but nothing was said about how to enter into a conversation with the 'divine principle'. We were told, 'Ask and ye shall be given.' But how exactly were we to do the asking?

More recently I had a conversation with a Christian monk who came to visit us. He lives the life of a hermit just north of here, in the Scottish Borders. We talked about the joys and sorrows of the monastic life, and about the people who came to visit him at his humble abode. I asked, "Do you ever teach them how to pray?" He gave a brilliant reply. "Oh no," he said, "prayer is not taught – it is caught. It's like a disease. You catch it off someone else who has it."

I immediately knew what he was talking about, having lived around traditional Theravada Buddhists for five or six years in Thailand. There was something that one might call a prayerful attitude towards practice, which I do feel that I 'picked up' there.

I wasn't altogether conscious of this dimension when I lived there, but a few years later, when I was on solitary retreat in this country and having a very difficult time, I discovered that there was a voice within me which wanted to speak out. During this period I had put myself on a solitary retreat for two months. Other than the fortnightly recitation of the rule, which I was obliged to attend, I wasn't going to see anybody for two months. I locked myself in a small room at the top of Chithurst House and covered the windows with tracing paper so that I received daylight but no view of the outside world. All this served the purpose of bringing about great intensity, which I thought of course I could handle. I had a few things to learn. One of those things was the value of prayer. The only things comparable to prayers that I had as a part of my Buddhist practice were the reflections that we do in the morning and evening chanting. When I started to give voice to the verses that I had been reciting daily for years, I found I was speaking them with feeling. Something within was quickened and uplifted, so that I was able to say these things and mean them. 'May I abide in well-being, in freedom

from affliction.' 'May I be free from suffering. May all beings be free from suffering.' To say those things with conscious intent was truly gladdening. I remember it inspired me to look a little further and in so doing I began to come up with my own words. That was a significant step on a path towards a meaningful prayer life, which I recognise with hindsight to have been something of importance that was missing from all the spiritual exercises that had been a part of my life as a monk up to that point.

The Dynamics of Prayer

To find our own words to express our innermost wishes can be of great significance when it comes to finding out how to take responsibility for our own hearts. It opens a pathway whereby we connect with that which is deepest within us; all aspects of our being are gathered together, focusing intent. It is also a way of investing a form or an outward gesture with spiritual power. When I light incense, I silently make this prayer, or some variation on it: 'May the fragrance of the truth permeate all aspects of my being, activity of body, activity of speech, activity of mind.' When prayer is made with feeling and emotion, made with intention, because body, speech and mind are all involved, there is power in it. In that moment of offering something is done. I can't say precisely what this something is, but it is of relevance to the path. In connecting consciously with that which one longs for, beyond the realm of casual concerns, one's life is given direction. Mindful prayer, informed by wise contemplation, is a way of revealing our most treasured aspirations and allowing them to guide the rest of our life.

When I lived in Thailand, I noticed that there was something in common between the Buddhist monks and the Christian missionaries in their use of a particular word. The

Thai Buddhists often discussed the importance of making *adhitthan*, which is the Thai version of the Pali word *adhitthana*. In Theravadin Buddhism, adhitthana means a conscious determined intention to practise with effort and dedication. Thai Christians used this very same word – adhitthan – when they talked about prayer.

My prayer life as a young person came with an understanding that there was some almighty authority out there who was somehow responsible for everything that happened, and that if you had a ticket you could get a privileged relationship with this character, and he could do what you wanted – if you asked nicely. The Thai Buddhists don't have that idea at all. That is not part of their conception of reality. After a few years as a Buddhist monk I came to realise that, without having to believe I was talking to an all-powerful figure who I had to obey and appease, I was able to give voice to the heart's wishes in a genuinely meaningful way.

The heart longs to speak and be heard. Some of you may be acquainted with the Bible where it says, in Psalm 130: 'Out of the depths have I called unto thee, oh Lord. Lord hear my voice: May Thine ears consider well the voice of my complaint.' I believe that the heart's longing to be heard is most naturally served by engaging in prayer. For those of us who were brought up as theists and learned to pray in that context, but later, feeling unfulfilled, withdrew from that form of religious expression, it can be an uncomfortable and difficult prospect to begin to pray again. Picking up a prayer life against the background of such associations can bring serious reservations, even fear. I recall having to deal with a strong fear that I might end up losing my faith as a Buddhist and return to being a theist. As things turned out, that testing was part of the process of finding my own way into a prayer life again.

By exercising careful mindfulness one can allow such fears without necessarily believing in them. Just because we're afraid something's going to happen doesn't mean that it will happen. Just because you feel guilty about something, it doesn't necessarily mean that you've done anything wrong; just because you want something doesn't mean that you'll be happy when you get it. We've all seen how delusive apparent reality can be. When I began to offer up my own prayers in a conscious way I had to bear with my fears, but at the same time I was also aware of an emerging sense of gratitude in being able to give voice to these deep longings. Eventually the worries and doubts subsided and I found a natural lightness and ease in what I was doing.

One evening I was leading the community at Chithurst when a prayer group from a local church came to visit. After I had given a talk I asked if there were any questions. One of the group put up their hand and said, "What good do you do for anybody else? You don't even pray." I replied that I prayed every day. She responded, "Well, how can you pray when you haven't got a God?" What I found myself saying was, "The sun shines whether or not it has anything to shine on." The sun just shines, that is its nature, and likewise it is the heart's nature to speak and express itself. It is not necessary to believe in an external 'other' receiving us.

This incident helped me to come to a clearer understanding of prayer from the perspective of Buddhist practice. I came to see that in my practice the orientation of attention was inward, whereas the person who had asked the question was focused on the object of her supplications, that is, a perceived Almighty. I wasn't expecting intervention from above in the way she was. When I pray it is for the sake of the heart itself. The heart prays because it needs to if it wants to become free. Our hearts are speaking all the time, but are we

listening? We have deep concerns, we have deep longings; with skilful attention we can enter into a dialogue with this dimension of ourselves and in so doing be enriched. The mysteriousness is welcoming and inviting. It is our own true heart with which we are engaged. We don't need to be afraid.

Insight Practice

Insight (*vipassana*) meditation practice entails investigating all phenomena according to their characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self, with the aim of letting go of our tendency to cling to them. If that is the totality of our practice, however, we may try to let go of everything but still find that there's a cold dark contraction within that doesn't want to let go.

Equipping ourselves with mindfulness and non-judgemental here-and-now awareness, it is possible to find our way into an intimate dialogue with the dimension that theists might call 'the divine principle'. For me the divine principle is symbolised by the Triple Gem – the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. In my own devotional practice I refer to it as Lord Buddha, Lord Dhamma and Lord Sangha because I find the word 'Lord' meaningful. To me the word 'Lord' carries the positive meaning of that which rules over: the overriding governing principle.

In traditional Buddhist countries nobody ever says, 'Buddha said such and such'. This would be to bring among common, ordinary things something that is held in the highest possible esteem. Instead one always says Lord Buddha, or, in Thai, *Phra Buddha Jao*. *Phra Jao* means a Lord or God. Similarly, both the Dhamma and the Sangha are referred to in Thailand as Lord Dhamma and Lord Sangha. This is not simply child-like naïveté – this is to qualify these realities with words that raise them up as worthy of veneration. Heart

matters are more important to us than casual concerns. If we don't get to read the newspaper one day, so what? We like to read the newspaper or drink coffee in the morning, but we can do without gratifying these casual desires, which are ultimately of trivial significance. But our heart's longings – if they go unattended to, there are serious consequences.

There has been a general trend in our culture over the last few decades towards a philosophy of relativism. The outlook of relativism is that there is no objective good or bad – there are only personal preferences. This is reflected in our day-to-day language: we have lost the usage of words that once testified to the fact that we held certain things as sacred and worthy of our deepest respect. In prayer – as a personal and private matter – we have the opportunity to give expression to these feelings that we all have in our hearts. It's a conversation with a higher principle – an intimate conversation.

Prayer and 'Merit'

The Buddha made it very clear that if we make the right kind of effort in the conduct of our body, speech and mind, we generate an active potential that he referred to as *puñña*, which is rather limply translated into English as 'merit'. Puñña is a living force of goodness. In most schools of Buddhism it is a common practice to dedicate the wholesome potential one has generated to particular individuals or to all beings. We can think of this as either blessing or prayer.

I appreciate how, for many, the concept of 'merit' smacks of materialism and is off-putting. However, we can sometimes learn from a material metaphor. For instance, in order to start a business we have to generate potential to get it up and running. The potential in this case is capital – we need to have accumulated sufficient savings of our own or have secured a loan from a bank. This preparation is not the busi-

ness itself, because we are not yet doing what we have set out to do or realising the result of the business that we want to run. Yet without the potential that capital stands for, we can't run the business – that's the reality. The same principle holds true spiritually.

If out of unawareness we have come to a condition of selfishness, isolation and loneliness and we wish to see our condition transformed, we may wonder where the necessary force or energy will come from to effect this transformation. Whether we are lay or monastic Buddhist practitioners, a lot of our practice is concerned with generating the accumulated momentum required for that transformation. This is one way of understanding puñña.

The act of dedicating puñña is aimed at purifying our effort. Despite doing our best, without our noticing it, there can be a steadily increasing sense of ourselves as being somehow spiritually superior to other people. This sense of accumulated benefit can, if we are not careful, increase our burden of conceit. When we dedicate any puñña that we may have generated by wholesome conduct we are making the gesture of giving it away. We pray, 'may the goodness resulting from my practice today, bring benefit to all beings'. When we do this, the focus of our attention is on the heart itself; it is not outwardly directed, concerned with what effect this gesture might have on the 'world'.

The Buddha told this story: There were two acrobats who travelled from village to village, performing tricks as a way of earning a living. As part of their act the older of the two would hold a ladder on his shoulders while the younger scampered up and performed. They were obviously aware that they needed to maintain close attention; otherwise it could have been dangerous. One day the older one spoke, saying that he thought for the sake of keeping their act on the

road the younger one needed to pay closer attention to what he was doing down below on the ground. He in turn would apply closer attention to what was going on at the top of the ladder. The younger one respectfully listened, but then said he felt it would be more effective if instead of watching each other they paid closer attention to what each one was themselves doing. That way, he said, there would be benefit. The Buddha's comment on this was that the younger one had it right. If we are each more careful about what is ours to be responsible for, then we actually benefit each other.

At the end of each day I find it wonderfully rewarding to dedicate the merit of my practice. It is not my place to worry about whether by making these wishes anyone else feels better. I am focused on doing what I can to reduce the tendencies of greed, aversion and delusion in my own heart. So I dwell on the thought, 'May this act of dedication bring benefit to my teachers – to Ajahn Tate, Ajahn Chah, and all those teachers I've lived with; Ajahn Sumedho, without whom the monasteries in Britain wouldn't exist; the monks that I've lived with, my mother, my father and the people that I care about, and those that I don't particularly care about; everybody who's ever lived here at Ratanagiri, who is living here now and will ever live here in the future.' The contents of the prayer can differ from day to day but the important thing is generating a genuine sense of well-wishing or loving-kindness to all people and all beings, without exception. I am not doing this because it is 'a part of our religion'. To make this gesture at the end of the day lightens the burden of self-centredness.

Ancient Practices

Our Asian teachers may not have explicitly taught the necessity of cultivating an attitude of devotion, but they certainly

demonstrated it themselves. There are a number of instances I can remember when I saw certain gestures that really cut right through any doubts or confusion I may have had about the overall attitude I should be keeping in my day-to-day practice.

When I was a new monk and visiting Wat Pah Bahn Tard, which is the monastery of Ajahn Mahaboowa – renowned as one of the most ferocious and mighty masters of the present Theravada Buddhist Forest tradition – I was waiting in the eating hall in the early morning, before we all went out on alms round together, when the Venerable Ajahn came in. I expected that he would probably start snapping orders to the monks, and then rush off on *pindapat* – he had a reputation for being very gruff and very fast. But what did he do? As he quietly entered the hall, the first thing he did was humbly kneel before the shrine and bow with the most gracious prostrations that one would ever wish to see. I wondered, "Why is he doing that? He's supposed to be enlightened. I mean what is he doing bowing to graven images?"

This uninhibited expression of his devotion was a natural part of his disposition. He had grown up with that sensibility, as Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Tate and other eminent monks had. The same is true in Burma. At the monasteries of the various well-known and Venerable Sayadaws, you will see numerous well-kept shrines with monks, nuns and laity alike offering respect by way of candles, flowers and incense. Before and after sitting meditation they always mindfully bow three times in devotion to the Buddha, their teacher to whom they know they owe so much. This is so normal, so close to them that they just take it for granted. Addhithan, making determinations, generating these conscious wishes from a deep place within is thoroughly natural, and this, I feel, is one of the essential nourishments of the contemp-

lative life. Many followers of vipassana teachings in the West that I have met report a lack of warmth, joy, well-being and wholeness in their life. Perhaps their spiritual diet lacks some important nutrients.

Silent Prayer

So I think prayer does have an important place in Theravada Buddhism. This Way is about getting to know the nature of our own being, so that we're at one with our hearts and attentive to its truest longings. The heart longs to return to its original condition of purity. To become more conscious of that dimension of our heart is an important point of practice. The reflections and ritual verses of contemplations that we all recite together in the monastery are a safe place to start to pray. Then, if we feel inclined, we can begin to say our own words. What does your heart want to say?

When we kneel before the shrine – that which symbolises perfect wisdom, perfect compassion and perfect freedom for us – and we express our good wishes for all beings – the bronze statue, beautiful and serene as it is, is not listening to us. We are not asking the Buddha to grant us any favours. Rather, beholding an image of the Buddha helps configure the 'divine principle' in our minds and creates the appropriate inner space – a sacred place – in which we feel totally free to speak and in which we can feel perfectly received.

There is a touching passage in *One Dharma* by Joseph Goldstein. He refers to an interview with Mother Theresa, in which the interviewer asks:

"When you pray what do you say to God?"

"I don't say anything," she said. "I just listen."

"Well, what does God say to you?"

"God just listens."

There was a pause in the interview, and she added,

"…and if you don't understand that, I am afraid I can't help you."

That's the essence of it. We all have within us the faculty of intuition, which, if we listen to it, can guide us towards our true home, where we trust that unshakeable peace lies. Our hearts already know the Way. Prayer and devotion put us in touch with the heart and its natural wisdom, allowing it to gently lead us on that journey.

Another question this evening asked: "Being here on retreat I've remembered what I had forgotten about being present, and now I am afraid that when I leave here I'm going to forget it again and become caught up in all the many responsibilities and challenges. How can I effectively remember this presence?"

I think prayer is one way of remembering. If we wish, we can quietly, reverently, offer up this prayer: 'May the goodness of my practice support me in my aspirations to be present in every moment of my day, no matter what's going on.' Prayer helps.

I am grateful for the questions you have asked this evening.

A Question of Identity

One should not be considered worthy of respect
because of family or background or any outer sign;
it is purity and the realisation of truth
that determine one's worth.

Dhammapada verse 393

I'm told that this evening one third of the world's population will be watching the World Cup football final between France and Brazil on television. This means billions of people! What is it that attracts so much interest? This is a relevant question for us to contemplate.

On this particular evening the perception of oneself as being French is charged with emotion. The newspapers are reporting that the cup final has triggered national pride unseen in France since the time of the Revolution in 1789. What is at stake is personal and national identity – the passionate feeling of being a substantial somebody.

All of us find our own ways of generating that feeling that we could call 'somebodihood'. Identifying with our nationality, be it French, British, Brazilian, New Zealander or Burmese, is one of those ways. We also identify with our gender, in being a man or a woman, and with our religion, with being Buddhist or Christian or Jewish, and so on. And generating the feeling of identity is okay up to a certain point, if we are careful.

But there are clear signs that show that, past a certain point, it is not okay. Look at what happened when England lost their last match. The ugly behaviour by so-called supporters is not okay. What does our practice tell us about training attention to see beyond the kind of identity that contributes to such unfortunate delusion?

Who Am I?

We could begin our investigation by acknowledging the importance of the issue. Racial wars, class wars and religious wars offer ample material for reflection. Acknowledging the relevance of perceived identity to what we do supports mindfulness around the actual bodily feeling of being a 'somebody'. We start to notice, as it is happening, the sense of solid 'I'-ness being born; we notice when and in what conditions we get this feeling.

We can also observe the experience of lacking self-definition. How does it feel when you first wake up in the morning after having been up late? We can learn a lot in the brief period after waking, when a sense of personal identity hasn't yet properly established itself. Sometimes we can't remember where we are. Next time this occurs, try not to rush past the experience. Observe how we reach out for familiar perceptions. Don't hurry to open your eyes. Just stay with the sense of wanting to find security; of not knowing where or who you are. When you do open your eyes, how does it feel to recognise 'my room' or 'my things'? Observe the sense of solidification as it occurs. This can be an effective way to begin undoing the way we grasp at our limited identities.

Using such exercises we develop an understanding of how the perceptions of 'my body' and 'my thoughts' arise. We realise that these ideas are only relatively true. We develop a sense of responsibility for those perceptions. We come

to see that they are not ultimately what we are. In my situation, for instance, the perception 'I am the abbot and have a duty to attend meetings of the monastic sangha' has consequences which I can contemplate. Because it's a relatively true perception, I act accordingly, even though ultimately it's not who I am.

If we don't exercise care in how we hold these relative identities then we set our attention chronically short of reality and grasp programmed perceptions as absolute truths. We believe 'This body is really me', 'My role in this community is ultimately important', and these perceptions can have serious consequences. I've begun to suffer arthritic pain, and believing in bodily identity as ultimately true leads to considerable struggle. Or if I get up in the morning still thinking about some conflict from the day before, assuming that I am what I think leads to immediate struggle. So long as I believe these conditioned activities of mind are more than the relative identities they really are, then there is no way I can be simply happy.

However, having begun to see through the apparent substantiality of these mental processes, it would be unwise to try to dismiss them. Just as it would be naïve for politicians to dismiss the power of a sense of national identity, it is likewise naïve of us not to pay very close attention to this area of our inner world. To try to dismiss our sense of identity would contribute to our deluded misery. We would experience a terrible sense of powerlessness as a result of living a false life. Fortunately, there are wise teachings given by those who have walked the Way ahead of us that invite us to engage in a training of body, speech and mind that leads to realisation of the place of true identity.

Abiding as Awareness

I've been living in Britain now for 20 years, and sometimes I forget that I'm not British. But when I return from trips abroad I have to stand, sometimes for a long time, in line at the immigration desk along with Russians and Turks and Americans. I hold a New Zealand passport so I'm reminded that I am a guest here. These days I stand in the immigration line feeling how it feels to 'be' an outsider. It's very interesting. The perception of 'I am …' readily reveals itself if we are there in time to catch it. With vigilance it's quite easy. And if awareness is functioning freely in that moment, we remember that there is a bigger picture. There is much more to us than the idea of 'me, a New Zealander' or 'me, a Buddhist'. In what are these ideas arising and ceasing? What was there before the idea and associated sensations arose? And what is there after that sense has passed away?

We can consider the same dynamic from a meditative perspective. If we persist with our formal practice we will arrive at an experience of natural stillness in which we find we are abiding quite effortlessly. There is a sense of seeing, yet there is no apparent content. We're not thinking, 'I am a man' or, 'I am an abbot.' The mind is not disturbed by thinking or feeling or activity of any kind. And we are not asleep. What is there? For the sake of discussion we can say that there is awareness. That doesn't mean we're sitting there thinking, 'There is awareness' – we are simply aware. We are awake and alert.

As we gain confidence in sustaining such awareness, we discover how to abide as awareness – and, at the same time, allow activity to take place. There can be thinking and feeling, but we don't forget ourselves. If, for example, pleasurable feeling is arising in the meditation and the thought 'I like this' appears, we don't lose awareness and become limited

by our identification with pleasure. We refrain from setting the focus of our attention on the content of awareness and, through not grasping, we cease to become lost in the joys and sorrows of existence. In this perspective we realise that we have the option to grasp and hence to 'become' someone, but that we also have the ability to inhibit that tendency. We see that we are not slaves to our conditioned identities – we are not the person that we have been told we are!

Our meditation begins to generate blessings in the world. Skill in awareness shows itself as increased presence in daily-life situations. To take an example: if somebody crosses over a personal boundary that I hold to, then the chances are that I will feel annoyed. If the perception 'I am angry' is established, but in that moment I have the strength of awareness to 'wake up', then I don't start to seek security in the conditioned sense of being an offended somebody. My sense of who I am doesn't become limited to that movement in the mind. Even when the perception 'I am angry' is born, I don't start to feed on the toxic nutriment of indignation. I survive anger and abide as awareness.

We abide as wakefulness when we remember, when we are alert. Often we forget. But what matters is that we are interested in remembering. We really don't want to contribute to the misery of the world by settling for some synthetic identity doled out by someone else. And waking up is possible. Little by little we learn to live our lives with the sense of simply being awake. It ceases to be so important whether we know who we are or where our lives are going. We can be awake to that movement of mind that we experience as feeling lost. We can be awake to not-knowing who we are and then find ourselves still able to act positively out of a sense of feeling responsible for our lives. We may not be feeling how we want to feel, but we are acting from a sense

of personal reality that we recognise as true. We can be with ourselves instead of fighting ourselves.

Being One with Life

When we discover how to be with ourselves in this manner we have a more ready ability to accord with both inner and outer events. Whatever is going on for us, we find we are more likely to 'be one' with it.

In reality we are already one with what is going on, but due to our heedless mental habits we can live as if we are once removed from everything. We feel like we are somehow not really involved, but are instead watching ourselves from a remote position. We cultivate an image of ourselves and live in that image. This causes us great suffering. The debilitating tendency to 'manage' life by maintaining constructed images of who we are doesn't make us feel good. We want it to, but it doesn't. Propping up these ideas of who we are, these false identities, consumes tremendous energy. No wonder we so often feel exhausted.

It wasn't many years ago that mobile phones were new and something of a status symbol. I've heard that at that time a young chap on a train was showing off his new acquisition by carrying on long, loud conversations, to the irritation of the other passengers. Then suddenly a pregnant woman in the same carriage went into labour. Of course, everyone turned to the man, expecting him to call for assistance. Much to his embarrassment he had to admit that his mobile was an imitation phone; his whole performance had been for show. Apparently both mother and child were fine in the end. The young man probably took much longer to recover.

Being addicted to an image of who we are and to ideas of our lives, we remain locked in endless struggle and become drained of vitality. Perhaps we were never taught and hence

it doesn't occur to us that we can do something about our predicament. Or perhaps our fear of facing up to what we really are feels too threatening. Sadly, the potential of authentic being remains clouded by our habits of self-disempowerment. But when we arrive at wakefulness we realise that we don't have to be afraid of fear. When we are awake, fear can teach us. It teaches us to be present, to be careful. Fear does not necessarily mean that something is going wrong; we often think that way out of habit. We can choose to patiently receive the fear of loss of security, loss of our precious identity, and we can witness the passing away of such fear. What remains is a more conscious appreciation of awareness.

The more we live our lives from awakeness the more readily we remember our ability to be aware. Everything teaches us – even confusion. Being confused but aware of it reminds us how not to become limited. If we forget to be awake, if we grasp, then we are born into limited self-identity and we become confused. This process is always one of our options, but it's less painful to opt for remembering to be aware and not to assume some detached, limited identity as a confused victim.

The wife of the American ambassador in Korea once went to visit a famous meditation master there. I heard this story in the 1970s. Apparently the woman asked the master to explain the essential teachings to her, and he told her that Buddhist meditation was about becoming one with everything. She was unimpressed, and asked what good such teaching would do for people if an atomic bomb was dropped. The master replied that, if the bomb was dropped, she would become one with everything anyway, so she may as well prepare herself.

That is not meant to be flippant. Meditation is about pre-

paring ourselves. When we sit and walk in formal practice, we are exercising our spiritual faculties. We are sharpening the tools of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and discernment so that we can be present when the real teachings come to us. And of course the real teachings come with the flaring up of our wild passions. In formal meditation we prepare ourselves for our own life. It is like the way we eat food so we can live – not live so we can eat. Similarly we meditate so as to live; we don't live to meditate.

Knowing the 'In-Between'

Being rightly prepared for what comes to us means we are fully involved. All of our being is present, which means we can draw on all possible resources for wise action. Hopefully it won't be anything like an atomic blast. Every day circumstances arise in which we can feel the agony of being not fully present.

We tend either to feel once removed from what is happening, or to become entirely lost in it. Both tendencies leave us with a sense of artificiality, however dramatic and sensational the situation may be. My understanding of the Middle Way is that it's possible to abide in-between these two modes of limited being. From an ego perspective this 'in-between' feels insecure and thoroughly unattractive. But this is not a problem – isn't it what our Teachings tell us to expect? Getting *my* way is not *the* Way, whereas *the* Way is what is true. With this contemplation our attention is drawn towards and becomes interested in the ability to abide in this Way. We no longer react and object to feeling insecure and unsafe. We don't like the feeling, but we cease being driven to divided or heedlessly absorbed states by its appearance. We remain one with experience – not torn apart by a commitment to an image.

Through abiding in the in-between we discover a subtle kind of personal confidence. It is not 'my' confidence, because it is a confidence that belongs to reality. The sort of investigation we are talking about, if followed, will undermine any views of ourselves that we hold too tightly. It can take us into feelings of despair, of hopelessness and of inadequacy. But it can also take us beyond the limited identities conditioned by those feelings. The struggle of moving from finding security in false identities into realisation of limitless abiding beyond personality is difficult. It feels like it will cost us everything. There should be no mistake about that. This is why we have teachers and why we need to attend to their guidance through this process of transformation.

Identity and Personality

Last week a young couple who live nearby brought their nine-week-old daughter to the monastery for a blessing. Observing this small being, there didn't appear to be any substantial sense of a somebody. There wasn't yet any accumulated perception of an individual differentiated from its parents or the sensory world. Child development theorists tell us that it takes about seven years for such a differentiation to fully take place. This happens to correspond to the age of the youngest *arahant* recorded in the scriptures. Maybe before seven years of age, there isn't enough of a somebody for transformation of the mistaken identification with personality to take place.

Learning to abide in awareness beyond limited personal identity doesn't mean that we are trying to get rid of our personalities. That the Buddha taught *anatta*, no-self, doesn't mean we are supposed to feel guilty for having personal desires, or embarrassed about who we are. We all have personalities; we had to work hard to attain one! Buddhism is tell-

ing us that personality is not all that it appears to be, but this doesn't mean we have to start apologising for our experience of being a particular somebody. We need to consider this carefully. The precious 'pointing to reality' that constitutes Dhamma teachings becomes dangerous when turned into doctrine. By this I mean that the concept of anatta should be understood as just a concept; the experience to which it points is something completely different.

Our personality is what we experience ourselves as, and we welcome and value it. The last thing to do is attempt to get rid of it. Should we be foolish enough to try – and some of us have been that foolish – then a lot of our personality goes underground. When it's not out in the open but relegated to the shadowy underworld, all that is dark in our character grows larger. Sometimes we get hints of its underground activity, and if we are sensitive to its rumblings we would be wise to welcome it back into the light of day before it grows into too much of a monster. We can be sure it will come to light some time. Perhaps it might wait until we have become well-known; one day somebody might criticise us in public – and full-blown repressed vengefulness raises its ugly head for everyone to see.

If our practice is not driven by wilful ambition, caution will guide us and we will learn from the lessons of life naturally. There will be no need to try to get rid of what we don't like about ourselves. From his perspective of perfectly unobstructed vision, the Buddha pointed out the delusive nature of the feeling of 'I'. From our perspective we take up this invitation to enquire and, remembering whatever degree of awareness we have access to, we examine the very dynamic of personality. We find that what we thought of as our 'self' is in fact a dynamic process. This realisation can be shocking. If we are not prepared, the shock might trigger an

even more tenacious grasping, which would be regrettable. But, if through our patient and consistent surrender to right training, we have been made ready, then when we do see through the apparent nature of personality, awakening can be deepened.

Coming Home

From here on, the struggles to defend or promote ourselves turn into the material of our contemplative enquiry. The force of feeling that drives us to protect our individual rights alters, transforming into active, compassionate concern for all beings. Just as a dead-looking branch in winter changes into a fragrant blossoming tree in spring, our hard-edged personal tendencies soften and reveal themselves as means of enhancing conscious relationship.

So we are not interested in getting rid of personality. We are very interested in altering our perspective on it. In moments of being one with ourselves we discover such clarity and sensitivity as was previously unimaginable, as well as an interest and willingness to accept in awareness everything that we might previously have sent underground. This process is very humbling and proceeds at its own pace, which is often not 'my' pace. 'I' want it over and done with. However, if we arrive at this stage naturally, that is, without straining for it, then all the resources needed for enduring the tests will be available. As we recite in our morning chanting: 'The Dhamma holds those who uphold it from falling into delusion.'

A heart that is awake studies delusion, doesn't run from it and doesn't push past it. Of course, we still have our habitual desire to avoid it, but we study the desire too. By carefully investigating what is already at hand, who and what we really are begins to become clear.

The instruction to contemplate anatta is not an injunc-

tion to become something or somebody other than that which we already are – and that includes trying to become nobody! It is drawing us back to a recognition of the reality that already always is. The gradual dawning of this recognition dissolves the apparent solidity of our somebodihood. We can gently trust in the benefits of all that we have endured in the process of investigation as we experience the unfolding of a more agile being. We find there are more and more situations in which we remember ourselves more quickly. We are now more likely to be able to accord with whatever situation we are in as we move through the world – not because we have become more liberal or compromising, not at all, but because we don't hold ourselves so tightly.

I once heard a venerable monk speak of the difference between the awakened and the unawakened states as like the difference between flowing and frozen water. A mind identified in egoity is like an ice cube that only fits into spaces its own shape. As our rigid frozen ego is subjected to the fires of the passions in the course of committed practice, eventually a kind of melt-down occurs, and like flowing water we can move more freely with the circumstances of our life.

Question: Could you say a bit more about having a personality – does what you have been saying only apply to us, or do arahants have personalities too?

Ajahn Munindo: That's a very good question. I can't say that I've ever sat down for a heart-to-heart sharing with an arahant and said 'How do you feel about your personality?' though I'd like to. I think the closest I have ever come to it is conversations I've had with Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Tate. Whether they were arahants or not I don't know. Actually, I don't find talking about whether or not somebody is an arahant very appropriate. To me the state of purity of somebody's heart is an intensely personal matter. What I do have

confidence in is that both were great monks who were very well-acquainted with reality and practice. However, the question remains. When Ajahn Chah was questioned along these lines he persistently told people that it was none of their business and to get on with their own practice. Yet on one occasion, apparently when he was asked whether he was an arahant, he said, "My experience is like being a tree, I've got branches and leaves and berries and fruits and so on. And the birds come along and they sit in the branches and they eat the fruit, some say it's sweet, some say it's sour. And they go on about whether they like it or dislike it and so on and so forth. That's just the chattering of the birds, that's just what they do. So I just am what I am. You call me an arahant or not, you can say what you like about it."

It's similar to the question as to whether or not an arahant has a personality. We could discuss the dynamics of an arahant's behaviour from the perspective of being an observer, and we could say 'Well, their personality is like this or their personality is like that.' I'm speculating here, but I would imagine that from the perspective of the arahant they don't *have* a personality.

I would suggest that perhaps it is more useful to see how we have things. Ajahn Chah often spoke about having and not having as being the same thing. He said, "*Hai mee mai mee* – make having not-having. Have but don't *have*. Having and not-having need to be seen as the same thing." And he would say, "Like this cup here; actually you can have this cup, but you have to know also how to not-have it. And when having and not-having are the same thing then you're free." There's having with attachment and there's having without attachment and there's a big difference between the two, a huge difference.

So I would expect that an arahant could be quite artic-

ulate in talking about tendencies of his or her mind and commenting on their own behaviour patterns, but there would be a very tangible sense of equanimity. They would be having without having; they'd be having without grasping. And that's what makes the difference.

The characteristic of an arahant is that their heart is completely free from all tendencies of clinging. All manifestations of ignorance and conceit have been removed. And so according to the Buddha's teaching all their activity is governed by wisdom and compassion. This does not mean they are always perfect in all the decisions they make. They are only perfect in the sense that they are incapable of becoming caught up in any unwholesome states. The Buddha had to reprimand one particular arahant for his decision to not attend the recitation of the monastic rule (*patimokkha*). Because he was free from all impurities of heart, this monk figured he did not have to join with the rest of the Sangha for their fortnightly gathering. From the perspective of the Buddha's superior insight this was a misjudgement, because it could have led less realised members of the Sangha to bad practice.

Neither does it mean that you'll like all these manifestations of wisdom and compassion. We could be in the company of an arahant and feel thoroughly annoyed, really disliking them. They may have grown up in an environment where they weren't taught proper hygiene for instance. Or they might have bad breath, or an accent we find unattractive, or they may not have washed their robes or something. And to them, according to their particular conditioning that's perfectly acceptable. Or they may even have a rather grubby sense of humour. I have known some people who were pretty much like arahants and they used to enjoy rather coarse jokes. You may not find that agreeable, you might say, 'That person can't be an arahant, he's too vulgar to be an arahant.'

But the Buddha said that you couldn't tell an arahant by looking at the outside. The outside's not just the complexion of their skin or their bodily features; it's everything that you can perceive from the outside, including what we might call personality. You have to be an arahant to know an arahant.

There are several stories in the scriptures which undermine some of the assumptions people might have about how an enlightened being would appear. One is from the sutta called 'Lakuntaka Bhaddiya' from the *Samyutta Nikaya*. In this sutta the Buddha mentions a monk who is called Bhaddiya who he says is ugly, unpleasing and even despised. Yet this same monk 'has arrived at and fully realised that uttermost goal of the holy life.'

Then Dhammapada verse 408 says: 'Those who speak truth and give gentle encouragement, contending with no-one, these do I call great beings.' It is explained in the commentaries that this verse was uttered by the Buddha in reference to incidents involving an elder monk called Vaccha, who was in the habit of addressing everyone in a patronising, even abusive, manner. He called people 'wretched' and 'vile', which of course wasn't what they had come to expect from a Buddhist monk. With their feelings hurt, they went to see the Buddha who, on hearing their complaint, looked into the mind of Bhikkhu Vaccha. The Buddha saw that this monk's heart was completely free from any intention to cause harm. Indeed he was a fully awakened arahant and the reason he spoke in such a way was because of deep but completely innocuous character traits. So the Buddha took the occasion to explain this matter, saying that it is possible for such an enlightened person to appear offensive but be inwardly perfectly pure.

Alone Together

Tasting the flavour of solitude and the nectar of peace,
those who drink the joy that is the essence of reality
abide free from fear of evil.

Dhammapada verse 205

Question: Can you explain the relative merits of practising as a monastic and practising as a householder? Could you also describe any general patterns of personality change that you have noticed in people as a result of Buddhist practice?

Ajahn Munindo: Whether one lives the life of a celibate renunciate, as a monk or nun, or whether one lives as a lay-person, a householder, is a question of one's choice of lifestyle. That choice is not just about personal preferences but has to do with all sorts of conditions – our accumulations, our *kamma*. It is a basic premise of the Buddhist outlook that we did not come into the world as a blank sheet but with a history and a set of tendencies. What we came into this life with, forms the context and the background against which our life's unfolding takes place, the details of which most of us can't see.

For all of us, however – monks, nuns or lay people – the practice is essentially the same. We all encounter frustration, limited existence and suffering. What matters is whether we are *willing* to receive our suffering consciously and look into

the actuality of it, or whether we are committed – knowingly or unknowingly – to distraction and avoidance in order to delay looking at what is truly taking place. In both the householders' life and the monastic life there is the full spectrum of commitment, from those who are enthusiastically committed to seeing what the reality of each moment is, to those occupied in distraction. What matters is whether our lifestyle is true for us and whether it helps us develop increased willingness. Willingness is what matters.

The reality, whatever our choice of lifestyle, is that throughout our life we have to face the evidence of our limitations. Whether we like it or not, we all experience not getting our own way and becoming lost in habitual reactivity. When we come right up against those experiences, how do we respond? Do we resist, saying, 'I shouldn't be this way, I should be more clear about where I'm going in my life;' or is there the heart-capacity to meet this person – me – in this experience of limitation in an unobstructed way?

Encountering Loneliness

To speak personally, I can say that living as a monk has been a difficult choice but that I don't have any regrets. I do regret some of the ways I have handled certain situations in the past but I don't regret having chosen to live the life of a monk. I feel very privileged and fortunate to live this life, and the longer I live it the more that feeling grows. It's fundamentally about living in solitude and getting to know your aloneness. Yes, monks live together in community but in our togetherness we are alone. The structures of the life bring us to an intense recognition of our aloneness and the agony of loneliness.

For someone who lives the monastic life of a celibate renunciate, loneliness is not considered as a symptom of

failure. It is looked upon as an indicator – a sign. When you feel the pain of loneliness as horrible – just as it is – it does not mean failure. This feeling tells you where your resources are, where you need to go to get your gold; so it's something that we train ourselves to welcome and look into. We are *supposed* to feel lonely – at least until we realize contentment in our aloneness. From this perspective, compulsive socialising or any heedless activity that distracts us from an accurate, personal, receptivity to the experience of loneliness is seen as a hindrance.

There are monastic communities in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions in which there are movements towards socialising and group activity, but according to my understanding and observation of these things, invariably either those activities die out or the communities themselves die. The reason is that the monastic life is essentially solitary – it's all about being alone. The decision to live such a life is made for all sorts of reasons, but ultimately it needs to be made because we find it in our nature to make that choice. It's not right or wrong to live the monastic life or to live a householder's life. We choose whatever is appropriate for our condition – whatever supports us in our commitment to the path of practice.

Anybody who has lived the life of a monk, a nun or a postulant for any length of time knows the pain of loneliness, but hopefully has also tasted the benefit of being supported by the spiritual community in their encounter with it. The spiritual community is a very important support in encouraging us to go deeper into all aspects of our experience – perhaps into loneliness even more than other aspects. To try and live monastically without any support would be very difficult. Because of this, the Buddha encouraged the spiritual community, the Sangha, to make a shared com-

mitment to a celibate renunciate lifestyle, and to support each other in their efforts.

If we have adequately prepared ourselves with strength of mindfulness and steadiness of *samadhi*, along with the self-respect that comes with sense-restraint and moral conduct, then we can embrace the energetic reality of loneliness. Instead of thinking, 'I feel lonely, what can I do to get rid of this feeling of loneliness? I'll write an e-mail, read a book, or ring somebody up,' we open up to receive – without any judgment or analysis – the feeling of loneliness. To be encouraged to do that is a wonderful thing and is very much a part of what the spiritual community is about.

As a householder or a layperson it is not necessarily the case that you will be forced to confront loneliness in the same manner as a monk or nun will be. Living with a partner in a committed relationship, for example – in many cases with children as well – brings a very different experience altogether. Assuming that such a relationship is not destructive or dysfunctional, there will be a sense of companionship – close, intimate companionship. Since the last close intimate companionship I had was about thirty years ago, there is little I can say about that. But from what people tell me, committing to a close relationship doesn't protect anyone from the pain of loneliness. So whatever our lifestyle choice, all of us who are committed to practice are called to go deeply into this experience and find our own way to a resolution.

Personality Shifts

With regards to changes in personality through practice, nowadays what I see in everybody who is training, whether monastic or lay person, is a shift in heart towards an increased willingness to receive the present moment in its fullness – without interpretation, indulgence or avoidance.

In any experience our mind can imagine all sorts of possible outcomes, some agreeable and some disagreeable. We can become very anxious because of these imagined possibilities. However, if we practise rightly and truly, we find ourselves increasingly capable of accommodating all sorts of eventualities – both the frightening and the wonderful. I have found this to be true throughout my years of training and have observed it growing in many with whom I have lived. Witnessing such increase of capacity is always a joy.

I received a letter today from someone who lives in Eastern Europe and has been practising for a few years. He's young and very enthusiastic in his practice and has just recognised that he's been attached to the conceited view that he is in the best religion. There is nobody in his family and hardly anyone else in his immediate environment who is a Buddhist, so he's very much a solitary Buddhist. He's been holding onto an idea of himself as a Buddhist in a very tight way, which is quite understandable – that's generally how we all begin. But because of his right practice he has reached the point where he's started to loosen the way he holds the perception of himself as a Buddhist, and has come to realise how conceited his view was that 'I am a Buddhist and Buddhism is the best religion there is.'

In his letter he described how, having seen his conceit, he became caught in terrible doubt. He thought, 'I've been brain-washed. Buddhism is just another system of brain-washing.' He wrote that he'd been watching a video of Nazis in Germany in the 1930's, in which the Nazi youth were going round teaching the young people to sing nationalistic songs praising Hitler and so on. The Nazis were skilled at programming large numbers of people to hold specific views and beliefs, to conform to a fixed idea.

Seeing this video coincided with him recognising how rigid his grasp of Buddhism was. He fell into this hellish doubt in which he decided that he had been thoroughly mistaken and that Buddhism was, in fact, just a load of codswallop! 'This is just another form of programming for imbeciles!' he thought to himself, believing that he'd made a terrible and humiliating mistake.

Fortunately, his practice was adequately balanced so that he was soon able to reflect on the shift in his experience and on the doubt he was caught up in. The reality of his experience was that he was having doubts, that's all. He didn't *know* that Buddhism was a load of codswallop; he didn't *know* that he'd been programmed into believing some cultic nonsense. His practice was sufficiently broad, non-judgmental and here-and-now that he was able to accommodate his doubt without grasping it, without becoming it. If in that moment when the thought arose – 'I've been programmed by a cult of fanatic monks and Ajahn Munindo is another sort of a Nazi' – he hadn't been properly prepared, then he could have thrown the whole thing out of the window, gone out drinking with his mates and created a whole lot of unskilful kamma. I am impressed with the way this young man went through this period – on his own – allowing the doubt to be there. He allowed the real possibility that he'd got it all wrong to remain in his consciousness, without losing the balance of his mind. His *willingness* to experience the doubt took him through to some insight into the nature of doubting.

As we continue in the practice of the Buddha-Dhamma we find an increased willingness to accommodate all sorts of possibilities that come to us. We don't jump to conclusions so readily, and because of this, the heart and mind begins to expand in a more open and easeful way. By our practice of

restraint we find that there are more, not fewer, possibilities. Practitioners become more relaxed, they become more trusting. This is the sort of personality change you might expect from practice.

Certainly, my experience has been that, instead of having to feel sure about things, I am able to let myself be not so sure. Sometimes people tell me that when I talk I sound very sure and confident, but that is not necessarily my subjective experience. When I talk about Dhamma, what I am concerned with is encouraging investigation. At the end of a Dhamma talk I hope the listeners have more and deeper questions than at the start. However, when I meet my brothers and sisters and their partners, who are all evangelical Christians, then I know that I am meeting people who are really sure. If they are not travelling the world as missionaries in Africa, Turkey, India, or the United States, they are preaching and running churches near home. They don't have any doubts at all – certainly not conscious ones. They are very much convinced that they have the answers. In that respect we are worlds apart because I can't say that I have the answers. I feel connected to a reality which is much bigger than me – something beyond delineations of inner and outer – a reality that I care about tremendously. And this is something that I wholeheartedly commit my life in service to; but I can't say that I know or that I'm sure. I welcome this state of uncertainty – I think it's a healthy condition.

Not Sure

As far as making right effort in daily life – accommodating family situations, community situations and other people – I think this particular point is very relevant. Recognising that, in reality, we are not sure most of the time makes us much nicer people to be with. If, out of fear of being unsure, we

hold on to ideas and take fixed positions, we can become very rigid. If I feel sufficiently threatened in certain situations, a fear comes up and there's an experience of contraction – a rigidity kicks in, and when that kicks in, possibilities become limited. My mind doesn't want to look at the myriads of possibilities, doesn't want to float around and feel what's actually going to fit. In that state of contraction and limitation it wants to get something and feel sure. But this doesn't benefit me and it doesn't benefit other people. On the other hand, when we are able to remember that we don't know what is going to happen – that we don't know for certain – then there is a relaxation, a releasing; an opening up and a trusting, a reconnecting with a trusting relationship to life. Life is uncertain but that is just the truth. We don't have to be in a perpetual state of fear because of it.

There are many contemplations that aim at leading us into a trusting relationship to life, but I think this reflection on the fact that most of the time we don't know what is going to happen is especially useful. When the tendency to grasp out of fear or insecurity arises, if we have prepared ourselves, we hold back and just wait, remaining open and at the same time in touch with the sense of 'not sure'. This was one of Ajahn Chah's most regular teachings, perhaps his most regular teaching. Whatever you said to him, after he responded he would often add, 'but…*mai neh, mai neh,*' not sure. *Neh* – which comes from the Pali word *nicca,* meaning 'permanent' – in Thai means 'sure' or 'certain'. *Mai* is negative. That was really the bottom line in all of his teaching. Whatever arrangements were being made, 'We're going to do this' or 'Next week I'm going to Bangkok,' he would regularly say 'mai neh', 'but not sure.' Not because he lacked commitment – he was anything but wishy-washy; but because he wanted us to see the Dhamma in all of our activity.

On the day that Ajahn Chah died in 1992 a friend of the monastery offered a lamp as a gift to mark the occasion. We switched this lamp on for the next ten days and nights as a gesture of our respect. After this period we held a Memorial Service in the Dhamma Hall here. A large gathering of people from Newcastle and the surrounding area came together for chanting and meditation, to reflect with gratitude on our teacher who had just passed away. At the Memorial Service I read a talk from a collection of Ajahn Chah's teachings called *Food For The Heart*. It was on Ajahn Chah's favourite theme – impermanence. The words in this talk gained a new significance as I read them. When I came to this important passage, the key sentence of the whole talk, which says, '…and any teaching from any teacher that does not include the words impermanence…' *the light bulb blew* '...is not the teaching of the Buddha….' I had to stop for a few moments. I suppose these things happen, don't they? What causes them, what is actually going on – who knows? But it certainly etched that particular aspect of Ajahn Chah's teaching even more deeply in my mind:

'Any teaching that does not contain the words *not sure* or *impermanent* is not the teaching of the Buddha.'

Thank you very much for your attention this evening.

'… and I know I should let go'

Let go of the past.
Let go of the future.
Let go of the present.
With a heart that is free, cross over
to that shore which is beyond suffering.

Dhammapada verse 348

Not rarely, people ask, regarding practice, 'How do I let go?' There is the perceived wish or need to let go, and yet regularly we feel unable actually to let go. We read the Buddha's teaching, in which it is clearly and precisely pointed out that clinging is the cause of suffering. We do a little meditation practice and very soon get to see for ourselves that it really is the case that we have these habits of clinging that keep tripping us up all the time. So we get the feeling that we should 'let go'.

This reminds me of a refrain from a beautiful song from the late sixties by The Mamas and the Papas called 'Look Through My Window'. It goes, '… and I know I should let go.' I was eighteen or nineteen when I first heard that song, and it was quite an inspiration for me. I was going through, if not an epiphany, a period of deep inquiry, and these words rang powerfully true. So this question that people ask, 'How *do* I let go?' has been with me for a long time.

We get stuck on memories, things that have clearly fin-

ished and gone. They may well be very painful. We think, 'If only I could let go of this.' We also get overly preoccupied with the future, imagining pleasant or unpleasant things that may happen. We might think, 'Only one more week at work then I'm off to La Gomera! It will be so beautiful there. There's that particular beach I know where it never rains – it will be so wonderful!' The mind can be obsessed with beautiful things which we imagine are going to happen in the future, but meanwhile we are not here with what is happening now. This can create real problems for us.

If we are not fantasising, we are worrying about this imagined future. Parents with young children can worry themselves sick with all the horrible things that might befall them. While these beautiful, lovely creatures are having a marvellous time mum and dad are making themselves ill thinking, 'What if this happens? What if that happens?' They might be dedicated Buddhist mums and dads, who say to me, 'I protect them the best I can but I am filled with worry, which I know doesn't do any good. I know I should let go but I can't.'

As adults we can be obsessed with our bodies. There is no doubt about it, our bodies are getting older and it is sensible to pay them due respect – to eat well, to sleep regularly and so on. But a few little things start going wrong, we get a little lump, and think, 'Oh my goodness, I've got cancer!' We rush off to the doctor's, but there's nothing wrong. We come home, but we keep worrying about our bodies, and then feel ashamed about it. But what is it that makes the difference? What is it that enables letting go? Just saying we *should* let go doesn't make it happen.

In my early years as a monk, I remember that Ajahn Chah would teach about letting go all the time. Some of his senior disciples used to copy him and whatever question you asked

they would say, 'Well, just let go. Let go. Just *do* it!' – as if you could just let go as an act of will. As if we were purposefully hanging on to things.

It's important to notice that idealising about how we should be is not necessarily helpful. We know how we should be, so that's good enough. We can leave that aside and get on with looking a little deeper, feeling how I can bring this about, and asking, 'Why am I hanging on? What is the experience of clinging anyway?' This is the encouragement of right mindfulness. Mindfulness is not about speculating about how we should or shouldn't be, but about cultivating a quality of attention that is in the moment, investigating the reality of our experience. One of the reasons we are clinging is because we don't see that the clinging is making us suffer. The Buddha said there are two reasons why you stay stuck in this miserable affair of *samsara*: not seeing suffering, and not seeing the causes of suffering. For those two reasons alone, not for eighty-four thousand mysterious reasons. It's not very complicated.

Taking Responsibility for our Suffering

A lot of the time we try to avoid suffering, and pretend we're not suffering when we are. On various levels, in subtle and gross ways, we are carrying different forms of suffering such as fear, anxiety, worry, doubt, regret and remorse. Even if we acknowledge that we are suffering, it is not so easy and straightforward to see what the cause is. Some of our habits are very deeply embedded. The habit of dwelling on resentment is an example. If we haven't truly enquired into this domain of our life we can readily react to the feeling of unhappiness as if it were somebody else's fault. Even though we know we have this tendency, it's still very easy to fall into this particular pattern of reaction.

One of the reasons it's easy to dwell in resentment is because it's so difficult to admit that we are doing it. So we keep on with this habit of thinking it's somebody else's fault. We think, 'It's got to be something out there that's causing this misery because it's so painful, and because I'm not such a bad person. Only a bad person would make me suffer like this. It can't be me.' Well, bad news, I'm afraid. You don't have to be a bad person to make yourself suffer. All you have to do is be a little unaware.

So one of the reasons why we find it difficult to let go – why letting go doesn't happen – is this unfortunate habit of unawareness or ignorance. When we feel resentful towards other people we don't see that we're doing this form of clinging. We don't see that it's something we're actively performing. We live our lives thinking that somebody else is doing it to us. In truth we are the authors of our experience.

Added to this is the accumulated momentum of our habits. If we have been hanging on to something for a long time, avoiding letting go by indulging in some particular habit, a momentum will have built up in this holding on. When we begin to counter our habits of denial or avoidance by taking up meditation, it is this very momentum of our habits that we experience as suffering. Even if we see through it and know, 'Oh, yes that's what I do!', the force of that habitual pattern, built up over a period of time, means that our insight into the reality of what is going on may not immediately seem to help change the situation. Indeed, it is at this point that some people turn away from the path. This contemplation is an encouragement, therefore, to resist the inclination to believe in the disappointment that inevitably comes with finding that there is nobody else to do our house cleaning. We should instead take heart from the example of those who have done their work and are enjoying the

benefits. The inspiration of the Buddha's teachings and the wisdom of those who have practised them, can help to encounter this disappointment. The strength that comes from such inspiration gives us the courage to take a fresh and creative approach to the forces of unawareness that we feel are driving us in familiar patterns of behaviour that we would like to stop but do not seem to know how to.

When we do eventually get around to opening up to ourselves, it's like opening a door to a room we haven't been in for a very long time. And it can smell really bad – I mean *really* bad. We just don't want to go in there. But, you know, it's a room in our house and it's only a matter of time before some guest comes along and decides to take a look. Then we will have a problem. The reality is that we already have a problem – we are just not aware of it. Although it smells bad, we've got to trust that the only reason it does so is because it has not been aired out for a long time.

When we first open up the doors and windows and see the filth and the mess, it looks like a huge task that we've got ahead of us. It can feel like it's just too much. The reason it feels that way is that we've put so much energy into avoiding something for a long time. So we have to be very careful not to assume that the way it looks is how it really is. It can be daunting when we start to open up some of these rooms and get to discover dimensions of ourselves that we were not expecting to find.

As meditation deepens, we start to see aspects of ourselves that we never even suspected were there. Or sometimes just with getting a little older or being under some kind of pressure, external pressures or pressures of health, we get in touch with things we vaguely sensed were there, but never really saw the extent of. We think, 'My goodness! How am I going to deal with this?' Again, we need to consider that the

reason it seems so much is that we've put so much energy into avoiding it.

Under such circumstances it is necessary to be very patient because sometimes we have to endure a lot for a long time before some of this momentum can be worn out. The momentum of clinging has created the apparent reality of 'This is too much. I can't cope with this,' and 'I won't ever be able to let go of this.' Well, don't be too sure. Letting go will happen. Try to consider that letting go is something that happens; it is not something that we do.

What is called for in practice is a willingness to bear with things, to be honest with ourselves, and to wait until these things start to fall away of their own accord. We don't have to get rid of these things. These things will fall away when we see the reality; when we see that we're doing the suffering. When we see that we're the ones that are actually creating this pain then automatically we will stop *doing* it. But before we get to that point of seeing it we sometimes have to bear with suffering for quite a long while and wear out – literally wear out or burn out – the momentum of avoidance or denial, or the habit of indulgence. Whatever the accumulated momentum is, we have got to endure it until one day, much to our surprise, we're still doing the same old practice that we've been doing for goodness knows how long, but when up comes the trigger we see it differently. When some sort of temptation to get angry, greedy or afraid arises, suddenly we see it in a way whereby it doesn't get us. We aren't fooled by it. It's as though we have acquired a new ability. It is not that we've done anything different to make it appear differently. It is simply that the *kammic* momentum has worn out. Though it might seem like a large heap of firewood will burn on and on, there will come a point when there is no more fuel and the fire will go out.

Until we've been through such an experience, we are not familiar with the dynamics of this process as it is happening within us. As a result we can be deceived by the apparent enormity of the 'problem'. This is, where good friends who have walked the path a little longer or a little further, can wisely and sensibly point out, 'Just wait a while before you decide you're doing the wrong thing. Stay with it for a while and perhaps it will change.' Of course, it does change in time.

Fixed Identity

Another reason that letting go doesn't happen is that sometimes our habits of clinging to various experiences – impressions, ideas or feelings – become the structures of our own sense of who we are – often quite irrationally so. Our identity is based on habits, and if these habits are of denial or avoidance our personalities become irrational on some level. Although we're doing something that may be self-destructive and better let go of, some old resentment or some old fear might prevent us from looking at it fairly and squarely. Even though facing it may be the right thing to do we don't feel able to let go of our habit of clinging because it's become part of who and what we feel ourselves to be.

The rational mind, though it may recognise and be able to describe the nature of our complex, cannot change the habit patterns by itself. To do this requires a much more focused application of effort in terms of both the practices of meditation and morality. Meditation is the means by which we undo habitual patterns but it cannot be effective without a foundation of morality.

If we go into these practices with some determination and contemplate what we're stuck on – how it would be wise, useful and skilful to be able to let go of this clinging business – what can come up, despite our right contemplation, is a

tremendous sense of fear. This often happens for people on meditation retreats. We've just had a group of people staying with us for the last week on formal retreat. Strict silence was maintained and everybody was very committed to the practice and saw genuine benefit from it. It wasn't just a nice holiday. It was good hard work, and for some people that good hard work meant encountering the fear that comes up with the sense of loss of identity.

Falling Away of the False

As we intensify attention and turn the light of awareness inwards, the practice will dissolve that which is false. That's how it works. When the sun shines and the rain falls there are seeds in the ground that will grow. Some of them are beautiful and some of them are weeds. It is in their nature to grow given the appropriate conditions. I remember in Thailand during the dry season the fields would be parched, with no visible plant or animal life. It all looked so dead – the earth cracked and hard. And then the rains would come and the land start to turn green. The next thing you knew there were so many plants and little creatures – even fish swimming in the puddles of water left by the rain. How did these fish get there – without a river in sight that could have flooded? When the sun comes after the rains have fallen, the causes are there and life expresses itself. That is its nature. That's just how it is. Whether we like it or not that's how it is.

So it is with the practice. If we exercise restraint and practise mindfulness and concentration, the false things that we've been hanging onto will start to dissolve and begin to fall away. But we might start to feel afraid as we become conscious of a sense of insecurity and a certain loss of safety. A loss of predictability comes into our life together with a sense of not really knowing who we are any more. When

encountering such fear, if we're not properly prepared or supported we can misinterpret it and think, 'Oh, I must be doing something wrong.' I don't know about you but I still find it very difficult when I encounter fear not to assume that something is going wrong. Somebody is doing something wrong and usually it must be me. There's nothing around me that is making me afraid, so it must be something I have done or am doing wrong.

That is not necessarily the case and it's wise to prepare ourselves in advance to withhold our judgement and our evaluation of the situation. If we bear with the fear and wait, we may come to see that this fear is what in the Buddhist terminology is called 'One of the defences of Mara.' The closer we get to Mara the more annoyed Mara gets. Mara gets really annoyed when we start practising with sincerity. Apparently, what happens is the more dedicated and committed a meditator gets in seeing through their delusion, the hotter Mara's seat gets. Because he is really miffed about our success in seeing through our apparent limitations, he will send down his hordes to annoy, distract and tempt us.

At the back of the Dhamma hall here at Aruna Ratanagiri, there is a mural by Pang Chinasai depicting Mara's attack on the Buddha. Because the Buddha was wholeheartedly committed to his practice and dedicated to realisation, purification and generating benefit for all sentient beings, he was able to stay true to his determination. Nothing upsets Mara more. If you look on the right-hand side of the painting you see the arrows that Mara's hordes are firing as they ride towards him on strange, hideous beasts. As the arrows get close to the Buddha they are transformed into flowers which fall to the ground. And when the armies pass the Buddha they are lost under the sea, and as they fall they hold up flowers asking for forgiveness.

When we remain resolved to see through the appearance of these forces that unsettle or frighten us, we come to see that what we thought was threatening us is in reality something that can help us. All the forces within us, whether anger, greed, lust – even hatred – should be regarded appreciatively as the raw energy which, once understood, fuels our effort towards awakening. The arrows turning into flowers can be considered a metaphor for what happens in our minds as we strengthen our resolve and determination to see beyond our habits, to let go of that which is false; to let go of our addictions, the false energy we're feeding on and the false identity that we're holding onto. We trust in reality and allow ourselves to receive these energies inside us mindfully and sensitively, without acting upon them, and instead allow natural compassion, clarity and wisdom to grow, without our attachment and manipulations.

The more determined we are to follow our heart's longing to realise truth, the more likely it is that we are going to encounter fear. Fear of loss; fear of losing our friends; fear of losing our sanity – these are common experiences. The fear of losing our friends is quite natural. Sometimes you do lose your friends when you practise. You become less interesting! You don't go out drinking anymore. You don't spend so much money on clothes and getting your hair done. These things are superficial; there's nothing immoral about them, but they are not exactly the most important things in life. You're just disinclined to invest in these kinds of concerns and so some friends fall away.

When you first join a monastery, like the *anagarikas* living here, you might still have lots of friends outside. But once you shave your head and your eyebrows and start getting around in robes, a lot of your friends, nice as they might be, tend not to get in touch anymore. You can start feeling, 'I'm

going to lose all my friends.' This can bring up the fear of abandonment, of being left alone. If you become a novice or a monk and you devote yourself to this training, during which you are not making any money for yourself, the fear can come up of growing old without friends, financial security, without career or home. Most of us have these sorts of fears lurking just below the threshold of our awareness, but in lay life we might avoid coming to an understanding of these fears by reacting to them and investing our energy in 'protecting' ourselves with money, friends, status and so on. As strange as it may sound, the energy that is contained in fear is potentially of great value to our well-being.

The Fear of Losing our Sanity.

When you get serious enough about practice and remain focused and energetic in your efforts, some of the old mainstays of your sense of identity are likely to dissolve. You can start to have unfamiliar ideas about yourself and about life, even crazy thoughts. The thought may arise, 'Maybe I'm going mad!' If we have never enquired into that thought before, as most of us haven't, it can trigger off a strong fear. One reason for the fear of going mad is holding on to the self-view that we're not mad; grasping at the idea that we're sane. The truth is we don't really know who or what we are, we just hold on to the ideas of who and what we are. As we practise more and begin to resume our true identity, these ideas become irrelevant and start to fall away.

Most of us avoid the fear of going crazy or being mentally ill because it's so unsettling. When you see people who are clearly suffering from some psychological disorder, it can be so disturbing that we choose to avoid it. As a result we're not familiar with that fear in ourselves. Then when the fear comes up, 'Maybe I am going to go crazy,' it can appear

genuinely threatening. We may ordinarily like to think of ourselves as a fairly decent and normal sort of person, but when you go on retreat you may start thinking instead, 'Oh, my goodness. I'm not any of these things. In fact I am not sure I will leave this place sane.'

Wanting to know who we are is a very old habit. It has been there ever since as a child we developed a self-image and fell for the mistaken impression that this image was substantial and dependable. Well, if we don't want to look at these assumptions about ourselves, that's where our practice stops. We don't get past that point. However, if we are committed to getting to the bottom of all this confusion and sorrow we don't have to believe that we're going crazy. We don't have to believe that we are actually under threat. We don't have to worry about losing all our friends. And we don't have to dismiss the possibility of these things being true either.

The way things appear to be is just the way they appear. With mindfulness we can allow them to be, including the feeling of loneliness when it comes up. The way loneliness appears to be is that 'I'm always going to feel like this. I'm going to feel lonely, unloved and unwanted for the rest of my life. If I stay as a monk and put up with this miserable feeling of loneliness maybe I will be reborn in my next life and become another miserable lonely monk. Then perhaps for another life and another life. Perhaps for all eternity.'

When we get lost in a state of fear, it feels like an eternity. That's why people talk of hell being eternal. Of course, no conditioned phenomena can be eternal. If there is a hell – and probably there is – it's not a permanent condition. But when we get stuck, get locked into fear, it feels like, 'I'm going to be lonely forever' or 'I'm going to be full of resentment forever.' We can't let go of these things if we're committed

to our habit of holding. However, if we do, little by little, gradually prepare ourselves, and practise regularly in a sensitive, mindful way then the strength of mindfulness can sustain us in a hellish situation.

These apparent realities, such as fear and loneliness, can be received into our awareness, but we have to be willing to allow them. The Buddha's teaching of how to come to the end of suffering requires us to have this willingness. When we allow these experiences to happen without turning away from them, it doesn't make them feel anything other than what they are. Fear is still fear, loneliness is still loneliness, and disappointment always feels disappointing. It is the way we relate to these experiences that changes.

So, to answer the question, 'How do I let go?': It is certainly not a matter of 'I *should* let go', of trying to *make* ourselves let go. Instead we turn our attention inwards towards our feelings and thoughts, and intelligently, carefully, consider, 'What is the experience of holding on? Do I really *want* to hold on?' Part of us wants to hold on and part of us doesn't. If we can become aware of both aspects and consider them patiently in a feeling manner, it is my experience that this brings about letting go. 'I' didn't do it, but it happened. To not investigate this dynamic leaves us vulnerable to heedlessly taking sides, struggling with thoughts about 'Do I or do I not really want to let go,' desperately trying to make the right choice.

Also, consider, 'What am I getting out of holding on to this? Am I getting anything at all useful out of it?' Some of the reasons we are holding on to things are thoroughly unexpected, worn-out ideas. We hold on to things that are not relevant anymore. So instead of idealising and saying, 'Well, I *should* let go,' I would encourage us all to consider the experience of holding on and not being able to let go; to

feel it directly without any resentment or idealising. Just to receive the consequences of what we are doing and allow natural wisdom to teach us. When we look at it long enough, little by little, a new momentum begins to emerge – the momentum of letting go.

As our faith in this approach to the path of practice strengthens, faith becomes a condition for further letting go. As faith and mindfulness work together we know for ourselves that we are safe to trust this path.

So thank you very much for your attention.

Contemplating Happiness

Happiness arises from the timely company of friends.
Happiness arises from having few needs.
Happiness arises from having accumulated virtue at life's end.
Happiness arises from seeing beyond suffering.

Dhammapada verse 331

In the practice of the Buddha's teaching we regularly hear about going for Refuge. When we first encountered Buddhism some of us might have had the impression that going for Refuge was an interesting traditional way of talking about believing in a teacher. Perhaps it was part of the way one became a member of the religion – you went through a ritual called 'going for Refuge'.

I know in my own case that it was not something I considered important when I first discovered the Buddha's teaching. I wanted to align myself with a way of understanding the world that emphasised meditation. The practice of going for refuge and precepts seemed rather secondary. It took a good number of years before I began consciously to sense how profoundly important it is to have a refuge; to have a sense of something that one is committed to, something beyond getting what one wants.

Of course, we are all committed to getting what we want to some degree, and there is a certain type of pleasure – a feeling of gratification – to be derived from it. If I get what

I want, I generally feel more comfortable than if I don't get what I want. In our effort to cultivate awareness, however, our perception of this usual state of affairs changes. We begin to understand that the pleasure of getting what we want has a hook on it; it gradually becomes apparent that there is more going on in the process of wanting and getting than we ordinarily suppose.

Assuming that you have to get what you want in order to be happy is very limiting. If I'm addicted to getting what I want, I can't help feeling an embarrassing sense of dependency. The second line of verse 331 in the Dhammapada reads 'Happiness arises from having few needs.' That is a message one rarely hears – that there is a pleasure that comes from not needing more than we already have. Usually we associate pleasure with getting what we think we need or what we want, yet the Buddha wisely pointed out that the very condition of clinging to wants and needs is what stands in the way of a deeper happiness and contentment.

This verse from the Dhammapada is about the nature of real pleasure. In each line there is a reference to the Pali word *sukha* which means 'happiness' or 'pleasure'. This verse provides a pertinent contemplation for us to consider the way we seek happiness. We are all interested in happiness – we all value well-being – but if we don't stop and consider carefully then we can easily settle for a happiness that falls far short of what wise beings have realised is possible.

The Buddha would sometimes use this word sukha when talking about *nibbana*, for example, '*nibbanam paramam sukham*'. This is a line in a stanza that we recite regularly, and it means 'nibbana is ultimate happiness'. People sometimes question this and say, 'How can you use the word 'happiness' when you talk about nibbana? Nibbana is supposed to be about freedom from desire, and happiness is tied up with

desire isn't it?' Even a fully enlightened Buddha cannot say *what* nibbana is. It is not possible to say what this state of enlightenment, liberation, or total inner freedom that Buddhas have reached is like, because all words and concepts about the experience are merely pointers to something inconceivable and inexpressible. However, when asked what nibbana was like, one of the ways the Buddha described it was as ultimate happiness. What we want more than anything else is to experience this happiness.

Valuing Friendship

A fully enlightened human being will tell you that it is not true that happiness only arises when we get what we want. When happiness arises, in whatever manner, we are encouraged to look at what it is that we are experiencing and calling 'happiness', and how we relate to it. An example is the happiness of the first line of that stanza – 'Happiness arises from the timely company of friends.'

Over the last few weeks I have often reflected how fortunate our community here is to have so many good friends, and how beneficial, how truly wonderful it is to have such friends. This year we decided to have a party. On the afternoon of Christmas Eve there was a children's party, and in the evening we had our own little party. We all sat round the fire and, miraculously enough, good friends of the monastery turned up with bottles of punch – non-alcoholic of course! So we spent the whole evening together – just being together as a community. We weren't delving deep into the great mysteries of life, but were simply enjoying each others' company. There is a pleasure in being with people you feel you can trust and a pleasure in being remembered by people that you have shared something with.

Unfortunately, we can sometimes take each other for

granted. Even though we care for and value each other, we perhaps don't express it – we never mention it to each other. Perhaps some of us have suffered the consequences of this in relationships in which there hasn't been enough expression of appreciation of friendship. There is a skill in expressing appreciation that we have to work to develop. The Buddha himself recognised the danger of not valuing friendship, and spoke a lot about the qualities and the value of friendship, the great blessing that is true spiritual companionship. When we find it, we experience happiness, and there is an encouragement to allow oneself to be fully conscious of our appreciation; to feel nourished by good company. In the recent issue of our monastery newsletter I let it be known how much we appreciate all the Christmas Cards that we get here. I know that if people stopped coming here on Sunday evenings or on New Year's Eve and there was just the nine of us, life wouldn't be the same! Having friends come and join us in a shared reaffirmation of things that we respect and value is something we treasure.

Seeing Deeper

The second line of the verse says, 'Happiness arises from having few needs.' It might be difficult to hear what is being said here if we don't engage ourselves in a meditation practice; if we haven't recognised for ourselves the possibility of inner quietness – a place where we are not wanting anything in particular. Meditation provides the means to observe that if there are ripples of wanting passing through the mind we can see them just as they are – as ripples, movement. There's much more to us than what the active mind leads us to believe. Sometimes we seem to be filled with a continuous stream of desire in our minds and our hearts. Such activity is quite exhausting. If we don't choose to draw our attention

inwards and enquire into the nature of this active mind with its ideas and wantings then the way it appears to be is who and what we feel ourselves to be. We believe, even feel convinced, that the only way that we can be happy is by getting what we want.

Some time ago I was told a story about a meditation student who lived in London and had a busy working life. Unlike many who live in London, she had consciously decided to walk to work every day. Over a period of time she began to realise that she had developed a problem. As she walked to work she would pass a particular French patisserie, and was unable to walk past without buying not just one but several pastries. The process of buying and eating these pastries stemmed from some inner compulsion rather than from any natural desire to satisfy hunger. Over a period of time she became aware what was going on and yet, although she recognised it, she could not stop buying the pastries! This was a humiliating experience for her, because in many areas of practice she was quite able. But when she came to walking past this pastry shop it all fell apart. One day, after acutely feeling the absurdity and oppressiveness of the situation, she simply decided to walk to work by another route. She made a resolution, a strong determination, that she would not walk past the pastry shop. She made a gesture of renunciation.

The student, feeling quite pleased about herself, reported all this to her teacher, but the teacher said, "I'm afraid you've misunderstood the teaching – that isn't the spirit of the practice at all. The choice you have made to walk another way is a strategy to avoid what is really going on. What you need to do is walk to work as normal but prepare yourself beforehand, both in the evening and the morning before you begin your walk. As you take your walk follow the process step-by-step and watch what is going on in your body and mind."

It is understood in our practice that disturbances of mind come to us with differing degrees of intensity and that we need to respond appropriately in each case. This particular phenomenon was of the sort where what was called for was the need to prepare oneself beforehand. What is necessary in such a situation is to slow down and to see what is happening as it's happening and just see it, just know it, not being fooled by the way things appear to be, believing one won't be happy until one gets the pastry.

This student was fooled regularly by the thought, 'I will not be happy until I get a pastry.' So, following her teacher's advice she prepared herself beforehand. The next morning she walked to work as normal, taking the route past the patisserie. She approached the shop remaining fully aware of her feelings and thoughts. Soon she was outside, standing there, fully conscious and knowing, 'I want to go in and get a pastry.' It was quite clear she wasn't kidding herself – she wasn't trying to convince herself that this was the case, she simply recognised with an interested awareness that she wanted to go in and buy a pastry. As she stood there it started to get a little easier to feel the wanting, until she was just observing and knowing the raw energy of wanting. Soon enough the wanting disappeared and she experienced a momentary ending of suffering.

Because of her patience and right effort this student had an insight into the truth that this second line of the verse points to. Getting more, in her case, was diminishing the quality of her life, although those pastries looked as though they would add quality to her life! We often believe that we need such things when we're fooled by the way desire appears. Desire has that apparent nature to it. There is nothing wrong with this appearance as long as we recognise it.

When desire arises there can appear to be some need. In

relationships, for example, the feeling can arise that there is something we really need to tell the other person. It is not uncommon for someone to come to see me to say, 'I really need to tell you something.' They get it off their chest and feel better afterwards. I try to encourage people to slow down; I ask them if they could try substituting 'I really *want* to tell you something.' Then we can come to an agreement that if they want to tell me something and I'm ready to hear it, we can enter into a discussion. We have these ideas of what we need in all areas of our life. There is an encouragement in our practice to investigate the relationship we have with what we feel are our needs.

So what this teaching points out is that, often enough, when we have less we actually have more. This is not to judge apparent needs or desires when they arise, but to generate an interest in looking deeper at how we are as we are. For example, over the last ten years, on two or three occasions, the feeling has arisen in me, 'I need to get out of here!' Thankfully, I have had whatever it takes to not follow such impulses. In fact I'm very grateful that I didn't follow them because behind the apparent need there is generally something else. We cultivate in ourselves an interest in what is taking place when we have strongly felt needs arising, in order to see beyond the way things appear. This is because there is something to be seen beyond the way things appear to be: reality or Dhamma. The way things appear to be is 'the world'. The way things actually are is Dhamma. To see beyond the way things appear to be is a source of great happiness and pleasure.

Practice as Preparation

The third line of this verse says, 'Happiness arises from having accumulated virtue at life's end.' That is something that

would not necessarily have occurred to me if I hadn't read those words. It isn't a thought I would generally dwell on. But this is something the Buddha spoke about often – not to waste our time, not to be heedless. We don't know when we're going to die – it could be soon. He encouraged us to prepare ourselves. A lot of what we are doing as spiritual practitioners is, in fact, preparation. Ajahn Chah said that true practice is not sitting on a cushion – that is preparation. The true practice happens when the passions impact on the heart. If we can be there in the moment of contact and stay there in the middle and not wobble, that is when we are practising. But if we don't prepare ourselves… Well, I'm sure you all know from your own experiences what happens.

Even if we prepare ourselves it is not easy, when the passions flare up, to stay there in the midst of the fire. It is much easier to go with them, to get carried away by them and act them out physically. The other common response is to go up into the head and rationalise or fantasise our way through their manifestation – perhaps in scenarios of heavenly sensuality, or in theatres of horrendous violence: our fantasies can take us to the most extraordinary limits. If we get carried away by the passions, we act on them and do things without due care, driven by wild energy. So our task is to be able to stay there in the centre, when the energy is raging, without repressing, without pushing down so we get a stomach disorder or a heart attack. We neither indulge in fantasies, nor act out passion, but follow a middle way of being sensitive, yet still and centred, when the passions are in full flight – this is the means by which we can gradually undo our habitual patterns of avoidance.

How is formal sitting preparation? When we sit on our cushion we are encouraged to be still and not to move, even if we want to. As we sit we just observe whatever is happen-

ing in body and mind without trying to achieve anything special. We experience thoughts and fantasies and different sorts of feelings and sensations. We allow things to be as they are. The more we try to forcibly stop our imagination and internal dialogue, the more vigorous our mental activity becomes. One skilful way of working is to try seeing ourselves as being a host to visiting guests – we treat them with kindness and courtesy and give them space to be themselves. It is not our duty to get unnecessarily involved with them. Sometimes our preoccupation with the momentum of our worldly activities means that we do not attain any real peace. I have recently spent whole meditation sessions designing the interior of our new retreat house! It does not necessarily matter that we do not attain deep tranquillity. It is more important to know that there is no obligation to be carried away by our thoughts and reactions. The discipline of meditation is a way of practising to be with reality as it is. This is what we are preparing for – how to be with what is, fully present in body and mind, so that we can learn from what is, instead of being caught up in 'what if' or 'if only'.

The 'what if' disorder is endemic: 'What if that didn't happen?' 'What if this happened?' The 'if only' disease is also a very painful and sad condition which we all suffer from to varying degrees. Instead of suffering the agony of being caught up in the 'if only' disease we could be experiencing the pleasure of learning from what already is – the way things naturally are. This takes training, however, and one of the ways the Buddha encouraged us to become more focused in our efforts is to think about our death and what's it going to be like.

I have a very good friend who lives in a rest home in Newcastle. She was independent until the age of ninety-seven, but in the past three years has retired to a home where she

receives nursing care. She was telling me recently, "I really feel for the other people in this home. Most of them haven't prepared themselves for being here." She sits in a room, pretty much all day long, peacefully preparing for dying. Every time I go to see her she says, "I was preparing to die last night." She describes how on occasions she has woken around three in the morning filled with a sense of awe associated with a perception of vast, free, edgeless awareness. On starting to open her eyes, or on moving physically, she observed a collapsing or a limiting of this awareness. From this experience, she says, she has developed a practice of learning how to inhibit this movement of contraction and to dissolve back into edgelessness, which is how she imagines dying will be. We have often talked about it in a calm and clear manner. She manifests a genuine inner contentment. I could see that she felt real pity for the people who distract themselves watching television all day long. She tends not to get involved in the various activities that are arranged for people living in the home. She feels that death is too important for her to be distracting herself with such things. So most of the time she happily stays in her room. She reads the Dhammapada and one or two other Buddhist books. She meditates and contemplates dying. I find this a great inspiration. When I read 'Happiness arises from having accumulated virtue by life's end,' I sometimes think what the alternative is – the terrible sadness that arises when you realise your lot. The image the Buddha gave for somebody who hasn't spent their life developing virtue is a scraggy old heron standing lonely at the edge of a dried up lake without any fish in it. At the end of their life they haven't accumulated any virtue; all that remains is an inner sense of poverty. Contrast that with the possibility of the real pleasure that can be there if we come to the end our life knowing we've

applied ourselves to what really matters and is genuinely worthwhile.

Real Refuge

This brings us to the last line of this stanza: 'Happiness arises from seeing beyond suffering.' To be able to see through suffering is to have a refuge. To have such a refuge is like having a compass. If you are ever out on the ocean or in the wilderness and you have a compass, you can find your bearings. In that sense a compass is very valuable. That's what I understand by refuge. It means skilfully enquiring into life and finding out what is really worthy. In the Pali language the word for an enlightened being is *arahant*, which literally means one who is worthy. Such a person is worthy because they have understood what is truly worthwhile from the perspective of reality. In the practice of the Buddha-Dhamma one is gradually finding out what is really valuable in life, and thus one gains a true orientation. This orientation is synonymous with taking refuge in the Buddha.

And remember what 'Buddha' means. There is the historical Buddha, of course, the human being who lived in India two and a half thousand years ago. For his humanity, teaching and example we are humbly grateful. But it wasn't his person that he left behind. The reality of the Buddha here and now in which we can go for refuge is a quality of mind that has the integrity and wisdom to see through the appearance of suffering, not by ignoring it, but by looking ever more fully and bravely at the reality of it. The Buddha said, 'If you want to see the Buddha, see the Dhamma.' See the reality, see actuality. To come to see reality clearly, just as it is, is to realise that it is the most valuable refuge that we could have.

To take Refuge in the Buddha is to cultivate the potential

that we all have for living out of an awareness that isn't limited by our reactions to our experience. The historical Buddha was certainly a human being. He sat and he ate; he walked and he bathed himself just as a normal person does. He suffered the experience of ageing and would sit in the morning sun to find relief from pains in his back. What was different about him was that his awareness wasn't limited. We, on the other hand, experience limitations of awareness all the time. A clear example of this is when we come up against the reaction of, 'I can't take it any more.' Now, whenever we experience this reaction, if we have developed awareness, there is a part of us that knows that this feeling of being limited is not the ultimate truth. We have all at times endured past the experience of 'I can't take it any more' and found that we can take it. Perhaps we have been on retreat and begun to experience an excruciating pain; or perhaps some fear or other emotion arose, and we felt unable to bear it. Instead of simply giving up, inspired by faith we have been able to breathe through these experiences, remaining focused on their reality, and what we have discovered is that the pain dissolves or we experience a release from the overwhelming emotion. We realise that the apparent reality of 'I can't take it any more' was just that – an appearance, an apparition; it was the apparent reality. If we had been completely fooled by the world, or by the way things appear to be, we would have grasped at that apparent reality, believing it to be the real state of things. Then we would have fixed that imposed limitation on awareness and defined ourselves as just that, thereby suffering the consequences of feeling inherently limited.

There are many other examples in our lives where we feel, 'I must have…' or 'I cannot put up with that.' The promise, the hope and the inspiration that is offered us in

the example of the Buddha and all his enlightened disciples is the message that undefiled awareness is not limited. It is inherently limitless. *Appamano Buddho, appamano Dhammo, appamano Sangha* – 'Limitless is the Buddha, limitless is the Truth, limitless is the Sangha.'

Consider for yourself the possibility through your own investigation that, when you feel limited, that is how it appears to be. Just consider that – don't simply believe it – then witness the experience of the heart and mind expanding, and the resulting potential for living increase, with more room, more possibility. If you learn something from that, consider what happens if you keep going until there aren't any limitations any more, as you have let go completely. To quote Ajahn Chah again, 'If you let go a little you have a little peace, if you let go a lot you have a lot of peace, if you let go completely you have complete peace.'

We take these three jewels as our refuge: the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. We consciously contemplate our true refuge and hold it up as of supreme value. Suffering is inevitable when we impose limitations on our hearts and minds. The Buddha was free from suffering because he had freed himself from all such habits. For us there is suffering – appropriately, accordingly. For us there is freedom only in small moments.

When we learn to experience suffering so that we don't believe in the way it appears to be, and we endure in the way that we need to endure – with here-and-now judgement-free awareness – sooner or later we will experience a letting-go, bringing relief and joy. This is the happiness that comes from seeing through suffering and this is the happiness that strengthens our faith. Faith that is discovered like this doesn't get us into arguments or lead to contention. This is a personally verified form of faith and is what can give us

bearings in life. Even though at times we might find ourselves without light or any outer signs that we are heading in the right direction, we can feel secure in an inner sense of trusting that comes from our heart's orientation towards truth.

Thank you very much for your attention.