

# CLARITY OF INSIGHT



*by Venerable Ajahn Chah*

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“It is the spirit of *dāna*, freely offered generosity, which has kept the entire Buddhist tradition alive for more than 2,500 years.”

*Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti*  
‘The gift of Dhamma excels all gifts’

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# About Ajahn Chah

VENERABLE AJAHN CHAH (Phra Bodhiñāṇa Thera) was born into a typical farming family in a rural village in the province of Ubon Rachathani, N.E. Thailand, on June 17, 1918. He lived the first part of his life as any other youngster in rural Thailand, and, following the custom, took ordination as a novice in the local village monastery for three years. There, he learned to read and write, in addition to studying some basic Buddhist teachings. After a number of years he returned to the lay life to help his parents, but, feeling an attraction to the monastic life, at the age of twenty (on April 26, 1939) he again entered a monastery, this time for higher ordination as a bhikkhu, or Buddhist monk.

He spent the first few years of his bhikkhu life studying some basic Dhamma, discipline, Pāli language and scriptures, but the death of his father awakened him to the transience of life. It caused him to think deeply about life's real purpose, for although he had studied extensively and gained some proficiency in Pāli, he seemed no nearer to a personal understanding of the end of suffering. Feelings of disenchantment set in, and a desire to find the real essence of the Buddha's teaching arose. Finally (in 1946) he abandoned his studies and set off on mendicant pilgrimage. He walked some 400 km to Central Thailand, sleeping in forests and gathering almsfood in the villages on the way. He took up residence in a monastery where the vinaya (monastic discipline) was carefully studied and practiced. While there he was told about Venerable Ajahn Mun Bhuridatto, a most highly respected Meditation Master. Keen to meet such an accomplished teacher, Ajahn Chah set off on foot for the Northeast in search of him. He began to travel to other monaster-

ies, studying the monastic discipline in detail and spending a short but enlightening period with Venerable Ajahn Mun, the most outstanding Thai forest meditation master of this century. At this time Ajahn Chah was wrestling with a crucial problem. He had studied the teachings on morality, meditation and wisdom, which the texts presented in minute and refined detail, but he could not see how they could actually be put into practice. Ajahn Mun told him that although the teachings are indeed extensive, at their heart they are very simple. With mindfulness established, if it is seen that everything arises in the heart-mind: right there is the true path of practice. This succinct and direct teaching was a revelation for Ajahn Chah, and transformed his approach to practice. The Way was clear.

For the next seven years Ajahn Chah practiced in the style of an ascetic monk in the austere Forest Tradition, spending his time in forests, caves and cremation grounds, ideal places for developing meditation practice. He wandered through the countryside in quest of quiet and secluded places for developing meditation. He lived in tiger and cobra infested jungles, using reflections on death to penetrate to the true meaning of life. On one occasion he practiced in a cremation ground, to challenge and eventually overcome his fear of death. Then, as he sat cold and drenched in a rainstorm, he faced the utter desolation and loneliness of a homeless monk.

After many years of travel and practice, he was invited to settle in a thick forest grove near the village of his birth. This grove was uninhabited, known as a place of cobras, tigers and ghosts, thus being as he said, the perfect location for a forest monk. Venerable Ajahn Chah's impeccable approach to meditation, or Dhamma practice, and his simple, direct style of teaching, with the emphasis on practical application and a balanced attitude, began to attract a large following of monks and lay people. Thus a large monastery formed around Ajahn Chah as more and more monks, nuns and lay-people came to hear his teachings and stay on to practice with him.

The training at Wat Nong Pah Pong at that time was quite harsh and forbidding. Ajahn Chah often pushed his monks to their limits, to test their powers of endurance so that they would develop patience and

resolution. He sometimes initiated long and seemingly pointless work projects, in order to frustrate their attachment to tranquility. The emphasis was always on surrender to the way things are, and great stress was placed upon strict observance of the Vinaya (discipline).

Ajahn Chah's simple yet profound style of teaching has a special appeal to Westerners, and many have come to study and practice with him, quite a few for many years. In 1966 the first westerner came to stay at Wat Nong Pah Pong, Venerable Sumedho Bhikkhu. The newly ordained Venerable Sumedho had just spent his first vassa ('rains' retreat) practicing intensive meditation at a monastery near the Laotian border. Although his efforts had borne some fruit, Venerable Sumedho realized that he needed a teacher who could train him in all aspects of monastic life. By chance, one of Ajahn Chah's monks, one who happened to speak a little English, visited the monastery where Venerable Sumedho was staying. Upon hearing about Ajahn Chah, Venerable Sumedho asked to take leave of his preceptor, and went back to Wat Nong Pah Pong with the monk. Ajahn Chah willingly accepted the new disciple, but insisted that he receive no special allowances for being a Westerner. He would have to eat the same simple almsfood and practice in the same way as any other monk at Wat Nong Pah Pong.

From that time on, the number of foreign people who came to Ajahn Chah began to steadily increase. By the time Venerable Sumedho was a monk of five vassas, and Ajahn Chah considered him competent enough to teach, some of these new monks had also decided to stay on and train there. In the hot season of 1975, Venerable Sumedho and a handful of Western bhikkhus spent some time living in a forest not far from Wat Nong Pah Pong. The local villagers there asked them to stay on, and Ajahn Chah consented. Thus Wat Pah Nanachat ('International Forest Monastery') came into being, and Venerable Sumedho became the abbot of the first monastery in Thailand to be run by and for English-speaking monks.

In 1977, Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho were invited to visit Britain by the English Sangha Trust, a charity with the aim of establishing a locally-resident Buddhist Sangha. Seeing the serious interest there, Ajahn Chah left Ajahn Sumedho (with two of his other Western

disciples who were then visiting Europe) in London at the Hampstead Vihara. He returned to Britain in 1979, at which time the monks were leaving London to begin Chithurst Buddhist Monastery in Sussex. He then went on to America and Canada to visit and teach.

In 1980 Venerable Ajahn Chah began to feel more acutely the symptoms of dizziness and memory lapse which had plagued him for some years. In 1980 and 1981, Ajahn Chah spent the rains retreat away from Wat Nong Pah Pong, since his health was failing due to the debilitating effects of diabetes. As his illness worsened, he would use his body as a teaching, a living example of the impermanence of all things. He constantly reminded people to endeavor to find a true refuge within themselves, since he would not be able to teach for very much longer. His worsening condition led to an operation in 1981, which, however, failed to reverse the onset of the paralysis which eventually rendered him completely bedridden and unable to speak. This did not stop the growth of monks and lay people who came to practise at his monastery, however, for whom the teachings of Ajahn Chah were a constant guide and inspiration.

After remaining bedridden and silent for an amazing ten years, carefully tended by his monks and novices, Venerable Ajahn Chah passed away on the 16th of January, 1992, at the age of 74, leaving behind a thriving community of monasteries and lay supporters in Thailand, England, Switzerland, Italy, France, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the U.S.A., where the practise of the Buddha's teachings continues under the inspiration of this great meditation teacher.

Although Ajahn Chah passed away in 1992, the training which he established is still carried on at Wat Nong Pah Pong and its branch monasteries, of which there are currently more than two hundred in Thailand. Discipline is strict, enabling one to lead a simple and pure life in a harmoniously regulated community where virtue, meditation and understanding may be skillfully and continuously cultivated. There is usually group meditation twice a day and sometimes a talk by the senior teacher, but the heart of the meditation is the way of life. The monastics do manual work, dye and sew their own robes, make most of their own requisites and keep the monastery buildings and grounds in immaculate

shape. They live extremely simply following the ascetic precepts of eating once a day from the almsbowl and limiting their possessions and robes. Scattered throughout the forest are individual huts where monks and nuns live and meditate in solitude, and where they practice walking meditation on cleared paths under the trees.

Wisdom is a way of living and being, and Ajahn Chah has endeavored to preserve the simple monastic life-style in order that people may study and practice the Dhamma in the present day. Ajahn Chah's wonderfully simple style of teaching can be deceptive. It is often only after we have heard something many times that suddenly our minds are ripe and somehow the teaching takes on a much deeper meaning. His skillful means in tailoring his explanations of Dhamma to time and place, and to the understanding and sensitivity of his audience, was marvelous to see. Sometimes on paper though, it can make him seem inconsistent or even self-contradictory! At such times the reader should remember that these words are a record of a living experience. Similarly, if the teachings may seem to vary at times from tradition, it should be borne in mind that the Venerable Ajahn spoke always from the heart, from the depths of his own meditative experience.









# Clarity of Insight<sup>1</sup>

**M**EDITATE RECITING “*Buddho*”, “*Buddho*”<sup>2</sup> until it penetrates deep into the heart of your consciousness (*citta*). The word “*Buddho*” represents the awareness and wisdom of the Buddha. In practice, you must depend on this word more than anything else. The awareness it brings will lead you to understand the truth about your own mind. It’s a true refuge, which means that there is both mindfulness and insight present.

Wild animals can have awareness of a sort. They have mindfulness as they stalk their prey and prepare to attack. Even the predator needs firm mindfulness to keep hold of the captured prey however defiantly it struggles to escape death. That is one kind of mindfulness. For this reason you must be able to distinguish between different kinds of mindfulness. The Buddha taught to meditate reciting “*Buddho*” as a way to apply the mind. When you consciously apply the mind to an object, it wakes up. The awareness wakes it up. Once this knowing has arisen through meditation, you can see the mind clearly. As long as the mind remains without the awareness of “*Buddho*”, even if there is ordinary worldly mindfulness present, it is as if unawakened and without insight. It will not lead you to what is truly beneficial.

*Sati* or mindfulness depends on the presence of “*Buddho*” – the knowing. It must be a clear knowing, which leads to the mind becoming brighter and more radiant. The illuminating effect that this clear

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<sup>1</sup>A talk given to a group of lay meditators in Bangkok in April 1979

<sup>2</sup>*Buddho*: a *parikamma* (preparatory) meditation word for the recollection of the Buddha. Frequently used as an initial object for developing concentration.

knowing has on the mind is similar to the brightening of a light in a darkened room. As long as the room is pitch black, any objects placed inside remain difficult to distinguish or else completely obscured from view because of the lack of light. But as you begin intensifying the brightness of the light inside, it will penetrate throughout the whole room, enabling you to see more clearly from moment to moment, thus allowing you to know more and more the details of any object inside there.

You could also compare training the mind with teaching a child. It would be impossible to force a child, who still hadn't learnt to speak, to accumulate knowledge at an unnaturally fast rate that was beyond its capability. You couldn't get too tough with it or try teaching it more language than it could take in at any one time, because the child would simply be unable to hold its attention on what you were saying for long enough.

Your mind is similar. Sometimes it's appropriate to give yourself some praise and encouragement; sometimes it's more appropriate to be critical. It's like the child: if you scold it too often and are too intense in the way you deal with it, the child won't progress in the right way, even though it might be determined to do well. If you force it too much, the child will be adversely affected, because it still lacks knowledge and experience and as a result will naturally lose track of the right way to go. If you do that with your own mind, it isn't *sammā paṭipadā* or the way of practice that leads to enlightenment. *Paṭipadā* or practice refers to the training and guidance of body, speech and mind. Here I am specifically referring to the training of the mind.

The Buddha taught that training the mind involves knowing how to teach yourself and go against the grain of your desires. You have to use different skilful means to teach your mind because it constantly gets caught into moods of depression and elation. This is the nature of the unenlightened mind – it's just like a child. The parents of a child who hasn't learnt to speak are in a position to teach it because they know how to speak and their knowledge of the language is greater. The parents are constantly in a position to see where their child is lacking in its understanding, because they know more. Training the mind is like

this. When you have the awareness of “*Buddho*”, the mind is wiser and has a more refined level of knowing than normal. This awareness allows you to see the conditions of the mind and to see the mind itself; you can see the state of mind in the midst of all phenomena. This being so, you are naturally able to employ skilful techniques for training the mind. Whether you are caught into doubt or any other of the defilements, you see it as a mental phenomenon that arises in the mind and must be investigated and dealt with in the mind.

That awareness which we call “*Buddho*” is like the parents of the child. The parents are the child’s teachers in charge of its training, so it’s quite natural that whenever they allow it to wander freely, simultaneously they must keep one eye on it, aware of what it’s doing and where it’s running or crawling to.

Sometimes you can be too clever and have too many good ideas. In the case of teaching the child, you might think so much about what is best for the child, that you could reach the point where the more methods you think up for teaching it, the further away the child moves from the goals you want it to achieve. The more you try and teach it, the more distant it becomes, until it actually starts to go astray and fails to develop in the proper way.

In training the mind, it is crucial to overcome sceptical doubt. Doubt and uncertainty are powerful obstacles that must be dealt with. Investigation of the three fetters of personality view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), blind attachment to rules and practices (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*) and sceptical doubt (*vicikicchā*) is the way out of attachment practised by the Noble Ones (*ariya-puggala*). But at first you just understand these defilements from the books – you still lack insight into how things truly are. Investigating personality view is the way to go beyond the delusion that identifies the body as a self. This includes attachment to your own body as a self or attaching to other people’s bodies as solid selves. *Sakkāya-diṭṭhi* or personality view refers to this thing you call yourself. It means attachment to the view that the body is a self. You must investigate this view until you gain a new understanding and can see the truth that attachment to the body is defilement and it obstructs the minds of all human beings from gaining insight into the Dhamma.

For this reason, before anything else the preceptor will instruct each new candidate for bhikkhu ordination to investigate the five meditation objects: hair of the head (*kesā*), hair of the body (*lomā*), nails (*nakhā*), teeth (*dantā*) and skin (*taco*). It is through contemplation and investigation that you develop insight into personality view. These objects form the most immediate basis for the attachment that creates the delusion of personality view. Contemplating them leads to the direct examination of personality view and provides the means by which each generation of men and women who take up the instructions of the preceptor upon entering the community can actually transcend personality view. But in the beginning you remain deluded, without insight and hence are unable to penetrate personality view and see the truth of the way things are. You fail to see the truth because you still have a firm and unyielding attachment. It's this attachment that sustains the delusion.

The Buddha taught to transcend delusion. The way to transcend it is through clearly seeing the body for what it is. With penetrating insight you must see that the true nature of both your own body and other people's is essentially the same. There is no fundamental difference between people's bodies. The body is just the body; it's not a being, a self, yours or theirs. This clear insight into the true nature of the body is called *kāyānupassanā*. A body exists: you label it and give it a name. Then you attach and cling to it with the view that it is your body or his or her body. You attach to the view that the body is permanent and that it is something clean and pleasant. This attachment goes deep into the mind. This is the way that the mind clings to the body.

Personality view means that you are still caught into doubt and uncertainty about the body. Your insight hasn't fully penetrated the delusion that sees the body as a self. As long as the delusion remains, you call the body a self or *attā* and interpret your entire experience from the viewpoint that there is a solid, enduring entity which you call the self. You are so completely attached to the conventional way of viewing the body as a self, that there is no apparent way of seeing beyond it. But clear understanding according to the truth of the way things are means you see the body as just that much: the body is just the body. With insight, you see the body as just that much and this wisdom counteracts

the delusion of the sense of self. This insight that sees the body as just that much, leads to the destruction of attachment (*upādāna*) through the gradual uprooting and letting go of delusion.

Practise contemplating the body as being just that much, until it is quite natural to think to yourself: “Oh, the body is merely the body. It’s just that much.” Once this way of reflection is established, as soon as you say to yourself that it’s just that much, the mind lets go. There is letting go of attachment to the body. There is the insight that sees the body as merely the body. By sustaining this sense of detachment through continuous seeing of the body as merely the body, all doubt and uncertainty is gradually uprooted. As you investigate the body, the more clearly you see it as just the body rather than a person, a being, a me or a them, the more powerful the effect on the mind, resulting in the simultaneous removal of doubt and uncertainty. Blind attachment to rules and practices (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*), which manifests in the mind as blindly fumbling and feeling around through lack of clarity as to the real purpose of practice, is abandoned simultaneously because it arises in conjunction with personality view. You could say that the three fetters of doubt, blind attachment to rites and practices and personality view are inseparable and even similes for each other. Once you have seen this relationship clearly, when one of the three fetters, such as doubt for instance, arises and you are able to let it go through the cultivation of insight, the other two fetters are automatically abandoned at the same time. They are extinguished together. Simultaneously, you let go of personality view and the blind attachment that is the cause of fumbling and fuzziness of intention over different practices. You see them each as one part of your overall attachment to the sense of self, which is to be abandoned. You must repeatedly investigate the body and break it down into its component parts. As you see each part as it truly is, the perception of the body being a solid entity or self is gradually eroded away. You have to keep putting continuous effort into this investigation of the truth and can’t let up.

A further aspect of mental development that leads to clearer and deeper insight is meditating on an object to calm the mind down. The calm mind is the mind that is firm and stable in *samādhi* (concen-

tration). This can be *khaṇika samādhi* (momentary concentration), *upacāra samādhi* (neighbourhood concentration) or *appanā samādhi* (absorption). The level of concentration is determined by the refinement of consciousness from moment to moment as you train the mind to maintain awareness on a meditation object.

In *khaṇika samādhi* (momentary concentration) the mind unifies for just a short space of time. It calms down in *samādhi*, but having gathered together momentarily, immediately withdraws from that peaceful state. As concentration becomes more refined in the course of meditation, many similar characteristics of the tranquil mind are experienced at each level, so each one is described as a level of *samādhi*, whether it is *khaṇika*, *upacāra* or *appanā*. At each level the mind is calm, but the depth of the *samādhi* varies and the nature of the peaceful mental state experienced differs. On one level the mind is still subject to movement and can wander, but moves around within the confines of the concentrated state. It doesn't get caught into activity that leads to agitation and distraction. Your awareness might follow a wholesome mental object for a while, before returning to settle down at a point of stillness where it remains for a period.

You could compare the experience of *khaṇika samādhi* with a physical activity like taking a walk somewhere: you might walk for a period before stopping for a rest, and having rested start walking again until it's time to stop for another rest. Even though you interrupt the journey periodically to stop walking and take rests, each time remaining completely still, it is only ever a temporary stillness of the body. After a short space of time you have to start moving again to continue the journey. This is what happens within the mind as it experiences such a level of concentration.

If you practise meditation focusing on an object to calm the mind and reach a level of calm where the mind is firm in *samādhi*, but there is still some mental movement occurring, that is known as *upacāra samādhi*. In *upacāra samādhi* the mind can still move around. This movement takes place within certain limits, the mind doesn't move beyond them. The boundaries within which the mind can move are determined by the firmness and stability of concentration. The experience



is as if you alternate between a state of calm and a certain amount of mental activity. The mind is calm some of the time and active for the rest. Within that activity there is still a certain level of calm and concentration that persists, but the mind is not completely still or immovable. It is still thinking a little and wandering about. It's like you are wandering around inside your own home. You wander around within the limits of your concentration, without losing awareness and moving outdoors, away from the meditation object. The movement of the mind stays within the bounds of wholesome (*kusala*) mental states. It doesn't get caught into any mental proliferation based on unwholesome (*akusala*) mental states. Any thinking remains wholesome. Once the mind is calm, it necessarily experiences wholesome mental states from moment to moment. During the time it is concentrated the mind only experiences wholesome mental states and periodically settles down to become completely still and one-pointed on its object.

So the mind still experiences some movement, circling around its object. It can still wander. It might wander around within the confines set by the level of concentration, but no real harm arises from this movement because the mind is calm in *samādhi*. This is how the development of the mind proceeds in the course of practice.

In *appanā samādhi* the mind calms down and is stilled to a level where it is at its most subtle and skilful. Even if you experience sense impingement from the outside, such as sounds and physical sensations, it remains external and is unable to disturb the mind. You might hear a sound, but it won't distract your concentration. There is the hearing of the sound, but the experience is as if you don't hear anything. There is awareness of the impingement but it's as if you are not aware. This is because you let go. The mind lets go automatically. Concentration is so deep and firm that you let go of attachment to sense impingement quite naturally. The mind can absorb into this state for long periods. Having stayed inside for an appropriate amount of time, it then withdraws. Sometimes, as you withdraw from such a deep level of concentration, a mental image of some aspect of your own body can appear. It might be a mental image displaying an aspect of the unattractive nature of your body that arises into consciousness. As the mind withdraws from the

refined state, the image of the body appears to emerge and expand from within the mind. Any aspect of the body could come up as a mental image and fill up the mind's eye at that point.

Images that come up in this way are extremely clear and unmistakable. You have to have genuinely experienced very deep tranquility for them to arise. You see them absolutely clearly, even though your eyes are closed. If you open your eyes you can't see them, but with eyes shut and the mind absorbed in *samādhi*, you can see such images as clearly as if viewing the object with eyes wide open. You can even experience a whole train of consciousness where from moment to moment the mind's awareness is fixed on images expressing the unattractive nature of the body. The appearance of such images in a calm mind can become the basis for insight into the impermanent nature of the body, as well as into its unattractive, unclean and unpleasant nature, or into the complete lack of any real self or essence within it.

When these kinds of special knowledge arise they provide the basis for skilful investigation and the development of insight. You bring this kind of insight right inside your heart. As you do this more and more, it becomes the cause for insight knowledge to arise by itself. Sometimes, when you turn your attention to reflecting on the subject of *asubha*<sup>1</sup>, images of different unattractive aspects of the body can manifest in the mind automatically. These images are clearer than any you could try to summon up with your imagination and lead to insight of a far more penetrating nature than that gained through the ordinary kind of discursive thinking. This kind of clear insight has such a striking impact that the activity of the mind is brought to a stop followed by the experience of a deep sense of dispassion. The reason it is so clear and piercing is that it originates from a completely peaceful mind. Investigating from within a state of calm, leads you to clearer and clearer insight, the mind becoming more peaceful as it is increasingly absorbed in the contemplation. The clearer and more conclusive the insight, the deeper inside the mind penetrates with its investigation, constantly supported by the

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<sup>1</sup>*Asubha*: refers to the impurity, foulness or unattractiveness of the body, which can be taken up as a meditation object for developing calm and insight.

calm of *samādhi*. This is what the practice of *kammaṭṭhāna*<sup>1</sup> involves. Continuous investigation in this way helps you to repeatedly let go of and ultimately destroy attachment to personality view. It brings an end to all remaining doubt and uncertainty about this heap of flesh we call the body and the letting go of blind attachment to rules and practices.

Even in the event of serious illness, tropical fevers or different health problems that normally have a strong physical impact and shake the body up, your *samādhi* and insight remains firm and imperturbable. Your understanding and insight allows you to make a clear distinction between mind and body – the mind is one phenomenon, the body another. Once you see body and mind as completely and indisputably separate from each other, it means that the practice of insight has brought you to the point where your mind sees for certain the true nature of the body.

Seeing the way the body truly is, clearly and beyond doubt from within the calm of *samādhi*, leads to the mind experiencing a strong sense of weariness and turning away (*nibbidā*). This turning away comes from the sense of disenchantment and dispassion that arises as the natural result of seeing the way things are. It's not a turning away that comes from ordinary worldly moods such as fear, revulsion or other unwholesome qualities like envy or aversion. It's not coming from the same root of attachment as those defiled mental states. This is turning away that has a spiritual quality to it and has a different effect on the mind than the normal moods of boredom and weariness experienced by ordinary unenlightened human beings (*puthujjana*). Usually when ordinary unenlightened human beings are weary and fed up, they get caught into moods of aversion, rejection and seeking to avoid. The experience of insight is not the same.

The sense of world-weariness that grows with insight, however, leads to detachment, turning away and aloofness that comes naturally from investigating and seeing the truth of the way things are. It is free

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<sup>1</sup>*Kammaṭṭhāna*: literally means the working-ground or basis for action. It is used to describe the object or subject of meditation that leads one to gain skill in both calm and insight. Often used to refer to the whole lifestyle of the practitioner who is aiming at developing calm and insight.

from attachment to a sense of self that attempts to control and force things to go according to its desires. Rather, you let go with an acceptance of the way things are. The clarity of insight is so strong that you no longer experience any sense of a self that has to struggle against the flow of its desires or endure through attachment. The three fetters of personality view, doubt and blind attachment to rules and practices that are normally present underlying the way you view the world can't delude you or cause you to make any serious mistakes in practice. This is the very beginning of the path, the first clear insight into ultimate truth, and paves the way for further insight. You could describe it as penetrating the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are things to be realized through insight. Every monk and nun, who has ever realized them, has experienced such insight into the truth of the way things are. You know suffering, know the cause of suffering, know the cessation of suffering and know the path leading to the cessation of suffering. Understanding of each Noble Truth emerges at the same place within the mind. They come together and harmonize as the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, which the Buddha taught are to be realized within the mind. As the path factors converge in the center of the mind, they cut through any doubts and uncertainty you still have concerning the way of practice.

During the course of practising, it is normal that you experience the different conditions of the mind. You constantly experience desires to do this and that or to go different places, as well as the different moods of mental pain, frustration or else indulgence in pleasure seeking – all of which are the fruits of past *kamma* (actions). All this resultant *kamma* swells up inside the mind and puffs it out. However, it is the product of past actions. Knowing that it is all stuff coming up from the past, you don't allow yourself to make anything new or extra out of it. You observe and reflect on the arising and cessation of conditions. That which has not yet arisen is still unarisen. This word 'arise' refers to *upādāna* or the mind's firm attachment and clinging. Over time your mind has been exposed to and conditioned by craving and defilement and the mental conditions and characteristics you experience reflect that. Having developed insight, your mind no longer follows those old habit patterns

that were fashioned by defilement. A separation occurs between the mind and those defiled ways of thinking and reacting. The mind separates from the defilements.

You can compare this with the effect of putting oil and paint together in a bottle. Each liquid has a very different density so it doesn't matter whether you keep them in the same bottle or in separate ones, because the difference in their density prevents the liquids from mixing together or permeating into each other. The oil doesn't mix in with the paint and vice versa. They remain in separate parts of the bottle. You can compare the bottle with the world and these two different liquids, that have been put into the bottle and are forced to stay within its confines, are similar to you living in the world with insight that separates your mind from the defilements. You can say that you are living in the world and following the conventions of the world, but without attaching to it. When you have to go somewhere you say you are going, when you are coming you say you are coming or whatever you are doing you use the conventions and language of the world, but it's like the two liquids in the bottle – they are in the same bottle but don't mix together. You live in the world, but at the same time you remain separate from it. The Buddha knew the truth for himself. He was the *lokavidū* – the knower of the world.

What are the sense bases (*āyatana*)? They consist of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. These exist and function just the same as before. The ears hear sound; the nose performs the function of smelling different smells, whether fragrant or pungent; the tongue has the function of tasting tastes whether sweet, sour, rich or salty; the body senses heat and cold, softness and hardness; the mind receives mind objects which arise in the same way as they always have. The sense bases function just as they did before. You experience sensory impingement in just the same way as you always have. It's not true that after the experience of insight your nose no longer experiences any smells, or your tongue that formerly was able to taste can no longer taste anything, or the body is unable to feel anything anymore.

Your ability to experience the world through the senses remains intact, just the same as before you started practising insight, but the

mind's reaction to sense impingement is to see it as "just that much". The mind doesn't attach to fixed perceptions or make anything out of the experience of sense objects. It lets go. The mind knows that it is letting go. As you gain insight into the true nature of the Dhamma, it naturally results in letting go. There is awareness followed by abandoning of attachment. There is understanding and then letting go. With insight you set things down. Insight knowledge doesn't lead to clinging or attachment; it doesn't increase your suffering. That's not what happens. True insight into the Dhamma brings letting go as the result. You know that it is the cause of suffering, so you abandon attachment. Once you have insight the mind lets go. It puts down what it was formerly holding on to.

Another way to describe this is to say that you are no longer fumbling or groping around in your practice. You are no longer blindly groping and attaching to forms, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily sensations or mind objects. The experience of sense objects through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind no longer stimulates the same old habitual movements of mind where it is seeking to get involved with such sense objects or adding on to the experience through further proliferation. The mind doesn't create things around sense contact. Once contact has occurred you automatically let go. The mind discards the experience. This means that if you are attracted to something, you experience the attraction in the mind but you don't attach or hold on fast to it. If you have a reaction of aversion, there is simply the experience of aversion arising in the mind and nothing more: there isn't any sense of self arising that attaches and gives meaning and importance to the aversion. In other words the mind knows how to let go; it knows how to set things aside. Why is it able to let go and put things down? Because the presence of insight means you can see the harmful results that come from attaching to all those mental states.

When you see forms the mind remains undisturbed; when you hear sounds it remains undisturbed. The mind doesn't take a position for or against any sense objects experienced. This is the same for all sense contact, whether it is through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body or mind. Whatever thoughts arise in the mind can't disturb you. You are able to

let go. You may perceive something as desirable, but you don't attach to that perception or give it any special importance – it simply becomes a condition of mind to be observed without attachment. This is what the Buddha described as experiencing sense objects as “just that much”. The sense bases are still functioning and experiencing sense objects, but without the process of attachment stimulating movements to and fro in the mind. There is no conditioning of the mind occurring in the sense of a self moving from this place to that place or from that place moving to this place. Sense contact occurs between the six sense bases as normal, but the mind doesn't “take sides” by getting caught into conditions of attraction or aversion. You understand how to let go. There is awareness of sense contact followed by letting go. You let go with awareness and sustain the awareness after you have let go. This is how the process of insight works. Every angle and every aspect of the mind and its experience naturally becomes part of the practice.

This is the way the mind is affected as you train it. It becomes very obvious that the mind has changed and is not the same as usual. It no longer behaves in the way you are accustomed to. You are no longer creating a self out of your experience. For example, when you experience the death of your mother, father or anyone else who is close to you, if your mind remains firm in the practice of calm and insight and is able to reflect skillfully on what has happened, you won't create suffering for yourself out of the event. Rather than panicking or feeling shocked at the news of that person's death, there is just a sense of sadness and dispassion coming from wise reflection. You are aware of the experience and then let go. There is the knowing and then you lay it aside. You let go without generating any further suffering for yourself. This is because you know clearly what causes suffering to arise. When you do encounter suffering you are aware of that suffering. As soon as you start to experience suffering you automatically ask yourself the question: where does it come from? Suffering has its cause and that is the attachment and clinging still left in the mind. So you have to let go of the attachment. All suffering comes from a cause. Having created the cause, you abandon it. Abandon it with wisdom. You let go of it through insight, which means wisdom. You can't let go through

delusion. This is the way it is.

The investigation and development of insight into the Dhamma gives rise to this profound peace of mind. Having gained such clear and penetrating insight means it is sustained at all times whether you are sitting meditation with your eyes closed, or even if you are doing something with your eyes open. Whatever situation you find yourself in, be it in formal meditation or not, the clarity of insight remains. When you have unwavering mindfulness of the mind within the mind, you don't forget yourself. Whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down, the awareness within makes it impossible to lose mindfulness. It's a state of awareness that prevents you forgetting yourself. Mindfulness has become so strong that it is self-sustaining to the point where it becomes natural for the mind to be that way. These are the results of training and cultivating the mind and it is here where you go beyond doubt. You have no doubts about the future; you have no doubts about the past and accordingly have no need to doubt about the present either. You still have awareness that there is such a thing as past, present and future. You are aware of the existence of time. There is the reality of the past, present and future, but you are no longer concerned or worried about it.

Why are you no longer concerned? All those things that took place in the past have already happened. The past has already passed by. All that is arising in the present is the result of causes that lay in the past. An obvious example of this is to say that if you don't feel hungry now, it's because you have already eaten at some time in the past. The lack of hunger in the present is the result of actions performed in the past. If you know your experience in the present, you can know the past. Eating a meal was the cause from the past that resulted in you feeling at ease or energetic in the present and this provides the cause for you to be active and work in the future. So the present is providing causes that will bring results in the future. The past, present and future can thus be seen as one and the same. The Buddha called it *eko dhammo* – the unity of the Dhamma. It isn't many different things; there is just this much. When you see the present, you see the future. By understanding the present you understand the past. Past, present and future make up a chain of continuous cause and effect and hence are constantly flowing on from



one to the other. There are causes from the past that produce results in the present and these are already producing causes for the future. This process of cause and result applies to practice in the same way. You experience the fruits of having trained the mind in *samādhī* and insight and these necessarily make the mind wiser and more skilful.

The mind completely transcends doubt. You are no longer uncertain or speculating about anything. The lack of doubt means you no longer fumble around or have to feel your way through the practice. As a result you live and act in accordance with nature. You live in the world in the most natural way. That means living in the world peacefully. You are able to find peace even in the midst of that which is unpeaceful. It means you are fully able to live in the world. You are able to live in the world without creating any problems. The Buddha lived in the world and was able to find true peace of mind within the world. As practitioners of the Dhamma, you must learn to do the same. Don't get lost in and attached to perceptions about things being this way or that way. Don't attach or give undue importance to any perceptions that are still deluded. Whenever the mind becomes stirred up, investigate and contemplate the cause. When you aren't making any suffering for yourself out of things, you are at ease. When there are no issues causing mental agitation, you remain equanimous. That is, you continue to practise normally with a mental equanimity maintained by the presence of mindfulness and an all-round awareness. You keep a sense of self-control and equilibrium. If any matter arises and prevails upon the mind, you immediately take hold of it for thorough investigation and contemplation. If there is clear insight at that moment, you penetrate the matter with wisdom and prevent it creating any suffering in the mind. If there is not yet clear insight, you let the matter go temporarily through the practice of *samatha* meditation and don't allow the mind to attach. At some point in the future, your insight will certainly be strong enough to penetrate it, because sooner or later you will develop insight powerful enough to comprehend everything that still causes attachment and suffering.

Ultimately, the mind has to make a great effort to struggle with and overcome the reactions stimulated by every kind of sense object and

mental state that you experience. It must work hard with every single object that contacts it. All the six internal sense bases and their external objects converge on the mind. By focusing awareness on the mind alone, you gain understanding and insight into the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind and all their objects. The mind is there already, so the important thing is to investigate right at the center of the mind. The further you go investigating the mind itself, the clearer and more profound the insight that emerges. This is something I emphasize when teaching, because understanding this point is crucial to the practice. Normally, when you experience sense contact and receive impingement from different objects, the mind is just waiting to react with attraction or aversion. That is what happens with the unenlightened mind. It's ready to get caught into good moods because of one kind of stimulation or bad moods because of another kind.

Here you examine the mind with firm and unwavering attention. As you experience different objects through the senses, you don't let it feed mental proliferation. You don't get caught into a lot of defiled thinking – you are already practising *vipassanā* and depending on insight wisdom to investigate all sense objects. The mode of *vipassanā* meditation is what develops wisdom. Training with the different objects of *samatha* meditation – whether it is the recitation of a word such as *Buddho*, *Dhammo*, *Sangho* or the practice of mindfulness with the breathing – results in the mind experiencing the calm and firmness of *samādhi*. In *samatha* meditation you focus awareness on a single object and let go of all others temporarily.

*Vipassanā* meditation is similar because you use the reflection “don't believe it” as you make contact with sense objects. Practising *vipassanā*, you don't let any sense object delude you. You are aware of each object as soon as it converges in on the mind, whether it is experienced with the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body or mind and you use this reflection “don't believe it” almost like a verbal meditation object to be repeated over and over again. Every object immediately becomes a source of insight. You use the mind that is firm in *samādhi* to investigate each object's impermanent nature. At each moment of sense contact you bring up the reflection: “It's not certain” or “This is im-

permanent”. If you are caught in delusion and believe in the object experienced you suffer, because all these *dharmas* (phenomena) are nonself (*anattā*). If you attach to anything that is nonself and misperceive it as self, it automatically becomes a cause for pain and distress. This is because you attach to mistaken perceptions.

Repeatedly examine the truth, over and over again until you understand clearly that all these sense objects lack any true self. They do not belong to any real self. Why, then, do you misunderstand and attach to them as being a self or belonging to a self? This is where you must put forth effort to keep reflecting on the truth. They aren’t truly you. They don’t belong to you. Why do you misunderstand them as being a self? None of these sense objects can be considered as you in any ultimate sense. So why do they delude you into seeing them as a self? In truth, there’s no way it could possibly be like that. All sense objects are impermanent, so why do you see them as permanent? It’s incredible how they delude you. The body is inherently unattractive, so how can you possibly attach to the view that it is something attractive? These ultimate truths – the unattractiveness of the body and the impermanence and lack of self in all formations – become obvious with investigation and finally you see that this thing we call the world is actually a delusion created out of these wrong views.

As you use insight meditation to investigate the three characteristics and penetrate the true nature of phenomena, it’s not necessary to do anything special. There’s no need to go to extremes. Don’t make it difficult for yourself. Focus your awareness directly, as if you are sitting down receiving guests who are entering into a reception room. In your reception room there is only one chair, so the different guests that come into the room to meet you are unable to sit down because you are already sitting in the only chair available. If a visitor enters the room, you know who they are straight away. Even if two, three or many visitors come into the room together, you instantly know who they are because they have nowhere to sit down. You occupy the only seat available, so every single visitor who comes in is quite obvious to you and unable to stay for very long.

You can observe all the visitors at your ease because they don’t

have anywhere to sit down. You fix awareness on investigating the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and nonself and hold your attention on this contemplation not sending it anywhere else. Insight into the transient, unsatisfactory and selfless nature of all phenomena steadily grows clearer and more comprehensive. Your understanding grows more profound. Such clarity of insight leads to a peace that penetrates deeper into your heart than any you might experience from the practice of tranquility (*samatha*) meditation. It is the clarity and completeness of this insight into the way things are that has a purifying effect on the mind. Wisdom arising as a result of deep and crystal clear insight acts as the agent of purification.

Through repeated examination and contemplation of the truth over time, your views change and what you once mistakenly perceived as attractive gradually loses its appeal as the truth of its unattractive nature becomes apparent. You investigate phenomena to see if they are really permanent or of a transient nature. At first you simply recite to yourself the teaching that all conditions are impermanent, but after time you actually see the truth clearly from your investigation. The truth is waiting to be found right at the point of investigation. This is the seat where you wait to receive visitors. There is nowhere else you could go to develop insight. You must remain seated on this one spot – the only chair in the room. As visitors enter your reception room, it is easy to observe their appearance and the way they behave, because they are unable to sit down; inevitably you get to know all about them. In other words you arrive at a clear and distinct understanding of the impermanent, unsatisfactory and selfless nature of all these phenomena and this insight has become so indisputable and firm in your mind, that it puts an end to any remaining uncertainty about the true nature of things. You know for certain that there is no other possible way of viewing experience. This is realization of the Dhamma at the most profound level. Ultimately, your meditation involves sustaining the knowing, followed by continuous letting go as you experience sense objects through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. It involves just this much and there is no need to make anything more out of it.

The important thing is to repeatedly put effort into developing in-

sight through investigation of the three characteristics. Everything can become a cause for wisdom to arise, and that is what completely destroys all forms of defilement and attachment. This is the fruit of *vipassanā* meditation. But don't assume that everything you do is coming from insight. Sometimes you still do things following your own desires. If you are still practising following your desires then you will only put effort in on the days when you are feeling energetic and inspired, and you won't do any meditation on the days when you are feeling lazy. That's called practising under the influence of the defilements. It means you don't have any real power over your mind and just follow your desires.

When your mind is in line with the Dhamma, there is no one who is diligent and there is no one who is lazy. It's a matter of how the mind is conditioned. The practice of insight keeps flowing automatically without laziness or diligence. It's a state that is self-sustaining fuelled by its own energy. Once the mind has these characteristics, it means you no longer have to be the doer in the practice. You could say that it's as if you have finished all the work you have been doing and the only thing left is for you to leave things to themselves and watch over the mind. You don't have to be someone who is doing something anymore. There is still mental activity occurring – you experience pleasant and unpleasant sense contact according to your kammic accumulations – but you see it as “just that much” and are letting go of attachment to the sense of self the whole time.

At this point, you aren't creating a self and so you aren't creating any suffering. All the sense objects and moods you experience ultimately have exactly the same value in the mind. Whatever mental or physical phenomena you examine appear the same as everything else, bearing the same inherent qualities. All phenomena become one and the same. Your wisdom has to develop that far for all uncertainty to come to an end in the mind.

When you first start meditating, it seems like all you know how to do is to doubt and speculate about things. The mind is always wavering and vacillating. You spend the whole time caught in agitated thinking and proliferating about things. You have doubts about every last thing.

Why? It stems from impatience. You want to know all the answers and fast. You want to have insight quickly, without having to do anything. You want to know the truth of the way things are, but that wanting is so strong in the mind that it is more powerful than the insight you desire. For that reason the practice has to develop in stages. You must go one step at a time. In the first place you need to put forth persistent effort. You also need the continuous support of your past good actions and development of the ten spiritual perfections<sup>1</sup> (*pāramī*).

Keep summoning up effort in training the mind. Don't get caught into desiring quick results; that just leads you to disappointment and frustration when the insights are slow to come. Thinking like that won't help you. Is it correct to expect to suddenly experience some kind of permanent state where you are experiencing no pleasure or pain at all? It doesn't matter what the mind throws up at you. At that time when you do get overwhelmed by pleasure and pain stimulated by contact between the mind and different sense objects, you don't have any idea what level your practice has reached. But within a short space of time such moods lose power over the mind. Actually, such impingement can be of benefit, because it reminds you to examine your own experience. You get to know what reactions all the sense objects, thoughts and perceptions you experience bring up in the mind. You know, both in the cases when they lead the mind towards agitation and suffering, and when they hardly stir the mind at all. Some meditators just want to have insight into the way the mind is affected by pleasant objects; they only want to investigate the good moods. But that way they never gain true insight. They don't become very smart. Really, you must also examine what happens when you experience unpleasant sense impingement. You have to know what that does to the mind. In the end, that's the way you have to train yourself.

It is also important to understand that when it comes to the practice itself, you don't need to seek out the past experiences and accumulated memories available from external sources, because it's your own experience that counts. The only way to really put an end to your doubts

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<sup>1</sup>*Pāramī*: the ten spiritual perfections include: giving, virtue, renunciation, wisdom, effort, patience, truthfulness, resolution, loving-kindness and equanimity.

and speculation is through practising until you reach the point where you see the results clearly for yourself. This is the most important thing of all. Learning from different teachers is an essential preliminary to practice. It is a valuable support as you move from hearing the teachings to learning from your own experience. You have to contemplate the teachings you receive in light of your own practice until you gain your own understanding. If you already possess some spiritual qualities and virtue accumulated from the past, practice is more straightforward. When other people give you advice, generally it can save you time, by avoiding mistakes and helping you go directly to the heart of practice. If you try practising alone without any guidance from others, the path you follow will be a slower one with more detours. If you try to discover the correct way to practise all by yourself, you tend to waste time and end up going the long way round. That's the truth of it. In the end, the practice of Dhamma itself is the surest way to make all the doubting and wavering wither away and vanish. As you keep enduring and training yourself to go against the grain of your defilements the doubts will just shrivel up and die.

If you think about it, you have already gained much from your efforts in the practice. You have made progress, but it's still not enough to make you feel completely satisfied. If you look carefully and reflect on your life, you can see just how much of the world you have experienced through your mind from the time you were born, through your youth until the present. In the past you weren't training yourself in virtue, concentration and wisdom, and it's easy to see just how far the defilements took you. When you look back on all that you have experienced through the senses it becomes obvious that you have been experiencing the truth about the way things are on countless occasions. As you contemplate the things that have happened in your life, it helps lighten the mind as you see that the defilements don't cover it over quite so thickly as before.

From time to time you need to encourage yourself in this way. It takes away some of the heaviness. However, it's not wise to only give yourself praise and encouragement. In training the mind, you have to criticize yourself every now and then. Sometimes you have to force

yourself to do things you don't want to do, but you can't push the mind to its limits all the time. As you train yourself in meditation it is normal that the body, which is a conditioned phenomenon, is subject to stress, pain and all sorts of different problems as conditions affect it. It's just normal for the body to be like that. The more you train yourself in sitting meditation, the more skilled at it you become and naturally you can sit for longer periods. At first you might only be able to manage five minutes before you have to get up. But as you practise more, the length of time you can sit comfortably increases from ten to twenty minutes to half an hour, until in the end you can sit for a whole hour without having to get up. Then other people look at you and praise you for being able to sit so long, but at the same time, you might feel within yourself, that you still can't sit for very long at all. This is the way the desire for results can affect you in the course of meditation.

Another important aspect of the training is to sustain the practice of mindfulness evenly in all the four postures of standing, walking, sitting and lying down. Be careful not to misunderstand that you are only really practising when sitting in the formal meditation posture. Don't see it as the only posture for cultivating mindfulness. That's a mistake. It's quite possible that calm and insight might not even arise during the course of formal sitting meditation. It's only feasible to sit for so many hours and minutes in one day – but you have to train yourself in mindfulness constantly as you change from posture to posture, developing a continuous awareness. Whenever you lose awareness, reestablish it as soon as possible to try and keep as much continuity as you can. This is the way to make fast progress. Insight comes quickly. It's the way to become wise. That means wise in understanding sense objects and how they affect the mind. You use this wisdom to know your moods and to train the mind in letting go. This is how you should understand the way to cultivate the mind. Even as you lie down to sleep, you have to fix attention on the in- and out-breaths until the moment you fall asleep and continue on as soon as you wake up. That way there is only a short period when you are in deep sleep that you are not practising awareness. You have to throw all your energy into training yourself.

Once you have developed awareness, the longer you train your-



self, the more wakefulness the mind experiences until you reach a point where you don't seem to sleep at all. Only the body sleeps, the mind remains aware. The mind remains awake and vigilant even as the body sleeps. You remain with the knowing throughout. As soon as you awake, mindfulness is right there from the first moment as the mind leaves the sleeping state and immediately takes hold of a fresh object. You are attentive and watchful. Sleeping is really a function of the body. It involves resting the body. The body takes the rest it needs, but there is still the knowing present, watching over the mind. Awareness is sustained both throughout the day and night.

So, even though you lie down and go to sleep, it's as if the mind doesn't sleep. But you don't feel tired out and hungry for more sleep. You remain alert and attentive. It's for this reason that you hardly dream at all when you are practising in earnest. If you do dream, it is in the form of a *supina nimitta* – an unusually clear and vivid dream that holds some special significance. Generally, however, you experience very few dreams. As you watch over the mind it's as if there are no causes left for the mental proliferation that fuels dreams. You remain in a state where you aren't caught in delusion. You sustain mindfulness, with awareness present deep inside the mind. The mind is in a state of wakefulness, being sharp and responsive. The presence of unbroken mindfulness makes the mind's ability to investigate smooth and effortless and keeps it abreast of whatever is arising from moment to moment.

You have to cultivate the mind until it's totally fluent and skilled in keeping mindfulness and investigating phenomena. Whenever the mind reaches a state of calm, train it in examining your own body and those of other people until you have deep enough insight to see the common characteristics. Pursue the investigation to the point where you see all bodies as having the same essential nature and having come from the same material elements. You must keep observing and contemplating. Before you go to sleep at night, use awareness to sweep over the entire body and repeat the contemplation when you first wake up in the morning. This way you won't have to experience nightmares, talk in your sleep or get caught up in a lot of dreaming. You sleep and wake

up peacefully without anything bothering you. You sustain the state of knowing both in your sleep and as you wake up. When you wake up with mindfulness, the mind is bright, clear and unbothered by sleepiness. As you awaken the mind is radiant, being free from dullness and moods conditioned by the defilements.

Here I have been giving details of the development of the mind in the course of practice. Normally, you wouldn't think it possible that the mind could actually be peaceful during the time you are asleep, when you first wake up or in other situations where you would expect mindfulness to be weak. For instance, you might be sitting down soaking wet having just walked through a heavy rainstorm, but because you have cultivated *samādhi* and learnt to contemplate, the mind remains untouched by defiled moods and is still able to experience peace and clarity of insight, just as I have been describing.

The last teaching the Buddha gave to the community of monks was an exhortation not to get caught in heedlessness. He said that heedlessness is the way that leads to death. Please understand this and take it to heart as fully and sincerely as you can. Train yourself to think with wisdom. Use wisdom to guide your speech. Whatever you do, use wisdom as your guide.



# Suffering on the Road<sup>1</sup>

AT THE TIME OF THE BUDDHA, there lived a monk who yearned to find the true way to enlightenment. He wanted to know for certain what was the correct way and what was the incorrect way to train his mind in meditation. Having decided that living in a monastery with a large group of monks was confusing and distracting, he went off wandering looking for quiet places to meditate on his own. Living alone, he practised continuously, sometimes experiencing periods of calm when his mind gathered itself in concentration (*samādhi*), at other times not finding much calm at all. There was still no real certainty in his meditation. Sometimes he was very diligent and put forth great effort, sometimes he was lazy. In the end, he became caught up in doubt and scepticism due to his lack of success in trying to find the right way to practise.

During that time in India there were many different meditation teachers, and the monk happened to hear about one famous teacher, “Ajahn A”, who was very popular and had a reputation for being skilled in meditation instruction. The monk sat down and thought it through, and decided that just in case this famous teacher really knew the correct way to enlightenment, he would set off to go and find him and train under his guidance. Having received teachings, the monk returned to meditate on his own again and found that while some of the new teachings were in line with his own views, some were different. He found that he was still constantly getting caught into doubt and uncertainty. After a while he

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<sup>1</sup>A talk given to a group of monks preparing to leave the monastery and go off wandering after their fifth year under the guidance of Ajahn Chah

heard of another famous monk, “Ajahn B”, who also was again reputed to be fully enlightened and skilled in teaching meditation; this news simply fuelled further doubts and questions in his mind. Eventually his speculation drove him to go off in search of the new teacher. Having received fresh teachings, the monk left and went away to practise in solitude once more. He compared all the teachings he had absorbed from this latest teacher with those from the first teacher, and found that they weren’t the same. He compared the different styles and characters of each teacher, and found that they were also quite different. He compared everything he had learnt with his own views about meditation and found that nothing seemed to fit together at all! The more he compared, the more he doubted.

Not long after that, the monk heard excited rumours that “Ajahn C” was a really wise teacher. People were talking about the new teacher so much that he couldn’t stand it any more and felt compelled to seek him out and try training with him. The monk was willing to listen and to try out whatever the new teacher suggested. Some things he taught were the same as other teachers, some things not; the monk kept thinking and comparing, trying to work out why one teacher did things a certain way and another teacher did it differently. In his mind, he was churning over all the information he had accumulated on the diverse views and styles of each teacher and when he put it together with his own views, which were completely different, ended up with no *samādhi* at all. The more he tried to work out where each teacher was at, the more he became restless and agitated, burning up all his energy until he became both mentally and physically drained, utterly defeated by his endless doubting and speculation.

Eventually the monk heard the fast spreading news that a fully enlightened teacher named Gotama had arisen in the world. Immediately his mind was completely overwhelmed and started racing twice as fast as ever, speculating about the teacher. Just as before, he could not resist the urge to go and see the new teacher for himself, so he went to pay respects to the Buddha and listen to him expound the Dhamma. The Buddha explained to him that ultimately, it’s impossible to gain true understanding and transcend doubt simply through seeking out and re-

ceiving teaching from other people. The more you hear, the more you doubt; the more you hear, the more mixed up you become. The Buddha emphasised that other people's wisdom can't cut through your doubts for you. Other people cannot let go of doubt for you. All that a teacher can do is explain the way doubts arise in the mind and how to reflect on them, but you have to take his or her words and put them into practice until you gain insight and know for yourself. He taught that the place of practice lies within the body. Form, feeling, memories, thoughts and sense consciousness<sup>1</sup> are your teachers; they already provide you with the basis for insight. What you still lack is a basis in mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*) and wise reflection.

The Buddha taught that the only way to truly end doubt is through contemplation of your own body and mind – “just that much”. Abandon the past; abandon the future – practise knowing, and letting go. Sustain the knowing. Once you have established the knowing, let go – but don't try to let go without the knowing. It is the presence of this knowing that allows you to let go. Let go of everything you did in the past: both the good and the bad. Whatever you did before, let go of it, because there is no benefit in clinging to the past. The good you did was good at that time, the bad you did was bad at that time. What was right was right. So now you can cast it all aside, let go of it. Events in the future are still waiting to happen. All the arising and cessation that will occur in the future hasn't actually taken place yet, so don't attach too firmly to ideas about what may or may not happen in the future. Be aware of yourself and let go. Let go of the past. Whatever took place in the past has ceased. Why spend a lot of time proliferating about it? If you think about something that happened in the past then let that thought go. It was a *dhamma* (phenomenon) that arose in the past. Having arisen, it then ceased *in the past*. There's no reason to mentally proliferate about the present either. Once you have established awareness of what you are thinking, let it go. Practise knowing and letting go.

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<sup>1</sup>The five *khandhas*: the five groups or aggregates in which the Buddha has summed up all physical and mental phenomena of existence, and which appear to the deluded person as a self or personality. They are physical form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), memory and perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhārā*) and sense consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

It's not that you shouldn't experience any thoughts or hold views at all: you experience thoughts and views and then let go of them – because they are already completed. The future is still ahead of you: whatever is going to arise in the future, will end in the future also. Be aware of your thoughts about the future and then let go. Your thoughts and views about the past are uncertain, in just the same way. The future is totally uncertain. Be aware and then let go, because it's uncertain. Be aware of the present moment, investigate what you are doing right here and now. There is no need to look at anything outside of yourself.

The Buddha didn't praise those who still invest all their faith and belief in what other people say, neither did he praise those who still get caught up in good and bad moods as a result of the things other people say and do. What other people say and do has to be their own concern; you can be aware of it, but then let go. Even if they do the right thing, see that it's right for them, but if you don't bring your own mind in line with right view, you can never really experience that which is good and right for yourself, it remains something external. All those teachers are doing their own practise – whether correctly or incorrectly – somewhere else, separate from you. Any good practise they do doesn't actually change you; if it's correct practise, it's correct for them, not you. What this means is that the Buddha taught that those who fail to cultivate their minds and gain insight into the truth for themselves are not worthy of praise.

I emphasise the teaching that the Dhamma is *opanayiko* – to be brought inside oneself – so that the mind knows, understands and experiences the results of the training within itself. If people say you are meditating correctly, don't be too quick to believe them, and similarly, if they say you're doing it wrong, don't just accept what they say until you've really practised and found out for yourself. Even if they instruct you in the correct way that leads to enlightenment, this is still just other people's words; you have to take their teachings and apply them until you experience results for yourself right here in the present. That means you must become your own witness, able to confirm the results from within your own mind. It's like the example of the sour fruit. Imagine I told you that a certain fruit tasted sour and invited you to try

some of it. You would have to take a bite from it to taste the sourness. Some people would willingly take my word for it if I told them the fruit was sour, but if they simply believed that it was sour without ever tasting it, that belief would be useless (*mogha*), it wouldn't have any real value or meaning. If you described the fruit as sour, it would be merely going by my perception of it. Only that. The Buddha didn't praise such belief. But then you shouldn't just dismiss it either: investigate it. You must try tasting the fruit for yourself, and by actually experiencing the sour taste, you become your own internal witness. Somebody says it's sour, so you take it away and, by eating it, find out that it really is sour. It's like you're making double sure – relying on your own experience as well as what other people say. This way you can really have confidence in the authenticity of its sour taste; you have a witness who attests to the truth.

Venerable Ajahn Mun referred to this internal witness that exists within the mind as *sakkebhūto*. The authenticity of any knowledge acquired merely from what other people say remains unsubstantiated, it is only a truth proven to someone else – you only have someone else's word to go on that the fruit is sour. You could say that it's a half-truth, or fifty percent. But if you actually taste the fruit and find it sour, that is the one hundred percent, whole truth: you have evidence from what other people say and also from your own direct experience. This is a fully one hundred percent substantiated truth. This is *sakkebhūto*: the internal witness has risen within you.

The way to train is thus *opanayiko*. You direct your attention inwards, until your insight and understanding become *paccattam* (knowing and experiencing the truth for yourself). Understanding gained from listening to and watching other people is superficial in comparison with the deep understanding that is *paccattam*; it remains on the outside of *paccattam*. Such knowledge doesn't arise from self-examination; it's not your own insight – it's other people's insight. That doesn't mean you should be heedless and dismissive of any teachings you receive from other sources, they should also become the subject for study and investigation. When you first come across and begin to understand some aspect of the teaching from the books, it's fine to believe it on one

level, but at the same time to recognize that you haven't yet trained the mind and developed that knowledge through your own experience. For that reason you still haven't experienced the full benefit of the teaching. It's as if the true value of your understanding is still only half complete. So then you must cultivate the mind and let your insight mature, until you completely penetrate the truth. In that way your knowledge becomes fully complete. It is then you go beyond doubt. If you have profound insight into the truth from within your own mind, all uncertainty about the way to enlightenment disappears completely.

When we speak of practising with the *paccuppanna dhamma* it means that whatever phenomenon is immediately arising into the mind, you must investigate and deal with it at once. Your awareness must be right there. Because *paccuppanna dhamma* refers to the experience of the present moment – it encompasses both cause and effect. The present moment is firmly rooted within the process of cause and effect; the way you are in the present reflects the causes that lay in the past – your present experience is the result. Every single experience you've had right up until the present has arisen out of past causes. For instance, you could say that walking out from your meditation hut was a cause, and that you sitting down here is the result. This is the truth of the way things are, there is a constant succession of causes and effects. So what you did in the past was the cause, the present experience is the result. Similarly, present actions are the cause for what you will experience in the future. Sitting here right now, you are already initiating causes! Past causes are coming to fruition in the present, and these results are actually forming causes that will produce results in the future.

What the Buddha saw was that you must abandon both the past and the future. When we say abandon it doesn't mean you literally get rid of them. Abandoning means the focus of your mindfulness and insight is right here at this one point – the present moment. The past and the future link together right here. The present is both the result of the past and the cause of what lies ahead in the future. So you must completely abandon both cause and result, and simply abide with the present moment. We say abandon them, but these are just words used to describe the way of training the mind. Even though you let go of your attach-



ment and abandon the past and future, the natural process of cause and effect remains in place. In fact, you could call this the halfway point; it's already part of the process of cause and result. The Buddha taught to watch the present moment where you will see a continuous process of arising and passing away, followed by more arising and passing away.

Whatever arises in the present moment is impermanent. I say this often, but most people don't pay much attention. They're reluctant to make use of this simple little teaching. All that is subject to arising is impermanent. It's uncertain. This really is the easiest, least complicated way to reflect on the truth. If you don't meditate on this teaching, when things actually do start to show themselves as uncertain and changeable you don't know how to respond wisely and tend to get agitated and stirred up. Investigation of this very impermanence brings you insight and understanding of that which is permanent. By contemplating that which is uncertain, you see that which is certain. This is the way you have to explain it to make people understand the truth – but they tend not to understand and spend the whole time lost, rushing here and there. Really, if you want to experience true peace, you must bring the mind to that point where it is fully mindful in the present moment. Whatever happiness or suffering arises there, teach yourself that it's transient. The part of the mind that recollects that happiness and suffering are impermanent is the wisdom of the Buddha within each of you. The one who recognizes the uncertainty of phenomena is the Dhamma within you.

That which is the Dhamma is the Buddha, but most people don't realise this. They see the Dhamma as something external, out there somewhere, and the Buddha as something else over here. If the mind's eye sees all conditioned things as uncertain, then all of your problems that arise out of attaching and giving undue importance to things will disappear. Whatever way you look at it, this intrinsic truth is the only thing that is really certain. When you see this, rather than clinging and attaching, the mind lets go. The cause of the problem, the attachment, disappears, resulting in the mind penetrating the truth and merging with the Dhamma. There is nothing higher or more profound to seek for other than the realisation of this truth. In that way the Dhamma is equal

to the Buddha, the Buddha is equal to the Dhamma.

This teaching that all conditioned things are uncertain and subject to change is the Dhamma. The Dhamma is the essence of the Buddha; it isn't anything else. The purpose of cultivating awareness through continuous recitation of "*Buddho*", "*Buddho*" – that which knows – is to see this truth. When the mind becomes one-pointed through the recitation of "*Buddho*", this supports the development of insight into the three characteristics of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and nonself (*anattā*); the clarity of awareness brings you to view things as uncertain and changeable. If you see this clearly and directly the mind lets go. So when you experience any kind of happiness, you know it's uncertain; when you experience any kind of suffering, you know it's uncertain just the same. If you go to live somewhere else, hoping it will be better than where you are already, remember that it's not a sure thing whether you will really find what you are looking for. If you think it's best to stay here, again, it's not sure. That's just the point! With insight, you see that everything is uncertain, so wherever you go to practise you don't have to suffer. When you want to stay here, you stay. When you want to go elsewhere, you go and you don't make any problems for yourself. All that doubting and vacillation about what is the right thing to do ends. It is the way of training in fixing mindfulness solely on the present moment that brings the doubts to an end.

So don't worry about the past or the future. The past has already ceased. Whatever occurred in the past has already taken place and is over and done with; it's finished. Whatever is going to arise in the future is also going to end in the future – let go of that too. Why get worried about it? Observe the phenomena (*dhamma*) arising in the present moment and notice how they are changing and unreliable. As "*Buddho*" – the knowing – matures and penetrates deeper, you gain a more profound awareness of the essential truth that all conditioned phenomena are of an impermanent nature. This is where insight deepens and allows the stability and tranquillity of *samādhi* to strengthen and become more refined.

*Samādhi* means the mind that is firm and stable, or the mind that is calm. There are two kinds. One kind of calm comes from practis-

ing in a quiet place, where there are no sights, sounds or other sensual impingement to disturb you. The mind with such calm is still not free from the defilements (*kilesa*). The defilements still cover over the mind, but during the time when it is calm in *samādhi* they remain in abatement. It's like pond water that is temporarily clear after all the dirt and dust particles have settled on the bottom; as long as the sediment hasn't been stirred up the water remains clear, but as soon as something does disturb it, the dirt rises up and the water becomes cloudy again. You are just the same. When you hear a sound, see a form or the mind is affected by a mental state, any reaction of disliking clouds over the mind. If no aversion is stimulated you feel comfortable; but that feeling of comfort comes from the presence of attachment and defilement rather than wisdom.

For example, suppose you wanted this tape recorder. As long as this desire was unfulfilled you would feel dissatisfaction. However, once you had gone out looking and found one for yourself, you would feel content and satisfied, wouldn't you? However, if you attached to the feeling of contentment that arose because you managed to get your own tape recorder, you would actually be creating the conditions for future suffering. You would be creating the conditions for future suffering, without being aware of it. This is because your sense of satisfaction would be dependent on you gaining a tape recorder, so as long as you still didn't possess one, you would experience suffering. Once you acquired a tape recorder you would feel content and satisfied. But then if, perhaps, a thief were to steal it, that sense of satisfaction would disappear with it and you would fall back into a state of suffering again. This is the way it is. Without a tape recorder you suffer; with one you're happy, but when for some reason you lose it, you become miserable again. It goes on like this the whole time. This is what is meant by *samādhi* that is dependent on peaceful conditions. It's uncertain, like the happiness you experience when you get what you want. When you finally get the tape recorder you have been looking for, you feel great. But what's the true cause of that pleasant feeling? It arises because your desire has been satisfied. That's all. That's as deep as that kind of happiness can reach. It's happiness conditioned by the defilements that

control your mind. You aren't even aware of this. At any time somebody could come along and steal that tape recorder causing you to fall right back into suffering again.

So that kind of *samādhi* only provides a temporary experience of calm. You have to contemplate the nature of the calm that arises out of serenity (*samatha*) meditation to see the whole truth of the matter. That tape recorder you obtain, or anything else you possess is bound to deteriorate, break up and disappear in the end. You have something to lose because you gained a tape recorder. If you don't own a tape recorder you don't have one to lose. Birth and death are the same. Because there has been a birth, there has to be the experience of death. If nothing gets born, there is nothing to die. All those people who die had to be born at some time; those who don't get born don't have to die. This is the way things are. Being able to reflect in this way means that as soon as you acquire that tape recorder, you are mindful of its impermanence – that one day it will break down or get stolen, and that in the end it must inevitably fall apart and completely disintegrate. You see the truth with wisdom, and understand that the tape recorder's very nature is impermanent. Whether the tape recorder actually breaks or gets stolen, these are all just manifestations of impermanence. If you can view things in the correct way, you will be able to use the tape recorder without suffering.

You can compare this with setting up some kind of business in the lay life. If at first you needed to get a loan from the bank to set up the business operations, immediately you would begin to experience stress. You would suffer because you wanted somebody else's money. Looking for money is both difficult and tiring, and as long as you were unsuccessful in trying to raise some, it would cause you suffering. Of course, the day you successfully managed to get a loan from the bank you would feel over the moon, but that elation wouldn't last more than a few hours, because in no time at all the interest payments on the loan would start to eat up all your profits. You wouldn't have to do so much as raise one finger and already your money would be draining away to the bank in interest payments. Can you believe it! You would be sitting there suffering again. Can you see this? Why is it like this? When

you didn't have any money you would suffer; when you finally receive some you think your problems are over, but before long the interest payments would start eating away at your funds, just leading you to more suffering. This is the way it is.

The Buddha taught that the way to practise with this is to observe the present moment, and develop insight into the transient nature of the body and mind; to see the truth of the Dhamma – that conditioned things simply arise and pass away, and nothing more. It's the nature of the body and mind to be that way, so don't attach or cling firmly on to them. If you have insight into this, it gives rise to peace as the result. This is peace that comes from letting go of defilements; it arises in conjunction with the arising of wisdom.

What causes wisdom to arise? It comes from contemplating the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and nonself, which brings you insight into the truth of the way things are. You have to see the truth clearly and unmistakably in your own mind. That is only way to really gain wisdom. There has to be continuous clear insight. You see for yourself that all mental objects and moods (*ārammaṇa*) that arise into consciousness pass away and after that cessation there is more arising. After more arising there is further cessation. If you still have attachment and clinging suffering must arise from moment to moment, but if you are letting go, you won't create any suffering. Once the mind is clearly seeing the impermanence of phenomena, this is what is meant by *sakkhibhūto* – the internal witness. The mind is so firmly absorbed in its contemplation that the insight is self-sustaining. So in the end, you can only accept as partial truths all the teachings and wisdom that you receive from others.

On one occasion the Buddha gave a discourse to a group of monks, and afterwards asked Venerable Sāriputta, who had been listening:

“Sāriputta, do you believe what I have been teaching you?”

“I still don't believe it, Bhante,” Sāriputta replied. The Buddha was pleased with this response and continued,

“That is good Sāriputta. You shouldn't believe any teaching people give you too easily. A sage must contemplate thoroughly everything he hears before accepting it fully. You should take this teaching away with

you and contemplate it first.”

Even though he had received a teaching from the Buddha himself, Venerable Sāriputta didn't immediately believe every single word of it. He was heedful of the right way to train his mind, and took the teaching away with him to investigate it further. He would only accept the teaching if, after reflecting upon the Buddha's explanation of the truth, he found that it stimulated the arising of wisdom in his own mind and this insight made his mind peaceful and unified with the Dhamma (Truth). The understanding that arose must lead to the Dhamma becoming fixed within his own mind. It had to be in accordance with the truth of the way things are. The Buddha taught his disciples to accept a point of Dhamma only if, beyond all doubt, they found it to be in line with the way things are in reality – as seen both from one's own and other people's experience and understanding.

In the end, the important thing is to simply investigate the truth. You don't have to look very far away, just observe what's happening in the present moment. Watch what is happening in your own mind. Let go of the past. Let go of the future. Just be mindful of the present moment, and wisdom will arise from investigating and seeing clearly the characteristics of impermanence, suffering and nonself. If you are walking see that it's impermanent, if sitting see that it's impermanent, if lying down see that it's impermanent – whatever you are doing, these characteristics will be manifesting the whole time, because this is the way things are. That which is permanent is this truth of the way things are. That never changes. If you cultivate insight to the point where the way you view things is completely and unwaveringly in line with this truth, you will be at ease with the world.

Will it really be that peaceful going to live alone up in the mountains somewhere? It's only a temporary kind of peace. Once you start to feel hungry on a regular basis and the body lacks the nourishment that it's used to, you'll become weary of the whole experience again. The body will be crying out for its vitamins, but the hill-tribe people who provide your alms-food don't know much about the level of vitamins needed for a balanced diet. In the end you'll probably come back down and return here to the monastery. If you stay in Bangkok you'll probably complain

that the people offer too much food and that it's just a burden and lots of hassle, so perhaps you will decide it is better to go and live way out in seclusion in the forest somewhere. In truth, you must be pretty foolish if you find living on your own causes you suffering. If you find living in a community with lots of people is a lot of suffering, you are equally foolish. It's like chicken shit. If you are walking on your own somewhere carrying chicken shit, it stinks. If there is a whole group of people walking around carrying chicken shit, it stinks just the same. It can become habitual to keep lugging around that which is rotten and putrid. This is because you still have wrong view, but for someone with right view, although they might be quite correct to think that living in a large community isn't very peaceful, they would still be able to gain much wisdom from the experience.

For myself, teaching large numbers of both monks, nuns and lay people has been a great source of wisdom for me. In the past I had fewer monks living with me, but then as more lay people came to visit me and the resident community of monks and nuns grew in size, I was exposed to much more because everybody has different thoughts, views and experiences. My patience, endurance and tolerance matured and strengthened as it was stretched to its very limits. When you keep reflecting, all such experience can be of benefit to you, but if you don't understand the truth of the way things are, at first you might think that living alone is best and then after a while you might get bored with it, so then you might think that living in a large community is better. Or perhaps you might feel that being in a place where there is only a little food offered is the ideal. You might decide that a plentiful supply of food is actually the best and that little food is no good at all, or you might change again and conclude that too much food is a bad thing. In the end, most people just remain forever caught up in views and opinions, because they don't have enough wisdom to decide for themselves.

So try to see the uncertainty of things. If you are in a large community, it's uncertain. If you are living with just a small group, it's also not a sure thing. Don't attach or cling to views about the way things are. Put effort into being mindful of the present moment; investigate the body, penetrating deeper and deeper inside. The Buddha taught monks and

nuns to find a place to live and train where you are at ease: where the food is suitable, the company of fellow practitioners (*kalyāṇamitta*) is suitable and the lodgings are comfortable. But actually finding a place where all these things are just right and suited to your needs is difficult, so at the same time, he also taught that wherever you go to live you might have to encounter discomfort and put up with things that you don't like. For instance, how comfortable is this monastery? If the lay people made it really comfortable for you, what would it be like? Every day they would be at your service to bring you hot and cold drinks as you wished and all the sweets and treats that you could eat. They would be polite and praise you, saying all the right things. That's what having good lay support is like isn't it? Some monks and nuns like it that way: "The lay supporters here are really great, it's really comfortable and convenient." In no time at all the whole training in mindfulness and insight just dies. That's how it happens.

What is really comfortable and suitable for meditation can mean different things to different people, but once you know how to make your own mind content with what you have, then wherever you go you will feel at ease. If you have to stay somewhere that would perhaps not be your first choice, you still know how to remain content while you train there. If it's time to go elsewhere then you are content to go. You don't have any worries about these external things. If you don't know very much, things can be difficult; if you know too much it can also bring you a lot of suffering – everything can be a source of discomfort and suffering. As long as you don't have any insight you will constantly be caught into moods of satisfaction and dissatisfaction stimulated by the conditions around you and potentially every little thing can cause you to suffer. Wherever you go, the meaning of the Buddha's teaching remains correct, but it is the Dhamma in your own mind that is still not correct. Where will you go to find the right conditions for practice? Maybe such and such a monk has got it right and is really practising hard with the meditation – as soon as the meal is finished he hurries away to meditate. All he does is practise developing his *samādhi*. He's really dedicated and serious about it. Or maybe he isn't so dedicated, because you can't really know. If you really practise wholeheartedly



for yourself, you are certain to reach peace of mind. If others are really dedicated and genuinely training themselves, why are they not yet peaceful? This is the truth of the matter. In the end, if they aren't peaceful, it shows that they can't be really that serious about the practice after all.

When reflecting on the training in *samādhi*, it's important to understand that virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) are each essential roots that support the whole. They are mutually supporting, each having its own indispensable role to play. Each provides a necessary tool to be used in developing meditation, but it's up to each individual to discover skilful ways to make use of them. Someone with a lot of wisdom can gain insight easily; someone with little wisdom gains insight with difficulty; someone without any wisdom won't gain any insight. Two different people might be following the same way of cultivating the mind, but whether they actually gain insight into the Dhamma will depend on the amount of wisdom each has. If you go to observe and train with different teachers you must use wisdom to put what you see in perspective. How does this Ajahn do it? What's that Ajahn's style like? You watch them closely but that's as far as it goes. It's all just watching and judging on the external level. It's just looking at their behaviour and way of doing things on the surface. If you simply observe things on this level you will never stop doubting. Why does that teacher do it this way? Why does this teacher do it another way? In that monastery the teacher gives lots of talks, why does the teacher in this monastery give so few talks? In that other monastery the teacher doesn't even give any talks at all! It's just crazy when the mind proliferates endlessly, comparing and speculating about all the different teachers. In the end you simply wind yourself up into a mess. You must turn your attention inward and cultivate for yourself. The correct thing to do is focus internally on your own training, as this is how right practice (*sammā paṭipadā*) develops. You simply observe different teachers and learn from their example, but then you have to do it yourself. If you contemplate at this more subtle level, all that doubting will stop.

There was one senior monk who didn't spend a lot of time thinking and reflecting about things. He didn't give much importance to thoughts

about the past or the future, because he wouldn't let his attention move away from the mind itself. He watched intently what was arising into his awareness in the present moment. Observing the mind's changing behaviour and different reactions as it experienced things, he wouldn't attach importance to any of it, repeating the teaching to himself: "Its uncertain." "Its not a sure thing." If you can teach yourself to see impermanence in this way, it won't be long before you gain insight into the Dhamma.

In fact, you don't have to run after the proliferating mind. Really, it just moves around its own enclosed circuit; it spins around in circles. This is the way your mind works. It's *samsāra vaṭṭa* – the endless cycle of birth and death. This completely encircles the mind. If you tried pursuing the mind as it spins around would you be able to catch it? It moves so fast, would you even be able to keep up with it? Try chasing after it and see what happens... What you need to do is stand still at one point, and let the mind spin around the circuit by itself. Imagine the mind was a mechanical doll, which was able to run around. If it began running faster and faster until it was running at full speed, you wouldn't be able to run fast enough to keep up with it. But actually, you wouldn't need to run anywhere. You could just stand still in one place and let the doll do the running. If you were to stand still in the middle of the circuit, without chasing after it, you would be able to see the doll every time it ran past you and completed a lap. In fact, if you did try running after it, the more you tried to chase after and catch it, the more it would be able to elude you.

As far as going on *tudong*<sup>1</sup> is concerned, I both encourage it and discourage it at the same time. If the practitioner already has some

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<sup>1</sup>*Tudong* (Thai Language) generally refers to the practice of wandering. It is derived from the Pāli word *dhutaṅga*, which refers to the thirteen austere practices. These are strict observances recommended by the Buddha to monks, as a help to cultivate contentedness, renunciation, energy and other wholesome qualities. One or more of them may be observed for a shorter or longer period of time. They include the vows of: wearing patched-up robes, wearing only three robes, going for alms, not omitting any house while going for alms, eating at one sitting, eating only from the almsbowl, refusing all further food, living in the forest, living under a tree, living in the open air, living in a cemetery, being satisfied with whatever dwelling and sleeping in sitting position.

wisdom in the way of training, there should be no problem. However, there was one monk I knew who didn't see it as necessary to go on *tudong* into the forest; he didn't see *tudong* as a matter of travelling anywhere. Having thought about it, he decided to stay and train in the monastery, vowing to undertake three of the *dhutaṅga* practices and to keep them strictly, without going anywhere. He felt it wasn't necessary to make himself tired walking long distances with the heavy weight of his monk's almsbowl, robes and other requisites slung over his shoulder. His way was quite a valid one too; but if you really had a strong desire to go out wandering about the forests and hills on *tudong*, you wouldn't find his style very satisfying. In the end, if you have clear insight into the truth of things, you only need to hear one word of the teaching and that will bring you deep and penetrating insight.

Another example I could mention is that young novice I once encountered who wanted to practise living in a cemetery completely alone. As he was still more or less a child, hardly into his teens, I was quite concerned for his well-being, and kept an eye on him to see how he was doing. In the morning he would go on alms round in the village, and afterwards bring his food back to the cremation ground where he would eat his meal alone, surrounded by the pits where the corpses of those who hadn't been burned were buried. Every night he would sleep quite alone next to the remains of the dead. After I had been staying nearby for about a week I went along to check and see how he was. On the outside he seemed at ease with himself, so I asked him:

“So you're not afraid staying here then?”

“No I'm not afraid,” he replied.

“How come you're not frightened?”

“It seems to me unlikely that there's anything much to be afraid of.” All it needed was this one simple reflection for the mind to stop proliferating. That novice didn't need to think about all sorts of different things that would merely complicate the matter. He was “cured” straight away. His fear vanished. You should try meditating in this way.

I say that whatever you are doing – whether standing, walking, coming or going – if you sustain mindfulness without giving up, your *samādhi* won't deteriorate. It won't decline. If there's too much food

you say that it's suffering and just trouble. What's all the fuss about? If there is a lot, just take a small amount and leave the rest for everybody else. Why make so much trouble for yourself over this? It's not peaceful? What's not peaceful? Just take a small portion and give the rest away. But if you are attached to the food and feel bad about giving it up to others, then of course you will find things difficult. If you are fussy and want to have a taste of this and a taste of that, but not so much of something else, you'll find that in the end you've chosen so much food that you've filled the bowl to the point where none of it tastes very delicious anyway. So you end up attaching to the view that being offered lots of food is just distracting and a load of trouble. Why get so distracted and upset? It's you who are letting yourself get stirred up by the food. Does the food itself ever get distracted and upset? It's ridiculous. You are getting all worked up over nothing.

When there are a lot of people coming to the monastery, you say it's disturbing. Where's the disturbance? Actually, following the daily routine and the ways of training is fairly straightforward. You don't have to make a big deal out of this: you go on alms round, come back and eat the meal, you do any necessary business and chores training yourself with mindfulness, and just get on with things. You make sure you don't miss out on the various parts of the monastic routine. When you do the evening chanting does your cultivation of mindfulness really collapse? If simply doing the morning and evening chanting causes your meditation to fall apart, it surely shows that you haven't really learnt to meditate anyway. In the daily meetings, the bowing, chanting praise to the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha and everything else you do are extremely wholesome activities, so can they really be the cause for your *samādhi* to degenerate? If you think that it's distracting going to meetings, look again. It's not the meetings that are distracting and unpleasant, it's you. If you let unskilful thinking stir you up, then everything becomes distracting and unpleasant – even if you don't go out to the meetings, you end up just as distracted and stirred up.

You have to learn how to reflect wisely and keep your mind in a wholesome state. Everybody gets caught into such states of confusion and agitation, particularly those who are new to the training. What

actually happens is that you allow your mind to go out and interfere with all these things and stir itself up. When you come to train with a monastic community determine for yourself to just stay there and just keep practising. Whether other people are training in the correct way or wrong way is their business. Keep putting effort into the training, following the monastic guidelines and helping each other with any useful advice you can offer. Anyone who isn't happy training here is free to go elsewhere. If you want to stay then go ahead and get on with the practice.

It has an extremely beneficial effect on the community if there is one of the group who is self-contained and solidly training himself. The other monks around will start to notice and take example from the good aspects of that monks behaviour. They will observe him and ask themselves how it is he manages to maintain a sense of ease and calm while training himself in mindfulness. The good example provided by that monk is one of the most beneficial things he can do for his fellow beings. If you are a junior member of a monastic community, training with a daily routine and keeping to rules about the way things are done, you have to follow the lead of the senior monks and keep putting effort into the routine. Whatever the activity is you do it, and when it's time to finish you stop. You say those things that are appropriate and useful, and train yourself to refrain from speech that is inappropriate and harmful. Don't allow that kind of speech to slip out. There's no need to take lots of food at the mealtime – just take a few things and leave the rest. When you see that there's a lot of food, the tendency is to indulge and start picking a little of this and trying a little of that and that way you end up eating everything that's been offered. When you hear the invitation, "Please take some of this, Ajahn", "Please take some of that, Venerable", if you're not careful it will just stir up the mind. The thing to do is let go. Why get involved with it? You think that it's the food stirring you up, but the real root of the problem is that you let the mind go out and meddle with the food. If you can reflect and see this, it should make life a lot easier. The problem is you don't have enough wisdom. You don't have enough insight to see how the process of cause and effect works.

Actually, while on the road in the past, when it has been necessary I've even been prepared to stay in one of the village or city monasteries<sup>1</sup>. In the course of your travels when you are alone and have to pass through different monastic communities that have varying standards of training and discipline, recite the verse to yourself: “*suddhi asuddhi paccattam*” (the purity or impurity of one's virtue is something one knows for oneself), both as a protection and as a guideline for reflection. You might end up having to rely on your own integrity in this way.

When you are moving through an area you haven't been to before you might have to make a choice over the place you are going to stay for the night. The Buddha taught that monks and nuns should live in peaceful places. So, depending on what's available, you should try and find a place to stay and meditate that is peaceful. If you can't find a really quiet place, you can, as second best, at least find a place where you are able to be at peace internally. So, if for some reason it's necessary to stay in a certain place, you must learn how to live there peacefully – without letting craving (*taṇhā*) overcome the mind. If you then decide to leave that monastery or forest, don't leave because of craving. Similarly, if you are staying somewhere, don't stay there because of craving. Understand what is motivating your thinking and actions. It's true that the Buddha advised monastics to lead a lifestyle and find living conditions that are conducive to peace and suitable for meditation. How will you cope on those occasions when you can't find a peaceful place? In the end the whole thing could just drive you crazy. Where will you go next? Stay right where you are; stay put and learn to live in peace. Train yourself until you are able to stay and meditate in the place you are in. The Buddha taught that you should know and understand proper time and place according to conditions; he didn't encourage monks and nuns to roam around all over the place without any real purpose. Certainly he recommended that we find a suitable quiet place, but if that's not possible, it might be necessary to spend

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<sup>1</sup>Generally the monks living in the village and city monasteries in Thailand will spend more time studying the Pāli language and the Buddhist scriptures than training in the rules of discipline or meditation, which is more emphasized in the forest tradition.

a few weeks or a few months in a place that isn't so quiet or suitable. What would you do then? You would probably just die from the shock of it!

So learn to know your own mind and know your intentions. In the end, travelling around from place to place is only that much. When you move on to somewhere else, you tend to find more of the same of what you left behind, and you're always doubting about what might lie ahead at the next place. Then, before you know it, you could find yourself with malaria or some other unpleasant illness, and you'd have to find a doctor to treat you, give you drugs and injections. In no time at all, your mind would be more agitated and distracted than ever!

Actually, the secret to successful meditation is to bring your way of viewing things in line with the Dhamma; the important thing is to establish right view (*sammā dīṭṭhi*) in the mind. It isn't anything more complicated than that. But you have to keep putting forth effort to investigate and seek out the correct way for yourself. Naturally, this involves some difficulty, because you still lack maturity of wisdom and understanding.

So, what do you think you'll do? Try giving *tudong* a go and see what happens... you might get fed up with wandering about again; it's never a sure thing. Or maybe you're thinking that if you really get into the meditation, you won't want to go on *tudong*, because the whole proposition will seem uninteresting – but that perception is uncertain. You might feel totally bored with the idea of going on *tudong*, but that can always change and it might not be long before you start wanting to go off moving about again. Or you might just stay out on *tudong* indefinitely and continue to wander from place to place with no time limits or any fixed destination in mind – again, it's uncertain. This is what you have to reflect upon as you meditate. Go against the flow of your desires. You might attach to the view that you'll go on *tudong* for certain, or you might attach to the view that you will stay put in the monastery for certain, but either way you are getting caught in delusion. You are attaching to fixed views in the wrong way. Go and investigate this for yourself. I have already contemplated this from my own experience, and I'm explaining the way it is as simply and directly as I can. So

listen to what I am saying, and then observe and contemplate for yourself. This really is the way things are. In the end you will be able to see the truth of this whole matter for yourself. Then, once you do have insight into the truth, whatever decision you make will be accompanied by right view and in accordance with the Dhamma.

Whatever you decide to do, whether to go on *tudong* or stay on in the monastery, you must wisely reflect first. It isn't that you are forbidden from going off wandering in the forest, or going to find quiet places to meditate. If you do go off walking, really make a go of it and walk until you are worn out and ready to drop – test yourself to the limits of your physical and mental endurance. In the old days, as soon as I caught sight of the mountains, I'd feel elated and be inspired to take off. Nowadays when I see them, the body starts moaning just at the sight of them and all I want to do is turn around and go back to the monastery. There's not much enthusiasm for all that any more. Before, I'd be really happy to live up in the mountains – I even thought I'd spend my whole life living up there!

The Buddha taught to be mindful of what's arising in the present moment. Know the truth of the way things are in the present moment. These are the teachings he left you and they are correct, but your own thoughts and views are still not correctly in line with the Dhamma, and that's why you continue to suffer. So try out *tudong* if it seems like the right thing to do. See what its like moving around from place to place and how that affects your mind.

I don't want to forbid you from going on *tudong*, but I don't want to give you permission either. Do you understand my meaning? I neither want to prevent you, nor allow you to go, but I will share with you some of my experience. If you do go on *tudong*, use the time to benefit your meditation. Don't just go like a tourist, having fun travelling around. These days it looks like more and more monks and nuns go on *tudong* to indulge in a bit of sensual enjoyment and adventure rather than to really benefit their own spiritual training. If you do go, then really make a sincere effort to use the *dhutaṅga* practices to wear away the defilements. Even if you stay in the monastery, you can take up these *dhutaṅga* practices. These days, what they call "*tudong*" tends to be



more a time for seeking excitement and stimulation than training with the thirteen *dhutanga* practices. If you go off like that you are just lying to yourself when you call it “*tudong*”. It’s an imaginary *tudong*. *Tudong* can actually be something that supports and enhances your meditation. When you go you should really do it. Contemplate what is the true purpose and meaning of going on *tudong*. If you do go, I encourage you to use the experience as an opportunity to learn and further your meditation, not just waste time. I won’t let monks go off if they are not yet ready for it, but if someone is sincere and seriously interested in the practice, I won’t stop them.

When you are planning to go off, it’s worth asking yourself these questions and reflecting on them first. Staying up in the mountains can be a useful experience; I used to do it myself. In those days I would have to get up really early in the morning because the houses where I went on alms round were such a long way away. I might have to go up and down an entire mountain and sometimes the walk was so long and arduous that I wouldn’t be able to get there and back in time to eat the meal at my camp before midday. If you compare it with the way things are these days, you can see that maybe it’s not actually necessary to go to such lengths and put yourself through so much hardship. It might actually be more beneficial to go on alms round to one of the villages near to the monastery here, return to eat the meal and have lots of energy left in reserve to put forth effort in the formal practice. That’s if you’re training yourself sincerely, but if you’re just into taking it easy and like to go straight back to your hut for a sleep after the meal, that isn’t the correct way to go it. In the days when I was on *tudong*, I might have to leave my camp at the crack of dawn and use up much of my energy just in the walk across the mountains – even then I might be so pushed for time I’d have to eat my meal in the middle of the forest somewhere before getting back. Reflecting on it now, I wonder if it’s worth putting oneself to all that bother. It might be better to find a place to practise where the alms route to the local village is not too long or difficult, which would allow you to save your energy for formal meditation. By the time you have cleaned up and are back at your hut ready to continue meditating, that monk up in the mountains would still be stuck out in

the forest without even having begun to eat his meal.

Views on the best way of practice can differ. Sometimes, you actually have to experience some suffering before you can have insight into suffering and know it for what it is. *Tudong* can have its advantages, but I neither criticise those who stay in the monastery nor those who go off on *tudong* – if their aim is to progress in training themselves. I don't praise monks just because they stay in the monastery, nor do I praise monks simply because they go off on *tudong* either. Those who really deserve praise are the ones with right view. If you stay in the monastery, it should be for cultivating the mind. If you go off, it should be for cultivating the mind. The meditation and training goes wrong when you go off with the group of friends you are attached to, only interested in having a good time together and getting involved in foolish pursuits.

What do you have to say about the way of training? What do you think about what I have been saying? What do you think you'll decide to do in the future then?

**Venerable S:** I'd like to ask for some teaching about the suitability of different meditation objects for different temperaments. For a long time now I've tried calming the mind by focusing attention on the breathing in conjunction with reciting the meditation word "*Buddho*", but I have never become very peaceful. I've tried contemplating death, but that hasn't helped calm the mind down. Reflecting on the five aggregates (*khandhas*) hasn't worked either. So I've finally exhausted all my wisdom.

**Ajahn Chah:** Just let go! If you've exhausted all your wisdom, you must let go.

**Venerable S:** As soon as I begin to experience a little bit of calm during sitting meditation, a multitude of memories and thoughts immediately spring up and disturb the mind.

**Ajahn Chah:** That's just the point. It's uncertain. Teach yourself that it's not certain. Sustain this reflection on impermanence as you meditate. Every single sense object and mental state you experience is impermanent without exception. Keep this reflection present in the mind constantly. In the course of meditation, reflect that the distracted

mind is uncertain. When the mind does become calm with *samādhi*, it's uncertain just the same. The reflection on impermanence is the thing you should really hold on to. You don't need to give too much importance to anything else. Don't get involved with the things that arise in the mind. Let go. Even if you are peaceful, you don't need to think too much about it. Don't take it too seriously. Don't take it too seriously if you're not peaceful either. *Vīññāṇam aniccaṃ* – have you ever read that anywhere? It means sense consciousness is impermanent. Have you ever heard that before? How should you train yourself in relation to this truth? How should you contemplate when you find that both peaceful and agitated mind states are transient? The important thing is to sustain awareness of the way things are. In other words, know that both the calm mind and the distracted mind are uncertain. Once you know this, how will you view things? Once this understanding is implanted in the mind, whenever you experience peaceful states you know that they are transient and when you experience agitated states you know that they are transient also. Do you know how to meditate with this kind of awareness and insight?

**Venerable S:** I don't know.

**Ajahn Chah:** Investigate impermanence. How many days can those tranquil mental states really last? Sitting meditation with a distracted mind is uncertain. When the meditation brings good results and the mind enters a state of calm, that's also uncertain. This is where insight comes. What is there left for you to attach to? Keep following up on what's happening in the mind. As you investigate, keep questioning and prodding, probing deeper and deeper into the nature of impermanence. Sustain your mindfulness right at this point – you don't have to go anywhere else. In no time at all, the mind will calm down just as you want it to.

The reason practising with the meditation word “*Buddho*” doesn't make the mind peaceful, or practising mindfulness of breathing doesn't make the mind peaceful, is because you are attaching to the distracted mind. When reciting “*Buddho*” or concentrating on the breath and the mind still hasn't calmed down, reflect on uncertainty and don't get too involved with the state of mind whether its peaceful or not. Even if

you enter a state of calm, don't get too involved with it, because it can delude you and cause you to attach too much meaning and importance to that state. You have to use some wisdom when dealing with the deluded mind. When it is calm you simply acknowledge the fact and take it as a sign that the meditation is going in the right direction. If the mind isn't calm you simply acknowledge the reality that the mind is confused and distracted, but there's nothing to be gained from refusing to accept the truth and trying to struggle against it. When the mind is peaceful you can be aware that it is peaceful, but remind yourself that any peaceful state is uncertain. When the mind is distracted, you observe the lack of peace and know that it is just that – the distracted state of mind is equally as prone to change as a peaceful one.

If you have established this kind of insight, the attachment to the sense of self collapses as soon as you begin to confront it and investigate. When the mind is agitated, the moment you begin to reflect on the uncertainty of that state, the sense of self, blown up out of attachment, begins to deflate. It tilts to one side like an inflatable boat that has been punctured. As the air rushes out of the boat, it starts to capsize and similarly the sense of self collapses. Try it out for yourself. The trouble is that usually you fail to catch your deluded thinking fast enough. As it arises, the sense of self immediately forms around the mental agitation, but as soon as you reflect on its changing nature the attachment collapses.

Try looking at this for yourself. Keep questioning and examining deeper and deeper into the nature of attachment. Normally, you fail to stop and question the agitation in the mind. But you must be patient and feel your way. Let the agitated proliferation run its course, and then slowly continue to feel your way. You are more used to not examining it, so you must be determined to focus attention on it, be firm and don't give it any space to stay in the mind. But when I give talks, you usually burst out complaining in frustration: "All this old Ajahn ever talks about is impermanence and the changing nature of things." From the first moment you can't stand hearing it and just want to flee somewhere else. "Luang Por only has one teaching... that everything is uncertain." If you are truly fed up with this teaching, you should go off and pursue

your meditation until you develop enough insight to bring some real confidence and certainty to your mind. Go ahead and give it a go. In no time at all you will probably be back here again! So try to commit these teachings to memory and store them in your heart. Then go ahead and try out wandering about on *tudong*. If you don't come to understand and see the truth in the way I've explained, you'll find little peace. Wherever you are, you won't be at ease within yourself. You won't be able to find anywhere that you can really meditate at all.

I agree that doing a lot of formal meditation to develop *samādhi* is a good thing. Are you familiar with the terms *ceto-vimutti* and *paññā-vimutti*? Do you understand the meaning of them? *Vimutti* means liberation from the mental taints (*āsava*)<sup>1</sup>. There are two ways the mind can gain liberation: *ceto-vimutti* refers to liberation that comes after *samādhi* has been developed and perfected to its most powerful and refined level. The practitioner first develops the ability to suppress the defilements completely through the power of *samādhi* and then turns to the development of insight to finally gain liberation. *Paññā-vimutti* means release from the outflows where the practitioner develops *samādhi* to a level where the mind is completely one-pointed and firm enough to support and sustain insight, which then takes the lead in cutting through the defilements.

These two kinds of liberation are comparable to different kinds of trees. Some species of trees grow and flourish with frequent watering, but others can die if you give them too much water. With those trees you only need to give them small amounts of water, just enough to keep them going. Some species of pine are like that: if you over-water them they just die. You only need to give them a little water once in a while. Strange, isn't it? Look at this pine tree. It appears so dry and parched that you wonder how it manages to grow. Think about it. Where does it get the water it needs to survive and produce those big, lush branches? Other kinds of trees would need much more water to grow to a similar size. Then there are those kinds of plants that they put in pots and hang

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<sup>1</sup>The four *āsava* or taints include: the taint of sense-desire (*kāmāsava*), of desiring eternal existence (*bhavāsava*), of wrong views (*dittthāsava*), and of ignorance (*avijjāsava*).

up in different places with the roots dangling in mid-air. You'd think they would just die, but very quickly the leaves grow longer and longer with hardly any water at all. If they were just the ordinary kind of plants that grow on the ground, they would probably just shrivel up. It's the same with these two kinds of release. Do you see it? It is just that they naturally differ in this way.

*Vimutti* means liberation. *Ceto-vimutti* is liberation that comes from the strength of mind that has been trained in *samādhi* to the maximum level. It's like those trees that need lots of water to flourish. The other kinds of trees only need a small amount of water. With too much water they just die. It's their nature to grow and thrive requiring only small amounts of water. So the Buddha taught that there are two kinds of liberation from the defilements, *ceto-vimutti* and *paññā-vimutti*. To gain liberation, it requires both wisdom and the power of *samādhi*. Is there any difference between *samādhi* and wisdom?

**Venerable S:** No.

**Ajahn Chah:** Why do they give them different names? Why is there this split between *ceto-vimutti* and *paññā-vimutti*?

**Venerable S:** It's just a verbal distinction.

**Ajahn Chah:** That's right. Do you see it? If you don't see this, you can very easily go running around labelling and making such distinctions and even get so carried away that you start to lose your grip on reality. Actually though, each of these two kinds of liberation does have a slightly different emphasis. It wouldn't be correct to say that they were exactly the same, but they aren't two different things either. Am I correct if I answer in this way? I will say that these two things are neither exactly the same, nor different. This is the way I answer the question. You must take what I have said away with you and reflect on it.

Talking about the speed and fluency of mindfulness makes me think of the time I was wandering alone and having come across an old abandoned monastery in the course of my travels, set up my umbrella and mosquito net to camp there and practise meditation for a few days. In the grounds of the monastery there were many fruit trees, the branches of which were laden with ripe fruit. I really wanted to eat some but I

didn't dare to because I was afraid that the trees were the property of the monastery and I hadn't received permission to take any. Later on a villager came by with a basket and seeing that I was staying there, asked me for permission to pick the fruit. Perhaps they asked me because they thought I was the owner of the trees. Reflecting on it, I saw that I had no real authority to give them permission to take the fruit, but that if I forbade them they would criticise me as being possessive and stingy with the monastery's fruit trees – either way there would be some harmful results. So I replied to the layperson: "Even though I'm staying in this monastery, I'm not the owner of the trees. I understand you want some of the fruit. I won't forbid you from taking any, but I won't give you permission either. So it's up to you." That's all it needed: they didn't take any! Speaking in this way was actually quite useful; I didn't forbid them, but I didn't give them permission either, so there was no sense of being burdened by the matter. This was the wise way to deal with such a situation – I was able to keep one step ahead of them. Speaking that way produced good results then and it's still a useful way of speaking to this day. Sometimes if you speak to people in this unusual manner it's enough to make them wary of doing something wrong.

What do they mean by temperament (*carita*)?

**Bhikkhu A.:** Temperament? I'm not sure how to answer that.

**Ajahn Chah:** The mind is one thing, temperament is another and the wisdom faculty another. So how do you train with this? Contemplate them. How do they talk about them? There is the person of lustful temperament, hateful temperament, deluded temperament, intelligent temperament and so on. Temperament is determined by those mental states within which the mind attaches and conceals itself most often. For some people it's lust, for others it's aversion. Actually, these are all just verbal descriptions of the characteristics of the mind, but they can be distinguished as distinct from each other.

So you've been a monk for six years already. You've probably been running after your thoughts and moods long enough – you've already been chasing them for many years. There are quite a few monks who want to go and live alone and I've got nothing against it. If you want to live alone then give it a go. If you're living in a community, stick with

it. Neither is wrong – if you don't reflect in the wrong way. If you are living alone and caught into wrong thinking, that will prevent you benefiting from the experience. The most appropriate kind of place for practising meditation is somewhere quiet and peaceful. But when a suitably peaceful place is not available, if you are not careful your meditation practice will just die. You'll find yourself in trouble. So be careful not to scatter your energy and awareness by seeking out too many different teachers, different techniques or places to meditate. Gather together your thoughts and focus your energy. Turn attention inwards and sustain awareness on the mind itself. Use these teachings to observe and investigate the mind over a long period of time. Don't discard them; keep them with you as a subject for reflection. Look at what I've been saying about all conditioned things being subject to change. Impermanence is something to investigate over time. It won't take long before you gain clear insight into it. One teaching a senior monk gave me when I was new to meditation that has stuck with me is simply to go ahead and train the mind. The important thing is not to get caught up in doubting. That's enough for now.

