Traces

Short Dhamma talks

by Ajahn Kalyāno

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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa
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Buddhaṃ Dhammaṃ Saṅghaṃ Namassāmi

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Brand new day
Boots and laces

Out to play
Tracks and traces

On the way
Facts and faces

Going to stay
In sacred places

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Brand new day
Boots and laces

The Problem of Suffering

The Buddha very plainly and straight-to-the-point saw suffering in itself as the primal problem that needed to be solved. He considered this problem very deeply, in its entirety, and found that the solution was there in front of him already, in the complete penetration of the problem itself – this gives us the First Noble Truth, or the Noble Truth of Suffering.

So what hope is there for us on the same path? It seems to me that very few people actually contemplate any problem for very long before they start looking for a way to get away from that problem, and even more so when it comes to the uncomfortable problem of suffering (however, this is surely forgivable).

How are we then to overcome this barrier? Perhaps by gritting our teeth and enduring it all until we somehow get the message. Or perhaps we will need loads of therapy to cope with all the inevitable suffering of the world? Both of these methods are frequently taught, but they are not very appealing, and they represent a fundamental misunderstanding as to the whole nature of this enquiry into suffering: the assumption that we are to investigate the feeling of suffering rather than the perception 'suffering'.

But then, does this instead mean an intellectual exercise to prove that everything is suffering?

Not very appealing either; in fact downright depressing.

This is a second common misunderstanding. Yet if suffering is simply seen with a very peaceful and meditative mind, we will let go and the experience will be not one of sorrow but of blissful release. This is the way of the Buddha.

Teacher and Student

Staring at the blank screen before writing can be nice, looking at the emptiness. Closing the document can be a relief. In the middle there can be a lot of uncertainty.

Communication is not always easy. In Buddhist circles, however, I am not expected to take all the responsibility, and this can make all the difference.

In Buddhism some of this responsibility instead falls on the listener; the relationship between teacher and student is not a one-way relationship. It is the duty of the teacher to present the teaching to the best of his ability, and the duty of the student to tell the teacher if they think his or her teaching is straying from the Dhamma; it is then the duty of the teacher to listen to the feedback. It is further the duty of the student to find another teacher if things are not working out. This can demand a lot of honesty, and for the studentan attitude of being prepared to move on and try to findthis new teacher. We might find that we have to put the Dhamma before attachments to individuals and places.

For the teacher the challenge is often to stay with the truth rather than trying just to please the student, which is a potential pitfall, especially if his livelihood depends on the relationship. In this respect what protects the Dhamma is for faithful Buddhists to support any monk or nun who is keeping the discipline with his or her basic needs, regardless of their teaching. This generosity is based on the faith that when the monks and nuns are training the way they do, they are developing an understanding of the inner life that is relevant to all.

This can be hard to fathom.

"What relevance does all this have to life in the office?"

I hear them say.

"Listen with an open mind and decide for yourselves," is the reply. People from all walks of life have been doing so for two and half thousand years and found sufficient value to support Monastics in return. Must be something in it, don't you think? After all, has human nature changed so much?

Spiritual Friendship

There is quite a contrast in direction between a spiritual friendship and the more worldly kind of friendship.

Just as a worldly mind is based on desire while a spiritual mind is based on wisdom and compassion – a worldly friendship is based on liking and disliking and a spiritual friendship on mindfulness. This means that our spiritual relationships can be of great value to us on the path. Sometimes, for instance, we can see more clearly what is happening in an outer dynamic than we can in an inner one, and by those means – by using the outer as a mirror for the inner – we can ascertain whether we are headed in the right direction or not.

Worldly friendship then is based on doing nice things together, on common tastes and preferences.

And the habit of satisfying our worldly needs through each others company in turn leads to an attachment and dependence, which gives rise to more emotional needs – we look for reassurance that these desires will continue to be met in some way. Such a relationship can also begin to become more complex as our desires take the form of views regarding ourselves or the other person, which make us try to recast the friend into what we want him or her to be.

Spiritual friendship has nothing to do with any of these things; in fact it goes in the opposite direction.
A common view comes first, not last. A common vision of the spiritual path or goal is the beginning, the basis. This then guides all the rest. The Buddha describes spiritual friendship as 'association with the beautiful'.

We can picture this as two practitioners bowing together at the same shrine, or as each party respecting the spiritual aspirations of the other.

So keeping a spiritual friendship together requires regularly checking where we both are on the path in relation to the common vision. Making this vision take shape is then the sole purpose of the relationship. So the ultimate in terms of a spiritual friendship will be both to support each other in the striving for enlightenment, and also supporting a monastery, or retreat centre in order to ensure that the material and practical support for the spiritual life is there too.

In this way worldly priorities are not omitted – doing so would just amount to spiritual idealism, but they are put at the end, they come after the spiritual affairs.

We define what is needed in concrete terms to support the vision while we can also make practical compromises without compromising that vision. We could perhaps combine spiritual discussions with baby-sitting, or something like that.

Finding a Sense of Urgency

For most people by far, the most prominent hindrance to spiritual practice – although not the most obvious one – is procrastination. Meditation is so often the thing that can wait until tomorrow. When did you last think, "I must just sit and do nothing"? Sure, sometimes we are desperate for quiet or space, yet the tendency is often to look for these outside of ourselves, which is of course easier – but less fruitful.

Often spiritual practice is the last thing on our list because it is considered to merely be the cream on the cake or the cherry on top; or in other words, usually in turning to spirituality, we are seeking to put a spiritual gloss on our lives; but this is just spiritual materialism and it is simply barking up the wrong tree, because all true spirituality has a renunciant flavour: It's about letting go. Letting go of all the things that don't really matter.

The traditional way to counteract this procrastination and instead seek a sense of urgency is to contemplate death. However many people getting nervous about this topic tell me, very hurriedly, "There's nothing you can do about that!"

But in the light of our mortality we are drawn to re-examine our lives and see what really matters.

Self Criticism and Self Love

Many Western practitioners ask me how to develop love for themselves. Most of the people who ask are very good people. So why are they so self-critical? And why does simply being nice, kind or positive toward themselves not seem to really help very much.

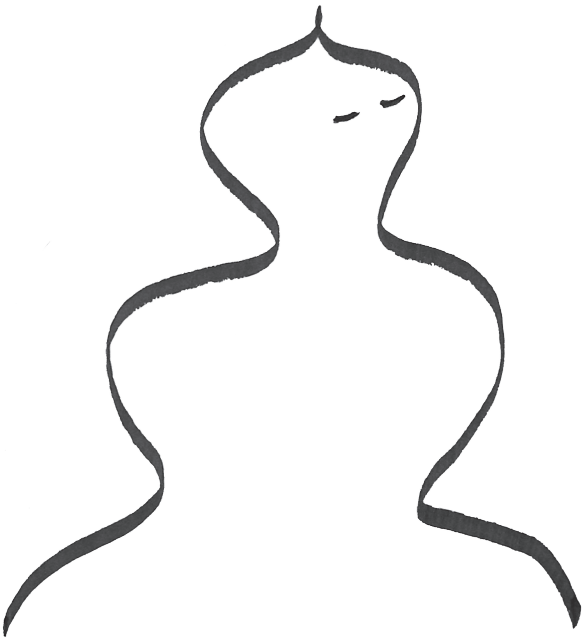
Where did we get so screwed up, they will ask? Perhaps way back in the misty past?

In the modern age, however, with wealth and technology, science and psychology, we have become so capable in so many ways that there is no end to the things we could do for ourselves or for others. In my eyes, unless we can find some limit to all this, we will always feel guilty for not doing enough. My solution to all this has been the Buddha's contempltive teaching.

Through true wisdom we can look at the greater, longer term perspective and realise that we are not as able as we thought to control or change things. If we see this in the right way this can be very liberating.

Drawing on a relevant example from modern sociology many young men get depressed because they feel that they are no longer needed. This is because women are now so much more able to do without them with modern childcare and employment opportunity. The positive side of this, that the sociologists are trying to emphasise, is that men are also much freer than previously to do their own thing. In this way, useless is good. We can live with gay abandon, can we not? But where is the love in it? In our ability to set others free in turn. If we find this freedom we realise that it leads to a different kind of love, a transformation of love into something

that is deeply true and deeply freeing for all of us. We find we can abandon, along with all the rest, the very self that we found it so hard to love in the first place.



Skilful Thought

Discussions of thought very often do not recognize the two sources from which it arises. One is the flow of automatic thought that operates just like the senses.

We see something, for example, and an automatic flow of thought (memory, imagination etc.) arises as a result in the mind. Then there is the thought that we add consciously to that automatic flow in the present.

When our thought in the present is wholesome it takes the automatic flow in a good direction, towards happiness. When it is unwholesome it takes it in a bad direction, towards unhappiness.

When the automatic flow is silent or empty then we have an empty canvas to paint on. Meditation practice helps us to see this process clearly and act appropriately. We do not get mixed up and see these two sources of thought as the same. We don't blindly believe or join in with the automatic; at the same time we see the importance of it, that if we are not careful it can make us suffer.

We clearly see what is wholesome or unwholesome in our present experience, as defined by its result in happiness or unhappiness. We see the influence of present-moment thought, good or bad, on our own mind machine.

Ultimately we see the potential to replace automatic with present moment thought and take control of the mind. When we continue to take it in a wholesome direction we see the happiness that results. The present moment thought becomes more and more dominant until it takes over.

In contrast we see that we can never control the mind that goes in the unwholesome direction, we see that it takes on a life of its own.

Meditation for World Peace

When we meditate we can be doing so to look for inner peace, or we can have a grander vision and purpose – we can be practising for world peace or happiness.

Actually if we can clearly see the connection between these two ways of practice, they may not be so different after all. The difference may be not what we are doing in our practice but in our attitude. Do we have an attitude of sharing? Do we have faith that our state of mind can have a wider influence on the world or not? Even if we cannot see this influence while we are meditating, we can find ourselves kinder afterwards. Then we can see that peace in the world can begin with peace in our own hearts.

Indeed we don't have to have problems in order to meditate, we can do so for these higher reasons. We can be finding a peaceful place, a safe refuge in ourselves, by meditating or by coming to the monastery, and we can then be sharing this peace with the world.

Some people wonder why monks and nuns are not involved in politics. Maybe there is more than one way to change the world.

Out to play
Tracks and traces

A Summary of Dhamma Practice

The ability to tolerate painful feeling opens up a new dimension to experience. If we can develop this power, our minds are no longer obsessed with avoiding these feelings. In this way we let go of our desires for the sake of following moral precepts or a discipline, this is virtue (sīla). We let go of our desires in order to follow the breath instead, this is meditation. We practise contemplating the suffering of mind and body to let go of desire once and for all, this is wisdom.

It is only if we cannot see anything other than conditioned reality that the Buddha's teachings on suffering can seem a negation of everything.

Ultimately, all our suffering arises from such a limited view. Dhamma offers a different view of what is real and possible; by merely accepting this potential we will be happier, if we can realise it much happier still.

The end of suffering is to see things completely the way they are, and to completely accept that truth.

The Mind

As we start to look inside we realise that what remains when we close our eyes to meditate are precisely those things that we get attached to when they are open. If we can avoid blindly reacting to such emotions it is good, but not to respond to emotion at all is not good. If we look for a resolution to a painful memory simply by watching together with attempting to avoid adding new negative karma to it, then we will not have lastingly gotten over anything, even if it might seem so at that time.

Every time the emotions connected to that memory arise the pain will keep arising, until we add something positive or change our view of what happened.

The best way to operate is to allow things to come up on their own, to come to us if possible and then, when they have arisen, look for a wholesome and skilful response.

Taking it further, the practice is aimed not merely at resolving specifics or making peace with ourselves, but to really get to the heart of things. When we can do this – and the calmer and emptier heart acts like a mirror to the mind – we see that emotions arise based on perceptions. And we have different sets of emotions based on different perceptions that we have had over time, often related to different intentions or roles.

And these emotions give rise to different personae. This is natural, it is only if we have fixed ideas about our feelings that we become confused and experience inner conflict.

This 'fixing' is like touching ourselves with our minds, and it reinforces and attaches us to emotions, making them appear more real, just like touching the physical world makes it real in our minds. But if we don't touch we can instead

re-examine the validity of our perceptions. Yet we also have to recognize and tackle what it is that makes us want to 'touch ourselves'.

How does the craving for and attachment to such feeling arise?

The Body

We have to trust the teaching that the source of attachment – i.e. feeling – is different from the source of detachment – the clear seeing of the body. This fact makes the deepest practice indirect; we undermine our attachment to the body in order to uproot our attachment to feeling. While we are walking this path we might discover the pleasant feeling of space or of letting go whereby we overcome the need for the pleasant feelings of holding on. This is our stepping stone to letting go of feeling altogether.

Then the only way to prevent the needs of the body or mind to pull us out of these pleasant spaces in our minds and hearts is to draw those spaces right into the body. Relaxing the body is the first step; being relaxed about the body is the second. Yet the ultimate purpose here is to completely let go of the body, at the right time, in the right and peaceful way, for the right reason.

This will take us to the Deathless.

If we see that the mind in its worldly conditions is dependent on the body, but in essence is not the body; then we can see the possibility of a mind that is not dependent on a particular body but just any body – hence the possibility of rebirth. We can let go moment by moment and of one body for another.

And if this mind-essence or spirit becomes stable we see the possibility for it to detach completely from all bodies – or from physicality in itself. We will also see that while we live out our lives, the detached position is the mind contained within the body, neither in the world nor away from it, and that such detachment is gained by seeing suffering with compassion. Seeing suffering the mind lets go, but having compassion it does not withdraw.

Mindfulness of Feeling

Let us consider the role of mindfulness and meditation in our active daily life. It is the nature of the mind that it can only be on one thing at a time. It is also the nature of the mind to wander from one thing to another. So to develop mindfulness, most of us need to simply develop the skill of keeping our minds from wandering, hence the meditation practice.

Mindfulness also requires a clear conscience, a sense of acceptance and commitment to what we are doing and also clear decision-making, yes or no, so that the mind is not full of regret or continually wavering and doubting.

There will then be times when the mind gets tired and needs a break, again we can use the meditation to let go of our task and rest the mind, and if that is not enough we can more actively withdraw in some way.

Becoming aware of the body and relaxing is a good way – relax the body and the mind will follow.

One way in which we lose our mindfulness, perhaps the main way, is that our feelings about something draw us away from our task or situation.

Often these days we are then given the advice to be aware of our feelings, but this divides our attention.

But if we instead ignore our feelings, then we can also go wrong since they may represent valid feedback – the solution is to acknowledge the feeling and check to see if this is the case. If we feel averse to something we can ask ourselves what exactly we are averse to, and similarly when we are attracted to something.

In this way we regain our attention to search for the source of the feelings and find some perspective.

A neutral perspective is what leaves our minds calm and best supports our mindfulness. If we find it difficult to find a new perspective for ourselves we can talk to someone else, preferably a neutral person, to help find clarity.

It is considered healthy these days to get out of "being stuck in our heads" and instead feel our feelings. The quality of this attention to feelings, however, is also important. Anxious attention will make anxious feelings worse, for example. So there is a need to calm the mind or find someone else with a calmer mind to help us before we go to such feelings. We need to recognise that it can be hard to stay calm and clear around negative feelings, or that we can get hooked on pleasant ones that are not taking us in a good direction.

A calm mind is one that is sensitive as well as one that is not easily overwhelmed.

Many of our feelings constitute an alarm ringing in response to an event – whether real, remembered or imagined. Going to a feeling with a calm mind, a calm touch, can be like resetting the alarm. This is skilful once we are confident that we have noted the danger or realised that there is no real danger. But to reset the alarm in the face of danger is just heedless.

There is also a tendency to get drawn into feelings to the point where we lose track of what they are really about, we focus down on them, fishing for meaning, when it is by this very act of focus that we lose our awareness of the context in which they are arising. All feelings are perfectly clear when we can step back and see the whole picture. When we say that we are not sure how we feel about something, this does

not actually mean that the feelings are not clear, but that our perceptions as they shift around on something, our feelings change.

A good question to ask is "how am I seeing things that make me feel like this?" Getting to the perception behind the feeling will always clarify. Often too, we are not sure what we want in a situation, but if we can get to a clear perception we will know the answer.

It is interesting how we think and speak in terms of feelings, when what we are really talking about is perceptions and desires. Perhaps we are not being very up front even to ourselves, and this gives so much power to feelings – how can they be questioned when we constantly let them operate in the dark? And it's not at all the case that giving them such power makes them any more pleasant.

So, stepping back from and opening up around feelings to gain the full picture can be the key. This can also help us discover bigger feelings. In my mind, when it comes to feelings, the bigger the better. So it is in the spiritual life, we are prioritising bigger and more lasting feelings, and we are careful not to sacrifice these for short term gratification. We also recognise that spiritual feelings associated with letting go are more pleasant than sensual feelings.

When our minds are very clear and quick, it can be possible to note pleasant and unpleasant perceptions of things without the arising of feelings of attraction or aversion in the first place. Actually we can protect ourselves from feelings of suffering with the perception 'suffering'.

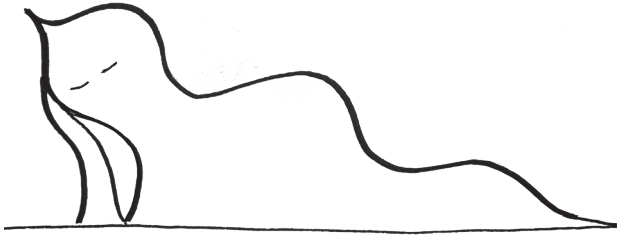
So much for the more transitory and particular feelings, what about the underlying stress of life? Let us take fear as an example of acute stress. By momentarily placing our

awareness on the feeling rather than running from it, we can steady ourselves and look for a course of action. If the course of action is clear but we are still afraid, then the solution is to reflect. We can ask ourselves what we are afraid of, in that way taking our minds back to the task or situation, looking for a change of perception; and if we find a new one, we can feel out the change, relaxing into the new perception.

In a deeper sense and in the long-term, fear has its roots in anxiety as to our physical safety. This is very often misplaced, arising through a wrong perception, but none the less very hard to shake as the perceptions involved are preconscious and very deep-rooted.

The feelings as well have always been around.

The meditator can discover that the ultimate solution to fear and stress is to let go of our attachment to the body. This is protecting our minds from the arising of stress by establishing a different perception. This comes through deeper meditation practice and reflection, it comes gradually and is not an all or nothing thing to begin with. If we manage to let go a little bit we will be a bit less serious about life. If we manage to let go of the body completely (this may also be transitory or permanently) instead of stress, our minds will be full of joy and a sense of liberation.



Working Through our Karma

Resolving past karma.

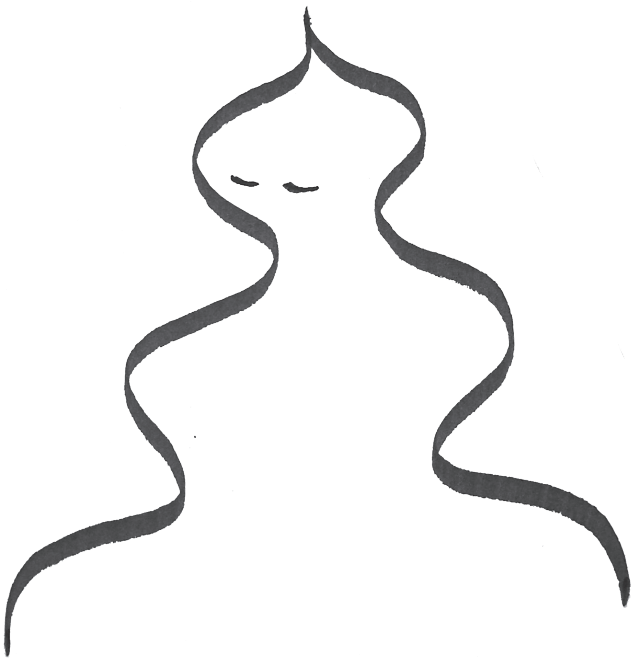
The Buddha's teaching on karma often gets associated with the teachings on rebirth and are therefore somewhat neglected in the Western world where we do not believe in such things. This is the case despite the fact that many people come to the teachings looking to resolve suffering rooted in the past. The Buddhist understanding of how to do this is very simple however and actually does not require a belief in rebirth. People can act to resolve bad karma, the dark events of the past, whatever their cause, by making good karma in the present.

This is not blaming ourselves for whatever bad things that happened in the past, it is not to dwell on the past at all, but to see and concentrate on the potential for positive action in the present. The ability to do this is one of the benefits of strong mindfulness, of a mind strongly rooted in the present. This swings the overall balance of the mind, or of the situation we are in, from unhappy to happy. I have developed a lot of faith in this.

I notice how if my mood is happy overall then issues from the past or painful memories are not a problem, they are rather a source of motivation to strive on.

I saw this very strongly when my father was made redundant at work and to everyone's complete surprise and dismay committed suicide. What really helped me was not to dwell on the past (or to blame his heartless bosses) but to throw myself into what I could do to help the situation in the present – initially this was drawn out of me by looking after my mother and brother who had found his body and were in

deep shock. Then looking after everyone, including myself, through all the grief.



Keeping in credit

I also notice in the present how inescapable karma is. If someone does something for me and I do not repay that in some way then I feel uncomfortable, there is a sense of being in debt. This seems to apply in general as well, feeling in debt to the world rather than in credit is an unhappy state. In contrast being in credit with the world is a joyful feeling – this is what makes generous people so genuinely, lastingly happy.

Let me poke fun at the modern consumer attitude for a moment, by way of contrast – surviving at the most voluntary end of the voluntary sector as I am, where there is no money involved at all – if I read between the lines am I not hearing the unhappy ones saying: "I am too busy to do anything for you but I'm not too busy for you to do something for me. And above all else, I am always too busy to do anything I don't like." "Hmm... no wonder you're unhappy", I think to myself...

We can draw a parallel between the resolution of past karma, that we have already considered, and the management of karma in the present. Here too it is not a matter of needing to resolve a particular situation, to repay a particular person. Although this might always be appropriate it is not always possible. If for example a doctor gives us a life-saving operation, we cannot give him or her an operation in return. That would be silly.

What we can do is to be grateful, and then in turn this will motivate us to do things for others, for the world, in return. If we are mindful enough, what remains in the centre of our attention is the goodness (or otherwise) of our actions of body, speech or mind. Then we will be clearing our minds

of karma as we go (like the windscreen-wipers of a car clear the screen to keep our vision clear as we go along) and entering fully into the present. This is the very best we can do, our highest potential within the world of karma. Yet it is also here in the present that we can naturally experience the insight into the nature of the world that is the escape from karma altogether. The key to this is to see our common humanity through the development of mindfulness of the body.

What is an Emotion?

In Buddhism we see all emotional suffering as constituting some kind of lack of response from the mind. This is different from understanding our suffering to be a question of merely being exposed to our own negativity or that of other's negativity. Instead it is recognising suffering as an expression of need, and seeing the potential of the mind and heart to satisfy those needs and thereby resolve the whole situation.

Our initial lack of response can be originated in our own inability to hear the underlying needs. Secondly, our ability to respond to these needs is hampered by our reactions, through the dominance of habit. The stirred up emotions can be so intense that we end up lost in them, responding to them rather than to their causes.

But in the spiritual training we can begin to calm these reactions, to calm our minds in the face of them and step back from them. And so we can see them for what they are – a kind of automatic pilot. And then through mindfulness we take the joystick in life, so to speak, and steer ourselves in a better way.

Then our training of the mind can go in different directions – we can meditate, or contemplate, or even both: Regarding meditation we can strengthen our mindfulness further and add positive qualities to our attention in the present, patience and kindness, for example. Such qualities can become universally wholesome spontaneous responses, to all life situations.

As for contemplation, our calmer mind gives us the space we need to question our perceptions of life, to find more skilful alternatives that are both completely benevolent and

also in line with reality or the truth, and that acknowledge our needs and also dare to question them.

Buddhism and the Ecological Crisis

There seems to be a growing acceptance of the fact that the earth is beginning to struggle to accommodate the needs – or let's be honest – the outright greed of modern man. We can then, perhaps, ask such questions as:

What can be done to cure the greed that could lead to humanity's destruction?

The overcoming of greed is a central theme in the teaching and practice of Buddhism which is thankfully beginning to find a stronger voice. We are trying to promote a more interdependent view of the world that generates empathy. What we can add to this is firstly that spiritual pleasures, meditation for example, are very eco-friendly; secondly we can give more emphasis to the value of disciplined conduct on the part of the individual. The practical value of this is, of course, recognised, but the power of such discipline to deeply change our relationship to nature is often underestimated. I lived in the tropical forest for years, not permitted by my monastic rules to kill insects.

Over time this transformed my relationship to the ants and mosquitoes which were a constant pest – and consequently to the whole environment – into one of harmless communion.

What about the helpless anger or despair of those who suffers from this greed?

Are there, for example, hidden causes here for the apparent increase in delinquency amongst young people? Or are my eyes on the world just getting too old and sensible? I believe that Buddhism as a source of faith and as a deep psychology can help us understand and manage the emotions rela-

ted to death or impermanence. It is surely these emotions that turn us away from facing the issues. In Buddhism we teach people both the wisdom to let go of attachment to things and the compassion to stay with those things, hence winning a lighter and more caring touch on life: Recently we had someone come to the monastery to commemorate the recent death of their favourite Aunt. When the ceremony was all over they were trying to talk to the monks but their little girl would not settle.

An elderly lady friend of ours in the room was pointed out and recommended as her new Aunt, saying, "there are lots of them in the world."

What if the planet cannot be saved? Then where are we to find hope? We can perhaps see for the first time in the current context how humanity up until now found this in 'the new generation'. Then what if there were to be no more mankind?

Perhaps we find hope in the preservation of human knowledge – the computer chip blasted into space?

Yet so much of this knowledge surely concerns and is hence based upon the earth that would then be lost. The earth that one day, however long in the future, must be lost. To me our greatest if not our only eternal hope is the Dhamma. Dhamma is a source of universal truth. If we can see the full potential Dhamma as it really is, as a part of nature that can never be destroyed, we can have hope. We have a new purpose in life promoting this understanding and faith in ourselves and in others. If we get this right this is in no way a negation of the transitory aspects of nature. It is rather seeing the Dhamma as the highest expression of nature, its highest evolution – the way that an aspect of nature, one that

I believe can be formative, can truly find a permanent basis. I would argue that the enlightened mind, free of limitation in time and place, is capable of reaching back out to the universe, so to speak, from its refuge in the beyond. I think it is possible to argue, based both on philosophy and the experience of deep meditation, that this can be true. This is not such a simple matter, however. We need to find a number of ways, philosophical and meditative, through which we free up the mind from its material constraints.

I have tried to tackle this in the recent book 'Virtue and Reality'. Just to try to give you a taste, to quote from Gregory Bateson, "...a miracle is a materialists idea of how to escape from materialism...the reply to crude materialism is not miracles but beauty."

To learn how to understand as suggested in this quote can also be to see like this and to find a new depth of appreciation for nature. This is to see with the quality of 'muditā' (sympathetic joy) at nature's achievement.

If we can find faith in all this as a possibility, we have a hope in those enlightened already and those to come as being able to take human consciousness forward beyond its material constraints. We see the Earth is the perfect training ground for the mind striving for enlightenment and therefore we do whatever we can to preserve it.

Having a few more enlightened beings in the world already will also certainly help to preserve the Earth.

Interestingly, many Thai Buddhists believe that while there are enlightened beings on the Earth, the Devas (heavenly beings) will protect it from destruction. This is inspiring but I hope such beliefs don't take the place of ecological responsibility on the human level!

To sum up, in addressing these three questions I hope we have done something to tackle the human greed, hatred and delusion respectively that are both at the source of the ecological crisis and are the results of it; they are indeed the forces behind this destructive cycle as a whole, as they are behind all other suffering.

Art and Poetry in Dhamma Practice

In order to yield insight the mind has to get beyond thought. This can be purely through the meditation process or we can also use other skilful means to train our minds towards this goal. Two ways of taking the mind toward silence are through contemplative poetry or art. To appreciate certain poetry one has to read or listen quietly, in a way that does not analyse the words but allows the mind to form a picture. Art of a more abstract nature is similar – we look with an attention that is not too tight nor too loose. A mind that is relaxed and open, yet attentive, allowing an impression to form.

This ability to allow a picture to form in the mind based upon sense impressions is part of the insight process.

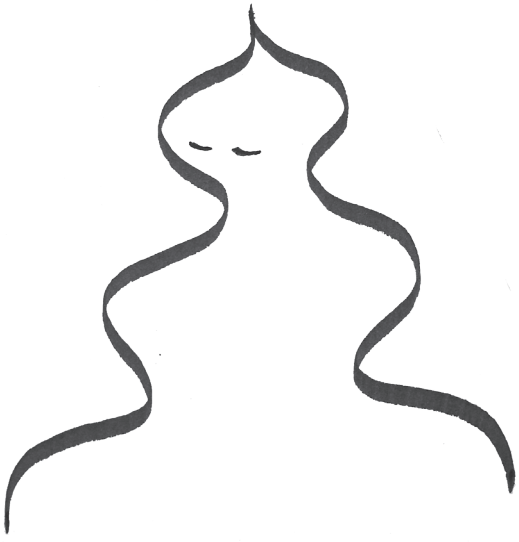
There is also a degree of sense or sensual restraint, a composure of the senses, that does not get into detail, grasping or fondling or criticising. It is a way we can begin to open the mind. This is a refined aesthetics rather than a coarse level of appreciation. In my opinion, however, such refined aesthetics can get us stuck. It is looking for the best of both worlds – the sublime form and the space – not realising the greater pleasure and purity in the completely open and free mind and heart, which is at one with space.

Our next step in this direction is to recognise through mindfulness that beauty is not just in the object, it is literally in the heart and eye of the beholder (mindfulness is therefore also a natural creator of art or poetry). In fact the appreciation of the mind itself can give a stronger impression than the object. In this way we find a source of enjoyment at least semi-independent of the sense world. There is a kind of refined sensuality to do with light and space where the line

begins to blur between the light of the world and the brightness of the mind, for example. This becomes like heaven.

If we can see heaven on earth in this way, it is like the gradual path where the Buddha teaches us to see the advantages of the refined heavenly realms as a way to let go of coarser, worldly sense pleasures.

This lightness of touch prepares us for the experience of entering samādhi through contemplating the suffering of the world. Here the experience of the emergence of the mind itself overwhelms us as we further let go of our attachment. This is a very different kind of pleasure, the bliss of the mind opening rather than sensually grasping or fondling.



The Euthanasia Debate

From a secular materialist viewpoint a human being is only a physical process, or a biological robot, and life is about experiencing pleasures through the sense doors.

With this perspective euthanasia may seem to become a natural and logical conclusion for a very sick person. A lot of people who advocate legalizing euthanasia are operating out of this modern perspective without knowing it, never mind questioning it.

I would like to suggest – speaking not only from the perspective of a renunciant monk, but also as someone who has worked in hospitals with seriously ill people for more than 10 years – that there are two very important spiritual possibilities, that if accepted and added to the debate on euthanasia, would change the whole thing.

The first is that the elderly and infirm are a blessing to a spiritual mankind, not a burden. Although individuals or families may find it hard to cope, society as a whole does have the resources to care for the elderly and could benefit enormously from this. We just need to develop a deeper understanding of what we have to learn from the elderly and from old age and sickness in order to see how all of us can benefit, whether it is by caring for a relative or working voluntarily in some capacity or another.

The wisdom of experience that the elderly can share with us is an invaluable resource, it can help us keep our lives in perspective and see what really matters in the long-run. The compassion that we can find for others and ourselves through caring, if we are not overburdened by it, is priceless. In fact the capacities of the elderly or sick to slow down the

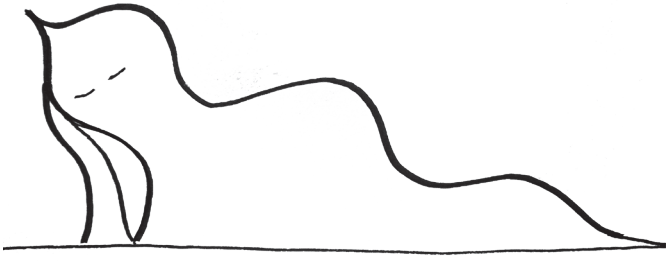
greedy, soften the angry and dispel the illusions of life are all unsurpassed. The urgency that we can gain from contact with the elderly in our own spiritual practice is invaluable.

This brings us on to the second spiritual possibility, which may be more difficult for some people to understand or accept – that while a person's spiritual faculties of mindfulness and wisdom are intact, they have the chance to escape death through the liberation of the heart. A person's own impending death may be their strongest motivation to find their escape.

Therefore the last conscious days can spiritually be the uttermost precious and important time for a person.

Sometimes when the body is weak, the spirit gets stronger and stronger.

These two considerations seem to me to outmatch the reasons why most people would think to end their lives – that they see no chance of their survival and that they do not wish to be a burden on others. Also, the Hospice movement has surely taught us that with sufficient care, there are few scenarios where a person's pain and suffering cannot be managed to be bearable and the potential of their conscious dying realised as far as possible.



Anger and Ill-will

Ill-will is anger going as far as wishing harm on another, and it is to be completely avoided. If it arises we need to seek to withdraw from the situation in some way or another. If we can calm the mind we will arrive at anger, then we can listen to ourselves or be listened to and can assess its causes.

In my experience very little of people's anger constitutes genuine ill-will. People are overly critical of themselves for anger, anger which is really an expression of desire or even of need. The only person free of anger is one completely free of desire, even the desire to survive.

This is a person who has no attachment to the body, seeing that it is not who or what we really are.

Anger, like lust, is a hindrance to the meditation, an obstacle to the refined mind and to such seeing. Calming meditation is hence used to suspend any anger in order to see deeper and resolve its cause. Opposite to lust, which needs to be restrained or the desire questioned, anger needs a response. It needs acting on in order that we avoid acting it out. We listen and assess what is a skilful course of action. This already requires a degree of calm so we would usually respond immediately by going straight to our meditation object.

The universal preventative medicine and skilful response is kindness, when we can find it. If we cannot respond with love, or if our love lacks sufficient direction, anger will persist. Then the anger needs more investigation, the need or desire underlying it needs to be exposed and reflected upon skilfully: "I feel angry because I ..."

If we cannot listen to or act on anger we freeze or we go dull, apathetic. Most people realise this and think that the only solution is not to suppress it but to act it out. This is not correct. Neither is it correct to say that we somehow store it up inside if we don't act it out.

What gets stored up inside is not the anger but all the needs or desires it represents. The way I see it as is that the anger is a lack of response to the underlying need, yet all the energy of our desire has gone in to that anger. To get our energy back we have to go back to the anger with a calmer mind and listen to it, find out what it really wants and look for a skilful response.

Right Mindfulness

These days most people associate mindfulness merely with living in the present, but this ordinary mindfulness is not enough to lead us all the way to enlightenment, to the complete end of suffering. In order for mindfulness to go as deep as is necessary for such radical results, it must be 'right mindfulness' (sammā-sati). This entails seeing and accepting impermanence in the right way – a way that leads to a peaceful, joyful letting go of our attachments; thereby we realise liberation of the heart.

So what is then the right way to see impermanence? If we merely determine to live in the present we can actually be defeating this seeing altogether. We can even come to feel that this present moment is eternal, and it can actually seem so. What, then, can right mindfulness be? Right mindfulness is not of another nature than ordinary mindfulness, it is a further development of it. As we sustain our mindfulness and strengthen it through meditation it is as though it soaks in to our minds and bodies and finds a new inner strength, developing beyond simple awareness into a quality of knowing, sure and bright.

We come to know our deeper feelings, leading us naturally to a life of morality, letting go of selfishness as we connect more fully with others. Secondly we develop a stronger knowingness of the body, leading us to see and know its mortality. This is how we can truly see impermanence in the present moment and discover the amazing, blissful possibility of letting go of ourselves altogether.

So learning to live in the present is just the start of something that, if we choose to take it far enough, can completely transform our lives, taking us on the spiritual path to liberation. If we take such a path we need to be so patient, however, perfectly patient in fact, or all our efforts will be fruitless. Only with perfect patience can we both live in the present and strive for liberation in the future. Only with perfect patience can we be mindful of the situation for spiritual practice that we have and not keep trying to change it in our minds to fit the ideal. Yet if we, regardless of our situation, have truly and completely entered this stream of practice, then we have all the time in the world, for we will have found a way beyond the body.

Natural Mindfulness

It is very important for us to understand the difference between the mindfulness that requires effort to create or sustain; and a natural, effortless mindfulness.

The first one is like the act of forcefully throwing a ball up in the air; the second one is like effortlessly dropping it and seeing it bounce. The result can look the same but actually the two are quite different. One can lead us into juggling to try to keep the various factors of our practice in the air, the other to relaxation, ease and openness of mind. The first can be a useful addition to a worldly life, it can give us our first taste of the present moment. The second is in the opposite direction to the worldly life, it can be what we relax into when we can't keep up the juggling any more or when we see the suffering entailed.

Even if we understand and accept the difference between these two we can still go wrong if we take natural mindfulness to be simply a state of passivity – of letting things be rather than letting things go. This mistake is more subtle. It means finding a false refuge in stillness rather than a real refuge in emptiness and transcendence. We have to make an effort in our practice for the letting go to really happen, but this is not an added effort or a burden, it is a different kind of effort. We take our lives in a new spiritual direction – towards simplicity and peace, and this does the letting go for us. We naturally let go as we leave home, so to speak, and go forth into a spiritual life.

On the way
Facts and faces

Real Merit

Throughout the Buddhist world there is a belief in the making of merit to secure ourselves a better future.

People give money, for example, believing that this will mean that they will be rich in a future life. This can come true in different ways, however, or we can think of the teachings on merit to have different depths of understanding or application. The results of our actions can return to us solely within the conventional, worldly sphere or in a higher sense. Most simply on the conventional plane if we are generous to people then they will, perhaps, be generous towards us. If this is not the case, however, the letting go of material wealth can be for our benefit on the renunciant spiritual path.

Perhaps this gain is in fact a higher kind of wealth, true wealth even.

Perhaps the Buddha was being very clever not to spell all this out but to let people find it out for themselves.

Someone could give up everything looking for a material reward to get nothing in return, only to then find out how wonderful that nothing is compared to all those things. We can thus be drawn into a spiritual life with a worldly understanding and motivation and find ourselves discovering a higher truth and goal.

The Doctrine of Anattā (not-self)

In considering the Buddha's teaching on 'anattā' it is important to recognize that there are two different ways in which this is referred to. This teaching can be skilfully used as a source of mental reflection first of all. In this sense, to consider that we cannot take permanent ownership or have ultimate control over things can help us to see our limits, keeping things in the proper perspective. We can also reflect on how we take things personally or form a self around inner things in a way that causes suffering or confusion in like fashion.

These then are the application of the conventional truths of non-ownership or limited control implied by this doctrine.

Ultimately, however, this truth of anattā is one of the three characteristics of all phenomena, as penetrated by supramundane insight. In this case it is seen and comes to us naturally, rather than being consciously cultivated as a perception, it spontaneously arises as the impermanence and unsatisfactoriness of things is also seen. It is in this second sense that this truth is truly liberating. It is also in this second way that we avoid the danger existent in the first application of this teaching – that of dissociation. There is less danger in reflecting on the phenomenon of the world as anattā; but when it comes to turning this within and considering our own mental and emotional processes in this way, it can lead to a denial of responsibility and hence to improper custodianship over our own minds.

Actually, it is possible, indeed necessary, to tame and discipline the unruly mind and to resolve mental issues, past or present.

Also, it is not possible to fully correct the biases, assumptions and self-making in our minds merely by seeing what we are doing. Knowledge does not necessarily give power. The roots of self-making lie beyond the reach of conscious thought, in automatic processes initiated by feeling: Craving for becoming (bhavataṇhā) is an intensification of our attachment to pleasant feeling; the craving to get away from or to not be (vibhavataṇhā) is similarly an intensified aversion to unpleasant feeling. These processes will keep their dominance in some form or another, no matter what we think. It is again the direct realization of anattā that is the solution and in the same way as in the previous example. This insight will naturally cause the mind to detach itself from phenomena, or is a result of this detachment.

What is this like? Let us consider an analogy that will also be relevant to the possible long-term results of the practice. Someone was explaining to me recently how she had entered into a commitment to celibacy within her marriage in order to further spiritual practice, but that the only way that this could be maintained was by her husband turning cold and aloof. This is like a mind trying to be the observer before it has developed the genuine detachment that comes around through seeing anattā. If this couple had also practised contemplation and meditation to the point where they no longer had desire, then they could have maintained a close relationship without this leading to or indeed needing physical intimacy.

What this all means for a practitioner of Dhamma is that the meditation that leads to direct realization, in particular that centred on the body, becomes the priority and will guide their lives more than other reflective or intellectual pursuits.

Why the body? It is very difficult for the mind to truly see the mind as not-self; it is, and should be, working on itself rather than merely observing itself. And after all, where is the genuinely independent position from which to make such observations? How can we observe without our observations effecting what we are observing?

We merely risk entering into an endless dialogue with ourselves and having two minds or more to talk to.

Either that or we may enter into a passive state in which we cannot truly apply our minds for our own benefit or for the benefit of the world we live in.

It is also true that if we can see that the body is not-self spontaneously, then we can see all the objects of the mind in the same way. If we see this way then compassion naturally arises as well as wisdom, so there is no danger that we will go too far and become uncaring. What is also apparent is that the quality of the mind that sees like this is one that has no sense of self. There is an important distinction here between the quality of this liberated mind and the mind of samādhi – or of the brahmavihāras – that is similarly bright and empty but still have a sense of self. This is the teaching of anattā taken to its most refined level and the way the teaching was used by the Buddha to revise the understanding or advance the meditation practice of other practitioners well advanced on the Path.

Lastly, how far do we need to go with the contemplation of the body in order to begin to realise such truth?

Do we need just to be aware of our bodies in the senses of movement and posture or do we have to look inside and thus threaten our passions? The answer will be different for each person. Although the passions may not need to be chal-

lenged early on, at least they need to be calmed in order for us to see clearly. This means that someone with good meditation or reasons for looking at the body other than desire, compassion for example, may at least fleetingly be able to see the body this way and experience some degree of liberating insight as a result. Someone who wishes to gain more lasting insight may then choose to go deeper and look inside the body. If they do this wisely then the delights of release will far outweigh the delights of sensuality.

Body Wisdom

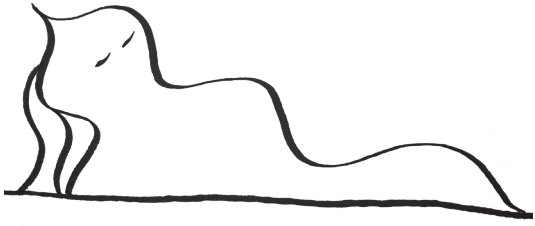
The Western model of the spiritual life is a life of goodness and conscience, led by the intellect – a top-down model of a disciplined life of principle.

This lifestyle is then in conflict with bottom-up bodily instincts and emotions. It is possible, however, to find a middle way between these two: the transformation of even our basest instinctual drives, through a spiritual practice that simply and calmly opens up to the realities of the body, rather than grasping or rejecting it.

In this cool space, physical sensations are now felt as inherently unpleasant, and thus let go of and transcended.

This new perspective overthrows the old one where feelings were seen as pleasant and were sought after.

Instead of the heat of emotion we experience the coolness of release. So sensations become a bottom up source of samādhi and wisdom – of spiritual energy, so to speak. We find a spiritual practice that feels good, actually even better than our old life of desire.



The Modern Mindfulness Movement

The mindfulness movement is gaining popularity and entering more and more into modern life. As it does so it is changing, adapting the principles and practice of mindfulness to fit modern materialist society. Central to this change is the more and more accepted view that our minds are not under our control. This is being cited as a rediscovery and affirmation of the deep psychological or spiritual truth of not-self taught by the Buddha.

The modern man quickly agrees that the way forward is to accept the mind the way it is and get on with life.

This is a tragedy. The greatest possible potential of our human lives, enlightenment, lies within our minds. The mind cannot be directly or internally controlled or fixed, this is true, but it can be tamed and trained in relation to the world of which it is a part. When this relationship comes right, then the mind will come right.

The first step of this process, as luck would have it, is the acceptance of our lack of direct control. So at least the modern mindfulness practitioner gets off to a good start. It can be a huge relief to let go and stop trying to control the mind. If we are wise, however, we see the content of our minds as the result of our contact with the world and we try to modify our lives.

We are generous and kind and start feeling a lot better.
We willingly take on moral precepts.

In this way mindfulness takes us beyond ourselves.
We discover the joy of truly letting go into a bigger, far more beautiful reality.

Psychic Phenomena

The first thing to note about paranormal or psychic phenomena – for example the existence of formless beings and so on – is that they all exist in the real world, they are not a distortion of perception; altering and giving rise to false perceptions of the world is what delusions are doing, and as such they are dangerous.

Therefore we need to stay clear and discriminating in this sense if we are to safely explore or even consider the psychic realm. Secondly, we should bear in mind that any such phenomena are all impermanent – they all belong to the world just like the 'ordinary' realities.

And this very impermanence is the highest truth and the truth of liberation. Considering this keeps the whole thing of psychic phenomena in a cooler perspective.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that such phenomena, or the mysterious energies or abilities that manifest within the spiritual world, can be of use and help us along the path. This can for example be with various kinds of healing or as a source of information we would otherwise not have access to.

The temptation or tendency, however, is to get a bit carried away by these things, or to seek to understand how it all works, beyond the range of what is really necessary. This can make us end up putting all our faith in devas or getting bogged down by metaphysics.

Certain perceptions or attitudes are, however, much more helpful than others. It can be very healthy to look upon energies or abilities not as our own but as impersonal and universal qualities of some kind in order to avoid conceit. So to see

any paranormal abilities simply as the work of devas can be a useful idea on this level, especially in cases where there is no further need to understand how something works.

It is also worthy of note that in such fields curiosity can actually kill the cat – too much thinking, no more powers.

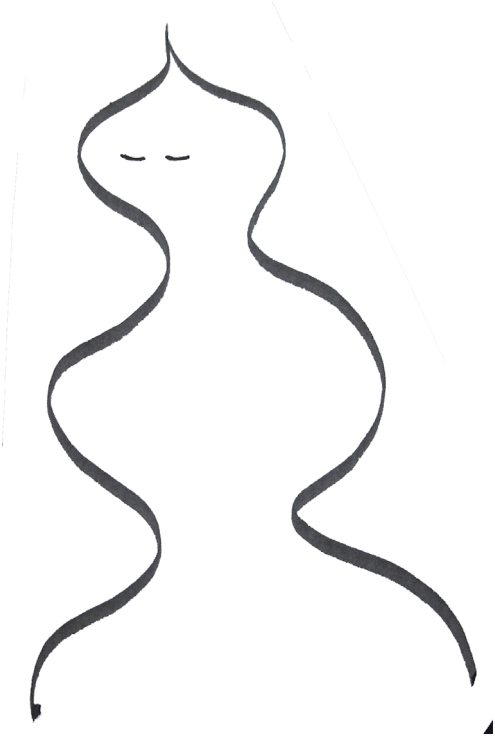
On another note, it can be better to talk about qualities rather than energies or powers. The term 'energy' can make us presume certain characteristics – an 'energy' is generally taken as something, rather than as an absence of something, and as working on a physical level or through a physical medium, for example. But actually none of these may be the case. Likewise, in terms of healing, to empty the mind leads to a stopping of the mind from interfering with the body; this could be the healing of samādhi rather than our minds giving birth to a mysterious energy. And why would it then not be possible for this emptiness to extend beyond our own bodies and effect another person's body?

These distinctions can become important when we seek to cultivate such qualities. Are we trying to generate something or are we trying to get out of the way for something to arise? The latter attitude is also the model that keeps the spiritual path at large going in the same direction – the direction of letting go. This is important, without this letting go our benevolent intentions end up imprisoning us in one way or the other rather than setting us free.

There is also the relationship between different kinds of samādhi – on the one hand mundane jhāna, which is associated with psychic phenomena; and on the other hand supramundane jhāna, which is associated with knowledge of path and fruit, with the spiritual attainments of stream entry and further on.

A meditator on the Buddhist path is likely to, though will not necessarily, attain mundane jhāna and some of its associated psychic abilities along the way to supramundane jhāna; but since both kinds of jhāna can involve a kind of Knowing there is this close association. The difference is that mundane knowing is still out in the world; the supramundane knowing of the path will be initiated by letting go of the world and is an entirely inner affair.

So if we are looking for lasting liberation we are advised to stay at the heart and not to go out into the world, normal or paranormal, however fascinating.



The Point of Focus

Many people misunderstand the point of concentration practice or dismiss it all together. It is a pleasing play on words to say, 'what is the point of focus?' or 'What is the point of the point?' but even without the humour perhaps it can be easy to dismiss something that involves a degree of effort and discomfort, sitting still for many hours.

That aside, 'but how does this help us work through our stuff?'

I hear them ask. Well, all the time we have our attention centred on the breath all this stuff is trying to get in from the periphery of our attention.

All kinds of visitors come and go. We see what our craving is like when it does not get what it wants – not nice!

This can help us really want to let it all go, but how does concentration meditation lastingly achieve this?

This first objection is related to a common assumption that concentration represents an exclusive point of focus and to small-mindedness. This is, however, only where it starts. The breath is not something we can hold tightly onto very long without going blue. We have to go with the flow and come to enjoy the space.

The act of concentrating on the breath, when so relaxed, does not tighten the mind into a small, feeling-based focus. Instead, when the attention is strong enough our concentration will obliterate this point altogether, leading the mind to open in a completely new way, fresh and bright.

This is the only way to really let go. For a mind that is grasping by nature the only way of letting go of something is to hold on to something else. The only way to let go of eve-

rything is to hold on to the space, to fill the mind up with space. This is a very important point. We cannot just let go; letting go is a fruit of the practice not a method. If we try it as a method we are not letting go of anything, instead we would be trying to push things away or ignore things.

But surely the spacious mind does not last, say the critics? On the contrary, if we get there the result of genuine letting go is so pleasant, so blissful, that it will change our lives forever. Gone will be all the active, sensual craving which was at the root of all the suffering all along.

Get the point? Actually, the only way to see if I am right is to try it for yourself.

Knowing in Action

Perceptions and intentions arise continually on sense contact. In relation to these, knowing, or wisdom, is that which allows whether an intention shall proceed into action or be abandoned, or in other words, into doing or not-doing. This knowing is connected to the memory of past actions and consequences. So knowing does not itself act but is also not passive in regards to action, it is the supervisor. As the potentially transcendent aspect of the mind, the Knower can become associated with an aloof passivity through forming an incorrect view of itself as separate from the Doer. The danger is then that we take refuge in passivity or lose effective control of our actions.

In order to avoid this we see and experience not-doing as restraint rather than passivity. Our actions are then carried by wholesome intentions, restraint within these actions being an element of control and refinement.

If action is focus, then the knowing heart in action is the quality of the space around that focus. This refined or composed bodily deportment can then be a determinant of mental attitude.

So we do not walk, we allow the body-mind to follow its walking programme, like opening a space around the focus of action; or we restrain walking, an element of restraint (like a thicker space) giving composure; full restraint being a sense of posture or re-posturing in a still space. This altogether is wisdom taking control of the body-mind.

A Radical Rewiring

It can be difficult for people to believe the extent to which the mind can be transformed by spiritual practice. One reason for this is that many see the brain as the seat of the mind and since it is taken for true that you cannot transform the brain to a large extent, then how could you ever transform the mind? There have been a number of responses to this. First of all modern neurology has shown there to be more flexibility or plasticity in the nervous system than we had previously thought. This encourages us to believe that it is possible to make substantial and lasting changes. There are many different neural channels through which information can pass. The more we use one of these the more established that route becomes. So we see a neural basis for our mental karma.

There is also the general level of the activity of the whole system. Often we are less aware of this dimension and instead get drawn into the specific content of the mind, which makes us miss the wood for the trees, so to speak; but in focusing on the overall level of activity, instead of focusing on particulars, we achieve a massive modification in our experience.

In addition to any change of the system there is also the possibility of the same system coming under a new master or being superseded in some way. We can certainly see the hierarchical structure of the nervous system with different sections placed one above the other. So it is reasonable to suggest that reason can dominate (isn't it just!) by some kind of super cortex.

A more radical and perhaps more joyful revolution would occur, however, if the lower, simply pleasure seeking, parts

of the system came under more control or even under a different control. The first is surely possible through long-term self discipline – if this happens in a good way, and has heart as well as head.

The second can happen when we find a different source of pleasure through the spiritual life. Samādhi is the most potent of these. There is growing evidence that samādhi has a radical effect on our neural patterns, both in terms of overall level of activity and in terms of specifics.

Let us consider how this can be. Although pleasure is very important – it is the motivator of the mind and heart – there is more to the cultivation of samādhi than just pleasure. It shows us a way to establish a different relationship between our minds and the world. Buddhist psychology first of all sees the mind as conditioned by our sensory contact with the world; it sees an open system, integrated into the world. Secondly it sees the mind as a sixth sense both channelled through the other five and having its own sense.

Buddhism sees it like this because we discover that when the mind withdraws from the senses then all thought and imagination ceases so that we clearly see our inner world as dependent, moment by moment, on the other senses. It is in this that there is the greatest potential transformation, not just in terms of content but in terms of how the whole system operates.

If we experience imagination, dreams and memory as a product of the senses, then we see for ourselves how the untrained mind is continuously caught up in them. It is never at rest, always out there in the 'real' world or in one of its own creations associated with it.

If we have ever managed to let go of the senses (even to some degree) and thereby entered samādhi, even if only momentarily, this situation is changed forever.

As well as being a new source of pleasure, samādhi also offers us the possibility of a liberating wisdom and compassion. The mind has found another abiding from which it gains a new perspective on the world, it has also thus discovered a kind of sense of its own, independent of the other five. Our way of experiencing the world changes in its balance from a situation where the outside generates the inside through sense impressions, to a situation where the inside reaches out into the world as the peace inside fills the senses.

This is also very significant because it means that the process of perception can come under conscious influence. We might become able to have much more choice over how we see things and this can change how we feel about life and the world overall.

Let us take the radical example of sexual desire. This is almost universally seen as hard-wired into the system; and since we are so tightly identified with our desires it is a very radical, and also a very rare, thing to see that this alleged hard-wiring is not the case – it can be so radical that it completely transforms our view of who or what we are. If we live the celibate life (and it's not that I am expecting everyone to be interested in this particular practice) we are not acting on this desire but rather trying to get beyond it, seeing it as that which ties us to the realm of birth and death.

The mechanisms by which desire occurs have therefore, throughout the age long tradition of spiritual practitioners, been carefully examined. What we discover is that in every case the desire needs to be triggered by a perception. All

other factors are secondary. Actually, the spiritual practitioner will recognize many secondary factors that make the physical reaction of desire stronger or less strong as it arises. This strength will be determined by the amount of karma we have made, this we will need to endure through our attempt to reverse the process. There are factors in our current lifestyle, and many yogic systems work with these, diet is one good example. The ultimate way past desire is none of these, however, but lies in a change in perception.

The main reason why we do not see the significance of perception is that we regard mental images as essentially different from the real thing, as essentially different from the objects of desire out there in the world. So when mental images arise they are taken to represent the desire itself when this is not the case.

A mind calmed through meditation that is not simply reacting to these images will see that when a mental image arises it can be seen as attractive or unattractive in the same way as an outer image and then desire will arise or not arise.

It is then realised that if it is possible to change the perception of the body permanently, sexual desire will not arise. This may not sound very attractive in itself but what we also discover is that freedom from desire is actually a very blissful state of mind. Anyone who has experienced it will never want to want anything ever again! This change of perception takes a long time and a lot of effort to achieve but it is worth striving for.

To widen the scope of this example a little, modern cognitive science is showing how influential images are in our thought processes, how our minds seem to hinge more on picturing than on verbal reasoning. This fits very well with the experience of the meditator.

Also, the body is very much a part of this system, our minds are very much embodied. Our perception of the body is therefore a very important aspect to almost all our thought processes and not just sensual thoughts.

So a change in this perception can have a very radical effect on our lives, and brains.

Going to stay
In sacred places

Finding Freedom in Right View

We can start by considering two fundamental mistaken views of the world. On one hand we have the view that everything is really mentality or mind; and on the other hand the view that everything is really materiality.

So a problem of the first view then is, if everything is mental then how can it be that the material world is outside the control of the mind? And on the other side, the materialist view is flawed because these objects in the mind are not the same as the material phenomenon that they may be derived from, they do not have the same material existence, their nature is not just of matter or energy but also of information or truth; further, we can wonder how can there be any free will and thus, perhaps, what's the point of it all?

This takes us to the distinction between the objective view of the world, which is championed by science (and that tends towards a matter-only view) and the subjective world view which is founded on our own experience (and tends towards a mind-only view).

In other words, both views leaves us in want. Is the only way to power and sanity then to try to match our subjective world with the external reality? Perhaps this is the modern hope, but how could it be done, won't these two views always be in opposition to each other?

Or could there perhaps be something in between the two views which is really distinct?

I can only give you the Dhamma practitioner's solution to all this. First of all we have to begin with the relative freedom won by virtue: As practitioners we see the mixing together of our inner subjective and objective realities occurring at the point of contact (phassa).

Since our desires are at the root of this contact, we avoid the whole problem by abandoning or suspending our desires (i.e. by developing virtue). Then we no longer see things by means of a distinction between material or mental; instead we see everything simply as mind objects within a pure, empty mind. And we make this new division not philosophically but in our experience, where it really matters. Ultimately this is achieved by withdrawing the mind through the practice of samādhi.

Here is the beginning of real clarity. From this point on we relate to everything, real or imagined, through wisdom rather than desire. This means that we have functional rather than fixed views of phenomenon, and in terms of their nature we see them ultimately as all the same. Our agenda no longer lies in the world of objects but in finding more and more lasting freedom from our entanglement with this world and those objects. Thus the question regarding subjective and objective loses its significance.

Ultimately this duality of subject and object, immaterial and material, is overcome through a humility and dispassion that sees, without a sense of self, in the simple mode of mind in relation to mind-objects; there is then a transcendent, empty base to consciousness – in the world, but not of the world. It is not the case that seeing in this way – everything-

in-the-mind – changes the nature of our experience as we might think it would either. Our experience does not start to appear unreal or dream-like. We simply have a subjective experience of the field of our own awareness, so that we see everything floating in that field. This is a purity through virtue and restraint.

Then there is the development of wisdom which protects the mind in activity. We see in action that there is not just mind (this is the mind only view which is one extreme), nor just objects (this is materialism which is the other extreme). Instead we find that there is the mind and the mind objects (this is the view in between these two extremes). The mind-only view is flawed because all the objects within the mind have a life of their own and don't obey anyone's orders, which the mind-only view would ultimately require in order to be able to stand. So since the objects of the mind are not under the control of the mind, they cannot, in essence, be considered part of it. Actually these objects rather have a degree of independence from the mind.

It is also the case that they are interdependent on each other among themselves, even if they are initially mind generated. So the objects of the mind exist on two levels: on the physical plane, out there; and on the mental plane, in here.

If we accept the existence of both mind and mind-objects – and hence accept the 'middle view' we see that the usual existence of mind and mind-objects in our ordinary modes of being is one in which these two are bound up and entangled to each other. Unless or until the mind is empty it is not independent but involved and mixed up with things – so at this initial stage to see two independent natures – the mind and the mind-objects – is just an idea and not a reality, and

we would be fooling ourselves if we thought we had some independence of mind.

It is only through insight that the mind finds complete freedom. It is through seeing, accepting and granting independence to the objects within the mind from the mind itself – through letting go of trying to control – that the mind in turn finds its own independence.

This is a part of the insight of anattā; and the birth of the pure, empty mind – of the transcendent mind.

This insight begins with the body; in letting go of the body we let go of all the rest.

This is the abandoning of the worldly life for the spiritual life. The mind-objects still have a life of their own but they chase after pleasant spiritual feelings rather than pleasant worldly feelings. We do not seek influence over the things of the world but influence in the spiritual sense – this is influence over what we do and say and how we see life in order to maintain our purity of mind, to continuously win and then to embody or express our spiritual freedom.

The Four Noble Truths

The Lord Buddha describes the fruits of the practice, the process of progressive insight and freedom from suffering as 'The Four Noble Truths'. Let us consider first the practical context in which these were offered.

The Buddha discovered these while he was meditating according to the Middle Way. He was not practising any kind of weakening austerities but rather gathering all his strength to sit for long periods, patiently enduring the pain.

First Noble Truth

If we after much exertion, when the whole body hurts, still stay with the practice like the Buddha – then we may see the suffering of the body with a Noble heart, a heart empowered with the compassion that sees suffering and yet does not withdraw. Then we will momentarily let go of our craving in relation to the body – a craving that either wants to hold on to it, or to get away. When this happens we naturally let go of the body to enter the deepest samādhi. As we let go of the body, we find we have let go of all the rest, all of the khandas, and suffering ceases completely and we understand for the first time that the source of suffering was not the khandas themselves but just the result of the sensual clinging and identification associated with craving all along.

Second Noble Truth

We are not surprised that both craving and suffering come back into the mind in relation to feeling and that these cravings still remain to be abandoned – the desire for pleasant feeling draws us back into wanting to become a feeling be-

ing, while the desire to escape unpleasant feeling compels us to want to get away from this same mode of being. But the Noble heart, having found itself freed from the body, will find itself naturally abandoning this craving in order not to get drawn back into the suffering of the body, into another birth. The heart now knows how to remain with the greater pleasure of samādhi, letting go of pain and suffering. The heart gradually comes to realise fully that the pleasures of the senses are low, coarse and unprofitable compared to those of samādhi. This fact and the wisdom that sees the connection between the body and the senses continue to cut away at sensual craving.

Third Noble Truth

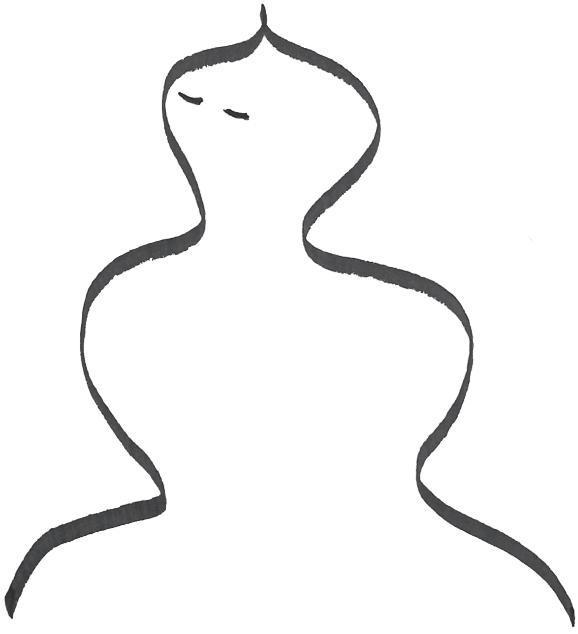
We see that all mental and emotional suffering ceases to arise whilst craving is abandoned and non-attachment to the body is maintained. We realise that we have won through to a more lasting solution and yet the pains of the body, of ageing and sickness, still remain.

Fourth Noble Truth

The Noble heart now sees clearly the Noble Eightfold Path, the need to live a life not of desire but of wisdom and compassion to make no more karma in the direction of becoming, birth and death. This is where nonattachment to the body finds its full expression in all aspects of life. Although all four truths are seen together in a single path moment, we realise that all we need to do is to keep letting go of craving and attachment to the body, the practitioner then needs to continue to apply effort to the path more and more fully to achieve this moment by moment in the face of sensual craving.

The Lord Buddha tells us how this is achieved in the next sermon, 'The Discourse on Not-self'. Here the Lord Buddha describes the contemplation or right mindfulness that enables us to abandon craving.

This begins with us seeing the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and not-self in relation to the body. Through letting go of identification with the body the identification with all other phenomenon ceases, suffering ceases and is seen by the meditator over and over as dependent on attachment to the body. This is underlined in the next discourse, 'The Fire Sermon' where the objects of the senses are similarly pointed out as arising dependent on the organs of the senses, as though burning with the same mortal fire.



Mindfulness of the Body

The 'body-in-the-mind' experience

We may feel or think that our minds are in our bodies, but is this true or are perhaps our bodies in our minds?

This may seem like a nonsensical question. Indeed it is impossible to just figure it out one way or the other; or to see the significance of this to our lives, unless we examine our perceptions and experiences with an open mind.

It might feel like the mind is in the body. Maybe it feels sometimes like it is in the brain or maybe in the whole nervous system. Maybe in the organs as well, or some of them at least, perhaps the heart or the guts.

This may be where we feel certain things, but that doesn't mean that the mind is in the body, it means that our feelings are being experienced in the body. But our feelings are, of course, really in our minds. So, in this way, these feelings can make us experience the mind as in the body, or in fact they might even actually pull our minds into the body (as a kind of contraction of the mind). If this is then our only experience of feelings, then we will take our minds to be there in the body.

What we experience of our bodies may, in fact, be just these feelings.

Yet if, through mindfulness (a relaxed, open mind), we cultivate an image or picture of the body in the mind, of some kind, and our body in that way finds its existence in the mind, rather than the mind being stuck in the body; then the

body no longer appears as a physical thing in our experience but as a mental thing.

This also changes our experience of feeling, at this point we experience feelings too as being clearly within the mind, rather than within the body. We therefore now have a clear experience of feelings, one that is in line with reality; we also have a clear image of our bodies, rather than our bodies merely being a mass of feeling for us.

We can also think that the mind is somewhere in the body. Objective science seems to tell us that the mind is somehow in the body or brain. In our more mindful subjective experience, however, as we have seen, the body is in the mind. So should we not then believe the objective fact rather than the subjective experience?

Do these two in fact contradict each other? Well, if we see the (open) mind, as containing and consisting of information, rather than just seeing the form or energy of the mind that is dependant on the body, then we see the mind as having another kind of existence altogether. It is then this second order of existence that is represented by our purely subjective experience.

This is the same mind existing in two different ways, physical and purely mental – this is duality without dualism.

Positively Empty

Meditation is often seen as the way we put our inner world of thoughts and feelings in order, like through therapy. Yet, what we may discover is that these mental phenomena are not truly an inner world.

The apparent inner world of thought and feeling is dependent, moment-by-moment, on the outer world.

What happens when we withdraw the mind from the senses in meditation is that the inner world begins to fall apart. We can then be trying to make sense of these fragments, looking for meaning in them in relation to the outside world, interpreting them in various ways, only to find the apparent inner world elusive and unstable. (On another level, we may have been assuming that the brain contains this inner world of memory but it does not hold any such thing. The brain is an extension of our sensory system, a sense base.)

Our memory, imagination and dream-world, which we may have taken to represent our inner world, are actually not independent of the senses and their input – our imagined inner world relies on our feelings (it is actually often an expression of them), and our feelings in turn rely on our sense contact with the world to be generated. It is then in the absence of sense data that these feelings generate thought and new feeling, creating the illusion of an inner world. This creation is then compared with or projected onto the outer world which in turn fills in the gaps in our inner representations.

Hence our subjective and objective experience mixes and creates delusion within the mind. We are making something out of our experience through our delighting in it.

All this we find out in another way when the mind truly withdraws from the senses and the bodily impressions, because at that time we find emptiness. What is also highly significant is that this is a blissful emptiness; we find that emptiness is a very positive experience, the mind is positively empty. This is so significant because from here on we see this emptiness as a true or higher happiness compared to the happiness from sensory input.

Introducing the terminology of dependent origination: The karma of our human existence is such that the mind is pre-programmed (saṅkhāra) to seek pleasure and avoid pain, and this through an ignorant assumption (avijjā) that sees this as the path to happiness. This is the way that the mind gets drawn into the world of the senses (viññāṇa) and of form (rūpa). The worldly mind then develops this sensory system into a highly sophisticated sense base (āyatana). This leaves us in a predicament where, although all our experience is essentially subjective, it is all reliant on the objective world. There is a sense then that none of our inner experience has any independent existence. Indeed being merely an interpretation of the outer world, which is unstable and illusory, it ultimately has no meaningful connection to the material world. Thus a mind that has not gone beyond the senses is without a refuge.

So we have to overcome this karma by meditating and letting go of it all to discover our refuge and our happiness in emptiness beyond the senses. What we may then discover is that there is the potential of developing a truly inner world within this emptiness, a world of inner religious vision and intuition associated with an outer world which is viewed with dispassion.

This is the way the mind can examine and understand without making anything out of sense experience and hence avoid confusing subjective and objective.

Furthermore the emptiness, as it detaches more and more from the world, becomes a transcendent base for consciousness and hence our refuge.

Transformation

In the absence of awakened teachers, what tends to happen is that we do not realise the potential of the practice to completely transform the mind. Then we go ahead and redefine Buddhism as a way of working with the ordinary mind rather than achieving this kind of transformation. Worst of all is when we go as far as redefining the ordinary mind as the enlightened mind or believe that we are all enlightened already.

As a consequence we never even see the benefit of the practice or its real urgency.

The first thing that we might need to admit is that in spiritual terms people are not all the same. In modern egalitarian society, already this can be difficult. But it is made more possible, perhaps, by adhering very strictly to the idea of equal rights on the conventional plane and by preventing any abuse of spiritual knowledge or position for unjust worldly gain or advantage, (this is an important reason for having a mendicant community at the centre of it all). In this way we make everyone the same on the conventional level and can then open to our differences on the spiritual level without risk.

Still we need to be careful how we communicate on spiritual matters. We are best advised never to boast; and to talk about the practice in general rather than personal terms. This behaviour is what is natural to anyone with any real insight or depth of practice.

They will be very humble in themselves, realising that wisdom and samādhi only came about when they went beyond themselves. It can also help others not to feel intimidated or jealous if they know that to arrive at such a transformation it takes an enormous, indeed heroic, amount of effort. Also

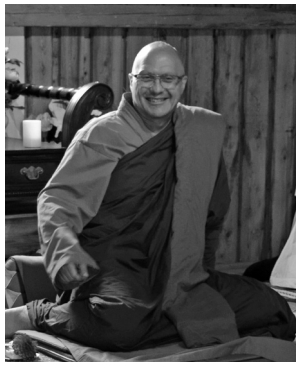
the result may not be so apparent to the worldly eye. It is only after long association with someone that we may realise that their minds are profoundly different from the ordinary.

What can we really know?

What we really can know is our own minds and the sense impressions (mind objects) that we gather from the world. Those two are all we can really know.

We can arrive at this conclusion philosophically (fairly easily) and through meditation (through a lot of hard work) but if we arrive at it through meditation our experience of life is transformed. In meditation we can strengthen mindfulness, the knowingness of the mind, until the sense of knowing, really knowing, is completely tangible to us. Then the world will appear to us as mind objects within a bright field of knowing and we will never be the same again.

So I offer this for your reflection



About Ajahn Kalyāno

Born in Hitchin in 1961, Ajahn Kalyāno has been a practising Buddhist since he was 17. He began visiting Amaravati in the 1980's. As a layman his path of practice and enquiry led him to work in hospitals for nearly twenty years specialising in neurological rehabilitation and learning disabilities as a Clinical Psychologist, Physiotherapist and Tai chi teacher.

He has a particular interest in exploring the relationship between body and mind. He took full ordination at Chithurst Monastery in 1998 and has since travelled to Italy, Thailand and Australia.

Ajahn Kalyāno is currently the abbot of Lokuttara Vihāra (Skiptvet Buddhist Monastery) in Norway.

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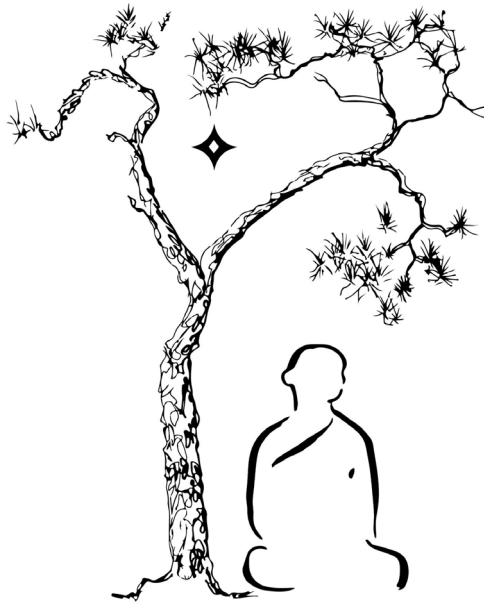

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