

Generosity, respect and gratitude

Dhamma talk on the 8th of January 2010

When a great master like Than Acharn Mahā Bua gave talks to the public, he spoke only about heaven, hell and *kamma*. He often referred to the story in the *suttas* where the Buddha pointed to a bull and said that its two horns represent the people going to heaven or *nibbāna* while its hairs represent all the people going down to hell. Than Acharn Mahā Bua stressed that people have to decide for themselves whether they want to be the horns or the hairs, and that if they wanted to continue being reborn as human beings they had to keep the five precepts. As a student of Than Acharn Mahā Bua, I completely trust what he said, and I also speak about heaven, hell and *kamma*.

People come to Buddhist monasteries for various reasons but mainly to hear about the teachings or to practice meditation. In the Thai Forest Tradition, everyone who comes to a monastery receives everything free. The food is free, the lodgings are free and the teaching is free. Yet people who come here from the West and then start to criticise the things which are given free, though I don't understand why. They criticise this, they criticise that. What kind of attitude is that? Everything here is free; the food is free, the teaching is free, and even the *Dhamma* books are free, yet people criticise. If they don't like it, they can leave. But think about this: where in the West do you get anything free? Where? Everything here is laid on for you completely free. Everything is donated by Thai laypeople, and they give it all for you, so you can hear the teaching and practice meditation. They give money to maintain the monastery, they build the monastery's meeting hall (*sālā*) and the small dwellings (*kutis*) you live in while you're here, and every morning they give you food. So, what is there to complain about? In the West there's a saying, "Don't look a gift-horse in the mouth". We've all heard that saying and understand what it means, so I sometimes wonder about the attitude of the people who come here.

I mention this because there are three important qualities that have to be cultivated by people who want to practice. I often talk about the path of practice – *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. But there are actually three prerequisites we need to cultivate in order to be able to practice fruitfully. These are generosity, respect and gratitude.

Generosity is the ability to give, whether material things or help and support. In Thai monasteries there is a tradition that on *wan phra* (monks day) every full or half moon, laypeople come to help out in the monastery and stay for meditation practice in the evening. Of course, they do this free. They give their time and money, as well as food, robes and medicines for the *bhikkhus*. Everything a *bhikkhu* needs is given by the laity – that's an example of generosity. This tradition of giving (*dāna*) is still alive in Buddhist countries like Thailand, but can also be found in India. Indian people who visit Thai monasteries are tremendously generous, and the Thais themselves are always looking for opportunities to give. If we *bhikkhus* are outside the monastery, people offer lifts or drinks or any number of things. Generosity is the ability to give away our material possessions and, because the Lord Buddha taught about generosity in the *suttas*, this quality has sunk into the mentality of the Thais.

Actually, we need some kind of generosity to come to live and practice in this monastery in the first place. Without practicing generosity in the past or in previous lives we would not have found our way here, where there are teachings, where everything is free, and where

no-one is asking us for donations. Giving up material possessions is much easier than letting go of our views and opinions, and thoughts which we consider to be our 'self'. This is why generosity is so important; if we can give away the things that we cherish, perhaps we can give away the very things that get in the way of practice, namely, our views and opinions and our beliefs about ourselves. We all have views that the world, our partners, our families and friends should be like this or that, but really we should just let them be as they are. The important thing is not what they do, but what *we* do, what *we* think, what *we* say – what other people get up to is their business, it's their *kamma*. We should simply be concerned with the kind of *kamma* we are creating for ourselves. If we are constantly criticizing other people, we can't see the unwholesomeness in ourselves. This is why Than Acharn Mahā Bua didn't allow *bhikkhus* to complain about each other; if that happened, he would kick out the one who complained first. He did this to show that we should look at ourselves before complaining about others. There is so much dirt within our own heart (*citta*) that we have no time to complain about other people; we have our hands full trying to remove from our own hearts the unwholesomeness that we criticize in others. If we tell others how bad they are, we feel satisfied because we see their faults, and this puffs us up. In fact, it's only when we have cleaned up the mess inside ourselves that we are entitled to criticise others, although when we've reached that point, when we've cleaned up our own heart, we can't see anything in others to criticise. The moment we have finished our own work, there's nothing to criticise; a genuinely purified person doesn't focus on the badness in other people.

Respect is another quality we have to develop on the path of practice. It's a quality that seems to be getting rarer in the West, and many people have scant respect for their parents. Many people see parents as milk cows to be squeezed for money or other goodies and left behind when they are no longer useful, put into old-folks homes and never visited. Is that respect? Is that gratitude? Than Acharn Mahā Bua calls such ungrateful people trees that give no shade, that suck all the moisture and nutrients from the earth but give no shelter and bear no fruit. Everyone who has tried to teach us something deserves our respect, whether our parents in childhood or our teachers later on. Apart from *Arahants*, no-one in the world is perfect, so we ought to have respect for those who have taught us. The same goes for spiritual teachers; if we do not respect the *Dhamma* of the Lord Buddha, we are lost. The alternative is to respect our own thoughts and views, the very things that have led to our present misery. We come to Baan Taad Monastery to get rid of the misery we are experiencing, without realising that it is a consequence of our own thoughts and actions in the past.

If we want to find the way out, the least we can do is have respect for the teachings, whether of the Lord Buddha or Than Acharn Mahā Bua. If you don't like their teachings, that's fine – just pack your things and go. There are so many meditation teachers and meditation centres in the world, and you can choose whichever you like. By all means choose a teacher who speaks honeyed words, but don't choose me. I don't have to say nice words that soothe your mind. I'm not paid, so I can speak the truth whether you like it or not. I can just tell it like it is. Of course, some people don't like that; after all, how many people want to hear the truth, how many people want to hear that their hearts are full of evil. No-one, because we all have the feeling that we are good. In fact, there are two forces within the *citta*, one wholesome and one unwholesome, one good and one bad. The first step is to accept that there is unwholesomeness within our heart; once we accept that, we can begin to remove it. Without acceptance, the evil remains suppressed and continues to determine our actions, words and thoughts.

We don't like to hear that we have a lot of greed and hate, and a mediation teacher who depends on payment or donations has to be careful not to say things people don't like to hear. But here in this monastery no-one is paid, so we can say whatever is true. Truth is to nobody's liking, at least not in the beginning, but the first step is to face up to the unwholesomeness within us and the unwholesome ways of behaviour which we have tried to suppress for the past ten, twenty or fifty years. Of course, we don't like it when a teacher comes and points out our bad points, rubbing our noses in our own mess saying "See, see, this is where the problem lies. Does it smell good? Would you like to eat the mess you have created?" Can you see now why respect is a prerequisite for progress in practice? If you don't respect the teaching, you won't listen to the teaching, you won't accept correction from the teacher, you won't follow the teaching, and you won't reach the end of *dukkha*.

The third quality is gratitude, being grateful for all the things that have been given to us. We should be grateful to the Lord Buddha who revealed the path to freedom from *dukkha*, as well as for the *Dhamma* itself and the experience of it within our hearts. Actually, gratitude comes up the moment we enter the state of *upacāra Samādhi*; some people even find tears rolling down their faces. Than Acharn Mahā Bua shed tears of joy at the moment of his enlightenment, the moment when he destroyed *avijjā*, as he described in a famous talk.* They were tears of joy that he had finally made an end of the rounds of rebirth, but also tears of gratitude for the teachings that had led him to that point. Compare this with the attitude of people in the West; they think they have a right to things, and they claim their rights. Some people come to this monastery and claim it is their right to stay here – it's not, of course, and sometimes I have to ask them to leave. If people don't have respect, gratitude and some degree of generosity, they have no right to stay here. Please understand this: generosity, gratitude and respect all help us on the path of practice. They are not the practice itself, of course, but they are prerequisites for the practice of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*.

Paññā is investigation. Why do we practice investigation? After all, in *upacāra samādhi* all our problems seem to be solved; we have no *dukkha* and nothing touches us even though we are still living in the world. The trouble is that when we come out of *upacāra samādhi* all the problems start again, for the underlying causes have not been addressed. The same is true of *appanā samādhi*, the deep state of *samādhi* in which everything disappears. The experience of *appanā samādhi* shows us that there is something left when the world as we normally experience it ceases, when the universe collapses. But the moment we come out again, we experience a world war of the senses, and the longer we have been in *appanā samādhi* the more intense is the contrast. Sometimes when I come out, I have to take time to re-orientate myself. *Samādhi* gives us a preview of something beyond and gives the mind a place to rest for a while, but the main work is investigation.

We like to investigate the things we are interested in, and we don't like to investigate unpleasant things. People sometimes ask why they should investigate *dukkha* if they are trying to get free from *dukkha*, or why they should investigate the faecal matter inside their intestines, which is horrible and smells really bad. Such investigations are vital, but when teachers like myself point this out people don't want to hear. They don't want to hear about *asubha*, the loathsomeness of the body; it's something unfamiliar to them, and they seem to find it unsettling. We tend to think of the body as a good thing that gives many nice experiences, but we should ask ourselves what benefits it actually brings in the 24 hours of each day. How many pleasant feelings come from the body? Feeling hungry, or feeling full after eating, or feeling sleepy – are they really pleasant? Is sight really pleasant, is sound really pleasant? We never think about these things, and some people don't like me speaking about them. When I sense that people don't like hearing about *asubha*, I sometimes spend the next half an hour speaking

about nothing else. To overcome *dukkha* we have to go through *dukkha*, we have to swim through the fires of hell to overcome hell. There is no other way to progress in practice. Anything else is like a cat on a hot tin roof – it jumps around without ever reaching the other side. *Dukkha* is here right in front of our eyes, and we do everything we can to evade it; we spend our lives running away from unpleasant feelings.

Many years ago a Thai Forest Master, Acharn Suwat, was invited to the USA to give a meditation course, but the organisers of the course made the condition that he must not speak about *asubha*! He could talk about everything else, such as heaven, hell and *samādhi*, but not the loathsomeness of the body. This master was an *Arahant*, so for three weeks he mentioned *asubha* in every talk he gave. He saw that if discussing the loathsomeness of the body was forbidden, it must be something people needed to know about and investigate. He was never invited back. This Acharn talked about things that people don't want to hear but need to hear. Who wants to hear the truth? Who wants to hear that the body is a biological robot? Who wants to hear that the body is full of blood, puss, urine and excrement, the very things that we try to hide and wash away when we see them? We flush these things down the toilet as quickly as we can so we don't have to look at them, even though they come out of the bodies we love so much. Yet, it's important that we look at these things and reflect on them in our practice.

We are stuck inside this body during its lifetime, so we have to take care of it and use it for our own purposes. The best use we can make of it is for spiritual practice. The Lord Buddha said that the human form is the springboard to *nibbāna* because, being stuck with a body, human beings have the opportunity to investigate the loathsomeness of it. They can also experience both *sukha* and *dukkha*, happiness and unhappiness. At most, human beings can experience pleasant feelings fifty percent of the time and unpleasant feelings fifty percent of the time, though for most people there is far more *dukkha* than *sukha*. *Dukkha* doesn't only involve the grosser experiences like pain and torment, but a host of milder discontents; we don't like this, we don't like that, we are discontented, we are restless, we are bored, and we are afraid. How many times in the day are you not at ease about something or other? These things are all *dukkha*, and you experience them whether you want to or not. In truth, it's far harder to identify pleasant experiences in a normal day than unpleasant experiences – count them up for yourself!

So, the human form is the springboard for becoming one of the four kinds of noble beings (*Ariya-puggala*) – *sotapanna*, *sakadagami*, *anagami* and *arahant* – because people are faced with both *dukkha* and *sukha*. In the *deva* realms, there is so much *sukha* and so little *dukkha* that the beings there are content and don't have to look for a way out, while in the lower realms there is so much *dukkha* that beings cannot see beyond it. The human realm is the perfect place for us to break out of the cycle of birth and death. Imagine being born again and again and again. It was this realisation that drove my own practice. Imagine being reborn, maybe in the same family with the same brothers and sisters, growing up, going to nursery and going to school. Whenever I thought of being born and going through all these things again, it bolstered my practice. I didn't want to experience these things ever, ever again. That realisation was the engine, the power source that took me through the difficulties of practice. But everyone is responsible for their own lives, so if you want to be reborn it's up to you. It takes about 15 years to train this biological robot before we can use it properly, and then we have about 30 years of reasonable use before it begins to fall apart. Pop! – this part doesn't work any more. Pop! – that part conks out. Is this a lot of fun? Are you all looking forward to old age, to having a broken-down body? Once something goes

wrong with an old car, lots of other things start to break down, and it's the same with bodies. No-one ever tells us these things, and we never think about them, do we? We see only what we want to see. When people get old we put them into homes, and when they get sick we put them into hospitals or in special institutions, so most of the people we see in the street are young and healthy. We are not confronted by old age, sickness and death; we don't have to face them on a daily basis. It's only when our mother or father or a friend becomes sick that we go to the hospital to visit them, and even then we can't bear the smell. Hospitals are places where people spend their last days, suffering from diseases like cancer. They are places of utmost misery, and that's why we don't like going to them. It's the same with old-folks homes where the residents are often disillusioned with life and have nothing to live for. We don't want to spend time there, do we? One hour is enough before we want out again. This is the reality people have to face but most of us never think about such things.

Take death – we bury dead people, and we don't want to see people die or bodies rotting away. We don't even want to see the bodies of dead animals, but our own bodies are no different from the bodies of animals; they have mouths, noses, ears, eyes, arms and legs, just like us. When we see dead animals, we want to look away, but I encourage you to look at them. In Baan Taad monastery there are lots of wild chickens; some of them get sick and die, and you can observe how much *dukkha* they go through at these times. You know for yourself when you get ill how much *dukkha* you go through and how sorry you feel for yourself. You have so many plans, and they all have to be cancelled. Yet this is what life is – being born, getting sick, becoming old and dying. After death we are born again to experience the same thing over and over and over again. Yet we remain fascinated by it all, and come back again and again, stuck in a loop like a person who can't stop playing video games, one game after another. It's only when someone comes along and points out that he has a body and can stop playing games that the player realises what he's been doing. *Samādhi* is where we realise that we can stop, where the video game of life stops for a while, and we see that there is another reality beyond that which we see, hear, smell, touch and taste. For us to make this reality true, we have to use investigation, and the first thing we investigate is the body, over and over again, inside out, outside in, from top to bottom and bottom to top.

Before coming here to Baan Taad monastery, I practiced meditation in the West under a number of different teachers in different centres. I'd heard about the loathsomeness of the body, but *asubha* practice was new to me, and it took me nine months to get a handle on it. The concept of *kilesas* was also new to me, even though Thai people brought up in a Buddhist culture instinctively understand what it means. In the Buddhist scriptures in the West, the Pāli term *kilesa* is translated as 'defilement' but, of course, Western readers can't really grasp what that means; after all, other people might be defiled but "I'm not, I'm clean!" In fact, we are all full of *kilesas*, our hearts are full of defilements. We go to great lengths to clean our bodies and put them to rest at night, but when have we ever washed our hearts and put them to rest? We need to clean the *citta* to make it pure, and we need to put it to rest. It's really so simple to do; just keep your attention on one point. The Lord Buddha used the analogy of tying a wild animal to a post. At first, it tries to break free but after a while it lies down and goes to sleep. Eventually, it gets accustomed to captivity and can be trained for useful work. With the heart, you train it by keeping your attention on one point, whether the repetition of the word *buddho*, the awareness of the breath or the object of investigation. When I first came to Baan Taad, I did nothing else for the first seven years but investigate the body day in and day out, from morning to night. I did this practice until I understood the true nature of the body. Once its true nature is understood, the investigation of the body is at an end. Then one starts to investigate the *nāma khandhas* – mental feelings, memory and association,

thoughts and consciousness – day in and day out. That’s the path. That’s all there is to it. The training is actually very simple, and it’s just a skill we have to learn. If you want to be a good carpenter, you have to put effort into learning the skills of carpentry, and the same is true of surgery or any other profession. In spiritual training, we start with investigation of the body, which includes investigation of the six senses. The important thing is not to let the mind go outside or let it react in anger or greed. This means putting it on a leash and hauling it back when it starts to go out. Then, once the mind is used to not acting on such things, it can investigate what leads to greed and anger; it can do this because thoughts still come up even though we are no longer acting on them. We look for the source, and we eventually find it lying very deep within the heart. The source of all our greed and anger is none other than *dukkha* or discontent, for we run away from unpleasant feelings and look for things to please and gratify the senses.

In fact, our reactions to greed and hate are profoundly unbalanced. We spend our whole lives running away from unpleasant things, and we have trained ourselves to do this so perfectly that we don’t even see them. However, in the practice of meditation, we have to bring up the unpleasant; the scale has to be brought back into balance before we can see both sides. We have to bring up all the things we have run away from for years. If we are to transcend greed and hate, there is no alternative. We have been running after pleasant sensations all our lives, but we stop doing that the moment we begin to practice seriously. Instead, we bring up all the unpleasant things, such as pain or the loathsomeness of the body, until the scales tip towards the other side, until we can’t see anything pleasant in our life. Then, we tip the scales the other way to balance them by bringing up pleasant things. We need to find a perfect balance, where we can see both pleasant things and unpleasant things, observe them existing at the same time, and simply walk through the middle. That is the end of greed and hate. However, before we reach that point we have to be able to manipulate – to create unpleasant feelings and destroy them with pleasant feelings, or create pleasant feelings and destroy them with unpleasant feelings. You have to become a master at this before you can see both pleasant and unpleasant feelings at the same time. Then you will be able to go through the middle and make an end of greed and hate. They will never bother you again.

The reason why we have to do investigation of the body, the senses and painful feelings is because we have spent our whole lives running away from them. We really don’t know what the experience of an unpleasant feeling is, so we have to face up to it and stay with it from the point where it arises to the point where it ceases. Staying with unpleasant feelings is much easier than staying with pleasant ones, which is why we use unpleasant feelings to train ourselves initially. As for pleasant feelings, it’s even more difficult to stay with them because when they arise our mind immediately goes out into thought. We wonder how to get the pleasant feeling back, how to prolong it, and how to recreate the situation that caused it. As soon as we contact a pleasant feeling, the mind starts wandering off into the future or the past; it never stays with the pleasant feeling. Can you see your own foolishness? As soon as you have a pleasant feeling, the mind instantly goes out, wanting it again and again for longer and longer. You’re not actually with the pleasant feeling because you are not aware of it; rather, you’re aware of your thoughts and memories. Don’t think it’s easy to deal with pleasant feelings. We like pleasant feelings, so the mind goes out trying to nail them down and find the perfect situation for them to arise. But you know from your own experience that the pleasant feeling doesn’t always arise in a particular situation. It doesn’t matter if you are climbing a mountain or watching a sunset or driving at high speed; whatever the external event, the pleasant feeling arises in the heart; it depends on the heart. Wherever

you take the heart, that's where the pleasant feeling arises. Because we take our bodies to fine restaurants or to the beach, we have the illusion that pleasant feelings come about because of these situations, but really they come from the heart. If we fall in love, we have the feeling that love arises because of the person we love, and if that person disappears we become upset. But, really, love arises in our own hearts.

Aren't we foolish? We have been fooled for so long by the master, *avijjā*, who tells us that things arise out there or over there, but never tells us that they arise right here in our own hearts. Actually, if we want a pleasant feeling we can just look inside our heart and find it. All of the pleasant feelings are there, because it is from there that they arise. The same is true for unpleasant feelings, and at the beginning of our practice we have to dig them up. Don't imagine that you can avoid unpleasant things – you have to face up to them, you have to dig them up. The more you dig up, the less you have to fear. If you go through the pain of death, what do you have to fear in this world? Nothing. There is nothing worse than the pain of death when the body is on fire or is breaking apart. Once you have gone through such pain in your meditation practice, once you have had that experience, what more is there to fear?

But what usually happens is that people experience a little pain and stop practicing. They stop at the same point each time, and run around at the bottom of the mountain without ever climbing it, looking for the easiest way up to the top. I want you to understand this. No matter how long the path is, the work is always the same. If you go up the steep slope, it's faster but more painful; if you take the shallow path, there is less pain but it takes much longer. Overall, whichever path you take, the amount of pain and amount of work is the same. Not realising this, we run around at the base of the mountain trying to find the easy way up. Sorry to say, there is no easy way up. The only shortcut that exists is *sati*, and the Lord Buddha said that if we can go for seven days, 24 hours a day, without one lapse of *sati* we can gain enlightenment. If your *sati* is not strong enough, however, it can take seven weeks, seven months, seven years or seven lifetimes. It all depends on the strength of *sati*.

Note

* “Shedding tears in amazement with *Dhamma*”. A *Dhamma* talk by Than Acharn Mahā Bua given on the 2nd of May 2002 at the age of 89. Available as a video (<http://www.luangta.eu/site/play-video-with-subtitles.php>) or as text in the book, “Paying our last respects” (page 91) available at http://www.luangta.eu/site/books/book12_respect.php.