Ajahn Martin Piyadhammo

Forest Leaves

A Selection of Talks on Buddhist Practice

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By Ajahn Martin Piyadhammo

"The gift of Dhamma excels all other gifts"
The Buddha

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Introduction

Ajahn Martin Piyadhammo, the author of this collection of talks on Dhamma (*desanās*), is a Buddhist monk (*bhikkhu*) in the Thai Forest Tradition, which puts emphasis on the practice of meditation to attain enlightenment in this life.

The founder of the Thai Forest Tradition was Than (Venerable) Ajahn Mun (1870–1949) who spent most of his life practicing meditation in the extensive rainforests of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos. Many of his disciples also became accomplished meditation masters, and certainly the most famous in Thailand was Than Ajahn Mahā Bua Ñāṇasampanno (1913–2011), affectionately known as Luangta Mahā Bua. Ordained as a Buddhist monk in 1934, Than Ajahn Mahā Bua attained enlightenment in 1950 and founded his famous monastery at Baan Taad near Udon Thani, Thailand in 1955. Thereafter, he became the central figure in the Thai Forest Tradition. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua often called his monastery the forest university, which indicated that it was not primarily designed for monks or laypeople at the start of their practice but rather for serious practitioners aiming to achieve a "doctoral degree" and rid themselves of *avijjā* (fundamental ignorance) once and for all. From the 1970s onwards, he wrote a number of books detailing Than Ajahn Mun's life and mode of practice – intensive meditation, discipline and renunciation – which brought these teachings to an international audience. The Thai Forest Tradition is summarized in this quote from Than Ajahn Mahā Bua: "This is the Lord Buddha's teaching – *rukkhamūla-senāsanaṃ,* retreating into the forests and mountains. After ordaining as a monk, one should go and live under the shade of a tree, in the forest, in the mountains, in caves or under rocky overhangs. These are places conducive to the practice, where one will not be disturbed. Your practice there will progress comfortably, smoothly and well. There you should practice diligently and with perseverance for the rest of your life!"

Ajahn Martin Piyadhammo was born in Stuttgart in 1957 and studied electrical and computer engineering in Germany and the USA. In 1995, he went to live with Than Ajahn Mahā Bua in Baan Taad Forest Monastery, and was ordained as a Buddhist monk in the same year. His first five years were spent living inside the monastery under the tutelage of Than Ajahn Mahā Bua and other senior monks. As Thai monasteries have a precise and detailed etiquette covering most aspects of life, he had to learn everything anew: how to wash himself, how to sit down properly, how to eat his one meal of the day, and how to behave and conduct himself as a monk. Meditation practice was not easy at the beginning, of course, but Ajahn Martin went deeper and deeper into practice as the years progressed. If obstacles arose and problems came up, he used his wisdom to overcome them, reflecting that whatever he had experienced before in his life had led to nothing but *dukkha*, whereas the satisfaction and joy that came from meditation was something he had never experienced in ordinary life. He was certain that he did not want to be reborn again. His teacher Than Ajahn Mahā Bua also had a vital role to play. As Ajahn Martin recalls, "He kept coming at the right moment, and he saw through all of us. Once when one of my fellow monks was sweeping the area around the monastery, Than Ajahn Mahā Bua came past and said, "If you're sweeping, you should just sweep, and not sing a song inside your head." It turned out that the monk had been silently humming to the rhythm of a song in his head while doing the sweeping. It was instances like this that showed the remarkable quality of Than Ajahn Mahā Bua as a teacher."

When his five years of apprenticeship in the monastery were over, Ajahn Martin went on *thudong* around the surrounding provinces for two to five months each year, returning thereafter to Baan Taad forest monastery to live with his teacher. At first, he spent his periods of solitude at a very remote monastery with other monks. However, as time went on, he preferred to be alone on *thudong*, spending time in caves located far away from the villages and largely undisturbed.

Ajahn Martin has mastered living in solitude, without becoming anti-social. He exudes a warm inner peace, shows great interest in the well-being of his fellow human beings, and does his best to help them to develop their full potential. He is known for the directness of his teachings that come straight from the heart and hit the questioner at exactly the right spot — the heart. Ajahn Martin does not beat around the bush, whether in his discourses or in his personal encounters with people. If he feels that someone is just about to understand something, he digs in further. He finds the sore point and presses his finger on it, so that the person can understand exactly what he means and look directly inwards for a solution. If some people find this provocative, then so be it, for it is part and parcel of Ajahn Martin's great talent for getting straight to the heart of the matter. He reaches effortlessly into people's hearts, asking questions like, "Are you awake or asleep? Are you still alive? May I try to wake you up, at least a little?" As he explains, "Buddhism in the West, and Theravāda Buddhism in general, is often too scholastic. People talk and talk about it with a superior attitude, but this is not the right way. Rather, it is one's own experience that counts."

To illustrate the point, he uses the analogy of a group of scholars sitting around a fire. They discuss the fire, arguing over whether it is hot, warm, or even, perhaps, cold. Without direct experience, these scholars have only their assumptions about its true nature, but when one of them touches the fire, he knows the truth for himself without having to ask anyone else's opinion. Ajahn Martin sees his task as encouraging people to practice Dhamma to know the truth for themselves. In an interview, he was asked what had driven him to move towards his goal of ending the rounds of rebirth with such energy and directness. He replied that the most important factor initially was his experiences during meditation retreats as a layperson in Germany: on one occasion, he had a feeling of utter silence that filled him completely; on another occasion, he had a feeling of indescribable joy. Afterwards, he found that everything in everyday life was stale and bleak in comparison; he had found something that was more beautiful than all the

promises he had run after previously. Later, as a Buddhist monk, he came to the firm decision that he wanted to make sure that his present life was to be his last.

In 2002, Luangta Mahā Bua gave him permission to teach and from then on he was responsible for teaching *bhikkhus* and Western meditators visiting or staying at Wat Pa Baan Taad. In 2017 Ajahn Martin moved to the monastery of Wat Phu Khong Tong in the Nongbua Lamphu province of Thailand, where he is Vice-Abbot and gives daily teachings to visitors and those staying at the monastery. Following a request from a group of visitors in 2006, Ajahn Martin's Dhamma *desanās* began to be recorded regularly. Eventually the talks were made publicly available to help the meditation practice of those few seekers interested in training themselves to reach *magga*, *phala* and *Nibbāna*. The selection of his Dhamma *desanās* in this book has been chosen to represent key aspects of his teachings between 2006 and 2016.

Many words in the talks have been left in *Pāli* because there is often no adequate translation in English; it is hoped the reader will forgive any difficulties that this may make, but it is felt better that the reader should not-understand rather than mis-understand. However, a fairly comprehensive glossary has been included at the back, which should cover all the *Pāli* words that are not actually explained in the text. It is hoped that this book will bring the Dhamma to many people and that it will help many of them to realise that the living Dhamma is still extant and is not just a thing of the distant past or the distant future when the next Buddha comes. May all who read this book gain from it that which will aid them towards the supreme happiness of *Nibbāna*.

The Editor
February 2019


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The need for simplicity

21st May 2007

When you stay and practice in Baan Taad monastery, please remember one thing. There's a lot to do by way of practice, but there's very little you have to know or understand. The fewer distractions the better, and it is best not to interact with other people by talking to them, particularly if you are developing the practice of *samādhi*. At the moment you probably don't realise it, but talking for thirty minutes or an hour will interfere with your meditation practice for hours afterwards. The mind will be occupied with the topics raised in conversation; for instance, it will think about cleverer answers that it might have given. This is just a waste of time, and it is best not to talk at all. If you really want to attain *samādhi*, you need to talk and interact with others as little as possible and have *sati* (awareness) as much as possible. Whatever activity you are doing, you can develop your *sati* by mentally repeating the word *buddho* or observing the breath coming in and going out at the nose. Whatever you are doing, you should maintain attention on one of these objects, but please don't switch between the two. The aim is to reach one-pointedness — don't forget this. During the day, if your mind constantly goes out and tries to interrogate this or that object in the world, whether feelings or anything else, you will not become one-pointed, for the mind will be reaching for many different points.

To reach one-pointedness, you have to be able to throw out everything that comes into your mind or heart *(citta)*, and you will reach it sooner if you have as little interaction with other objects as possible — I'm referring mainly to objects called *ārammaṇa* in *Pāli*, which are often emotional states. The idea is to watch them as they come up without interfering with them, and then go back to the breath or the word *buddho*. This is what we have to do from moment to moment if we want to develop awareness of the breath or the mental repetition of the word *buddho*. The longer you can stay with this practice, from the moment you open your

eyes to the moment you close them again at night, the better will be the results and the faster they will come. Please don't forget this. Whatever comes up, let it come and then either pay no heed to it or throw it out. If whatever comes up is stubborn, just leave it to one side and continue with your practice. For instance, if the *kilesas* don't want to practice, just tell them, "Alright – you don't want to, but I'm going ahead with my practice. Do whatever you want, but I'm interested only in my practice." If you are determined to push ahead in this way, the *kilesas* will have to leave. Please understand this; the *kilesas* can only live if we pay them attention, if we become interested in them. If we don't give them any mental energy, they have to die away, at least for the time being. If our *sati* slips, however, the *kilesas* can take all the energy we have built up during practice, and we'll have to struggle to get some of it back.

We have to be careful about these lapses in *sati*; if we have developed reasonably good concentration and *sati* lapses, hopping off onto a topic we are interested in, it's possible to lose all the energy built up in the previous two or three hours. It's our interest in what is going on around us that keeps the *kilesas* alive – please understand this. The *kilesas* don't like to observe the breath or repeat the word *buddho* – they want to play, play with all the things around us, with objects in the mind, with sounds at the ear, with objects before the eye. But if we as practitioners don't show any interest, don't pay them any attention and just keep focussed on the breath or the word *buddho*, the *kilesas* will be starved of energy and will have to fade away. This will bring peace and restfulness and happiness. The *kilesas* are constantly demanding our attention, like a little child hanging onto its mother's skirt. We can see this in shops, little children seeing objects and wanting them, wanting this and wanting that. If the mother gives in, the child wants more; if she doesn't give in, the child cries and cries but eventually gives up because the mother is not paying any attention. Similarly, in meditation practice, we shouldn't pay any attention to these crying naughty little children called *kilesas*. And if we don't pay them attention, they will stop bothering us, leading to stillness and peace of mind.

However, the *kilesas* are much cleverer than a little child; they know us much better than we know ourselves, so they conjure up a range of different things – anger, greed, likes and dislikes, fear of death, fear of the unknown, and so on – and they catch us with them. In Westerners, they usually bring up doubt, often about whether this practice is worthwhile or whether another practice might bring better results. After a few days, we go on to another practice, and then another and another. Later, when we look back, we can see that the *kilesas* fooled us into behaving like this, just as they've fooled us all our lives. Our whole lives have been like this, wanting this, not wanting that; the *kilesas* have made all the decisions, and we have just said, "Alright, go ahead, and I'll pay the price." But when we start the practice of *sati*, we can begin to see this process happening and start to interfere with the power of *avijjā* (fundamental ignorance) which has kept us in prison for such a long time. If we do not stand up against the wardens of the prison, if we do not take away their power, we will stay in the prison for ever. They will not let us go without a fight; we have to learn how to fight back, how to trick them and overcome them.

To trick them, we need determination and effort to stay on one point; this is what they loathe most because they find the breath or the word *buddho* extremely boring. We have to become very interested in our meditation object, so that all our energy and all our attention is focussed on one point. It is being interested that keeps us on the one point, and if our interest diminishes the *kilesas* have the opportunity to take power. It's as if there is a throne, and the occupant can either be the light (Dhamma) or the dark (*avijjā*). Only one of them can tell us what to do at any one time, and if we give the Dhamma the chance to rule, we will do the practice. However, if our interest in the Dhamma diminishes because we are bored or think we haven't had the expected results, we allow *avijjā* to rule. The *kilesas* whisper that we could be doing so many other things; they are very persuasive and we believe whatever they say. They are like little birds sitting behind our ears twittering that it would be interesting to do this or that, and they are so honey-tongued that we find their suggestions wonderful.

If we feel we can't stay in a monastery but have developed some *sati* in our practice and want to live in the world, we should at least check to see whether the *kilesas* keep their promises and whether what we are doing at their bidding leads to wholesome results or not. If we check thoroughly, we'll find that their promises are untrue and that they lead to a lot of agitation and restlessness of heart. This agitation can be seen as either positive or negative; lust can be seen as positive but it also agitates, and the lust for any of the senses also leads to agitation. Reading a book or meeting a person, for instance, agitates the heart, making it either excited or angry. So, you need to test the promises of the *kilesas* to see whether they really do come true. I'm not saying that laypeople shouldn't act in the world — as long as the five precepts are being kept it's alright to do things — but you should still check to see whether your actions have the results promised by the *kilesas*. In ordinary life we check things out all the time; if we buy products with our hard-earned money, we expect to get what was promised, otherwise we ask for the money back. We need to do the same with the mind; given the false promises of the *kilesas*, we should demand our *citta* back. We are all in trouble; our hearts are agitated or burning hot, but we don't realise that the fires of greed and hate have been caused by our own thoughts, by wanting this and not wanting that. So, we should at least be honest with ourselves. Being honest with other people is difficult, but it's more difficult to be honest with oneself.

When you want to go to a film or out for a meal, ask yourself what state your heart is in at that moment. If you truly investigate, you'll see that there are unpleasant feelings in the heart. Our reaction to these unpleasant feelings is to think about doing something that promises happiness or satisfaction — "satisfaction guaranteed" — but the reality is that dissatisfaction is guaranteed when the *kilesas* make promises. In fact, satisfaction comes only from the pure heart, when it is still and no longer agitated. This doesn't mean that we have to be vegetables; we can function in the world, but the world will just be the world, and the heart will not be involved with it any more. This is something we have to learn

through the path of investigation with wisdom (*paññā*), and part of investigation includes checking whether the actions suggested by the *kilesas* produce the promised results; if they don't, we shouldn't repeat them. Similarly, we should investigate why the *kilesas* keep coming up, and we'll find that the cause is *dukkha* (dissatisfaction). And we also need to remember *anicca* — whatever arises ceases — and stay with an unpleasant thought or feeling until it fades away, simply observing it as it comes and goes. When it goes, it changes into another feeling and then another feeling, for this is the nature of the *citta* that is defiled. It will always produce something positive or negative, although most of the time the negatives outweigh the positives, and this is why we find so little happiness (*sukha*) or satisfaction with the world. If you reflect back on your life, you'll notice that you've had five or ten minutes of happiness in any one day, while the rest of the time has been hard work with agitation, trouble and worry. It's the brief periods of happiness that we latch onto, however, for these make us feel better.

Please understand one thing. Whatever arises does so within the heart, and that's where we have to observe. The things in the outside world, including other beings, are just the triggers for whatever arises in our own hearts. When we love a material object such as a vase, for instance, we don't imagine that the love exists in the vase itself; we realise that the love for the vase is in our own heart. But when the object is another person, we think that the person is the cause of our love or, perhaps, the cause of our loneliness. But they are just the trigger; in reality, the other person has set something into motion within the *citta*. The love we feel is the love within our own heart — it's not the love of the other person. Remember this; whatever arises does so only within our own hearts, nowhere else. The other being, say a person of the opposite sex, is just the trigger; it has nothing to do with us. So, when we recognise that triggering has occurred, we need to investigate what has been triggered. If longing has been triggered, we need to investigate what we want, what we really want from this person or object. What is this person or object promising us? In

most cases, they are promising something that we do not have, at least at that moment. However, as all things arise within our own hearts, if we look within our own hearts for what is being promised, it follows that we don't need the external objects. Isn't that marvellous? This realisation makes us completely self-sufficient, completely whole, not lacking anything at all and not worrying about anything at all. If we truly understand that everything arises within the heart, we can find within our hearts those things that are lacking. Everything is already there, whole. We have separated ourselves from what we really are, from our true nature, and this produces the feeling of loneliness that makes us act in so many ways. We cannot stay alone because we are afraid of loneliness, so we look for friends, for a partner, for a society, for a group that thinks like us – all because we cannot be alone. We look for people with similar thoughts or similar views to our own, and feel comforted that our opinions confirmed. But when no-one in the world has the same opinions, and no-one shares our views, then we are alone – except, of course, for the "fool" called the *Arahant*, a fool because he is crazy in the sense that he sees things from a different point of view. The German word *verrückt* means crazy, and it simply means taking another point of view, stepping aside to see things from a different angle. In that sense, an *Arahant* is completely crazy – he's a person who is completely satisfied and completely whole and who does not want anything, and this makes him seem crazy to the beings in the cosmos, all of whom have so much wanting and craving.

Humans and other beings want to change the world, to make it good, but what is a good world? It's one that conforms to our views and opinions about what good is, but other people have different views. That's why we look for people who think like ourselves, so we feel safe with our views and opinions. But if you live alone, you have to get rid of your views and opinions because no-one shares them, and you can come to see that, actually, they are just a damned nuisance. Get rid of all your opinions and you will see the truth. We are all so attached; that's why Buddhists run

to Buddhists, and Christians to Christians, and peacemakers to peacemakers, and so on. They all share the same opinions about life. Human beings are like herds of cows; they need a leader to follow because they cannot stay alone. Even if there are very few animals in the herd, they still feel safe, but they do not feel safe alone. This is why the Lord Buddha taught his disciples to go alone into the forests, the caves, the hills, to isolated places. The teachers in these places are the forest, the wind, the heat, the rain and nature itself; it's called the forest university because the forest is teaching the truth. When you are alone in the forest, you cannot find fault with anyone else because you are the only one there. You can only find fault with yourself, and this is helpful because you have to realise that everything is within yourself. The trees or the leaves can't be at fault – they just grow there. If we bang into a tree, it's because of our lack of *sati*; it's not the fault of the tree, and we can see this clearly. If we tread on a snake, it's our fault because *sati* is lacking; we were thinking about other things and didn't see the snake. In the wild, there's no-one else to blame; we can only blame ourselves, and this is why the Lord Buddha said that forests are the most auspicious places for practice.

We should go into forests, however, only when our practice rests on a firm foundation. Our minds have to be quite stable to deal with all the difficulties that arise, and these difficulties are not small. You may feel happy for a week, but if you stay in the forest for months life can get very tough. Yet, the simplicity of nature can show us the truth, and that's why we should go there. I remember a story in the Zen tradition where the abbot of a monastery kicked out one of the monks who was trying to be cleverer than the abbot himself. He sent him off to live in a cave and sweep it, and to come back when he had finished. So, the monk stayed there for one, five, ten years, sweeping every day from morning to night. Only after twenty years did he realise the truth, whether of sweeping or anything else. Once he had found the truth, there was no need to go back to the monastery because he had finished his work, finished the work of getting rid of the *kilesas* that had made the

twenty years of sweeping the cave the most dreadful task imaginable. After his realisation, the abbot came to see him and asked, "You've finished your sweeping, so why didn't you come back?" The monk replied that there was no need – he was whole in himself, he had realised the truth, so why go back? Wherever he was, he was.

I give these examples to show you that it is the simplicity of life that teaches us the truth. The complex world of aeroplanes, buses, shops, restaurants, beaches, mathematics, physics or whatever does not teach us the truth. No – it's the simplicity of walking up and down or sitting in *samādhi* or sweeping in front of a cave. This simplicity will teach us the truth about everything if it's done correctly. So, please remember this; we think that the more complicated life is, the more enticing and exciting it is. This is why we find it hard to stay with simplicity. But life itself is so simple, and the path of the Lord Buddha teaches us to investigate the five *khandhas* – the five groups that make up what we think of as our personality. If we understand how these five groups work together to produce what we see as "I", we will find it amazing. It's so simple, just like the workings of a mechanical clock going round and round. Once we take off the hands of the clock and the numbers around the edge, there is no meaning left; it's just a mechanism that turns and turns and turns. It doesn't tell us the time, it doesn't tell us anything, but it still turns round and round. Once we have understood that it simply turns around, and that there is no meaning to it at all, we find freedom, the freedom of the *citta*. The clock continues to turn round and round until the body is dead, and then it's finished. There will be no more clock and no more body, because the maker of the clock has been discarded.

So, for the time being, try to remember this; it's the simplicity of things that makes us understand, the simplicity of touching fire to know that it is hot. We can wrangle forever about whether a fire is hot, warm or cold if we are only looking at it from afar; all we're seeing is the interaction of the fire with the other elements. But if we touch it, we know for ourselves, and we don't have to ask

any more questions. Whatever anyone else says, we know for ourselves. So, touch the fire of truth for yourselves and you'll know; you'll understand and you won't need any diploma to confirm the truth. You won't have to go and ask another teacher to confirm it, and even if the Lord Buddha sits in front of you, you won't have any questions because the Dhamma and the Lord Buddha will be one and the same thing. And because you are the Dhamma the moment you are relieved of *avijjā*, the Dhamma is you and you are the Lord Buddha – it's all one and the same. There are no more questions.

So, I want you to go in the direction of seeing the truth. Remember that things are simple. Don't distract yourselves with complexities, with complicated questions that can never be solved, such as the future of human life. Similarly, thinking about or trying to change the past is futile. Look at the present, and you'll find that everything is completely there. Everything in the whole cosmos makes sense; there is nothing that we have to change. All we need do is comply with the truth, not to go against it. Identifying with the five *khandhas* is going against the truth. Once we realise that the truth is as it is and that there is no way to change it, we will comply with it and find relief. That is the end of the matter, the end of all our troubles and worries and fears. What remains is *paramaṁ sukhaṁ*, the ultimate happiness. At that stage, the five *khandhas*, if they still exist, can still give us trouble, just as the mechanism of a clock still works; the wheels still grind against each other, and this may create some unpleasant feelings. But once we die, once the clock stops, that's the end of it.

So, put some effort in. You know how to go along the path, and the first thing to do is find inner stillness; this is where you have to put all your effort. If you really want to find it, you can do it. There's no question about this; you really can do it. It just depends on your *sati*, determination and effort not to let go of your meditation object. That's all, nothing else – just don't let go of it. Imagine you are drifting on the high seas and need to keep hold of the plank of wood that keeps you afloat. You wouldn't let go of the

plank, would you? The word *buddho* or the breath is your plank that keeps you alive, so don't let go of your meditation object. This will bring you very quickly to *upacāra samādhi* from which you can go deeper, into *appanā samadhi*, to find a preview of *Nibbāna*. You will definitely like the experience, I've no doubts about that; I've never seen anyone who doesn't like it. But there are only a few people who really put effort into achieving it, because the world, the *kilesas*, intervene. These *kilesas* are little birds behind our ears that promise us honey and sugar, and this is why Than Ajahn Mahā Bua called them sugar coated poison; the outside is sweet and the inside is poison. How long have we been taking this sugar-coated poison? We have all died so many times because of this poison, and been reborn and reborn to take more and more poison. When are we going to stop taking poison?

As Westerners, we are all so concerned about poisonous food, but we're unconcerned about having a poisonous *citta*. Why? We go through so much hardship to make sure we get proper food for a body that has to die in any case. But we never think about giving the *citta* proper food. We take in poisonous things because the poison is exciting, and excitement is what we are looking for. But we never consider the after-effects and never realise that the *kilesas* are keeping us in prison. So take a good look, especially if you are living a lay life in the world; take a good look at the sugar-coated poison that you are taking all the time. And when you are concerned about chemicals or poisons that might be in your food, have a thought for the mind that gets sprayed with the chemicals or poisons of the *kilesas*, the poisons that you love to eat, love to follow and love to swallow.

Samādhi
is not an option

8th December 2006

You must understand that it's necessary to go through the fires of hell to reach the ocean of happiness. There is no other way; we have to go through the fire — pain, *dukkha*, torture, hardship — to reach the safe shore of supreme happiness. The Lord Buddha himself fainted three times because of the extreme pain and so did Than Ajahn Mun. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua came very close to fainting, and I have had a similar experience. If you don't wage war against the *kilesas* (defilements) that grab the *citta* (heart) and cause all your suffering, you will not be able to uproot your greed, hate and delusion. These things are very deeply rooted in all our hearts, so to get them out we need to endure some pain and *dukkha*.

Mettā is translated as loving kindness. You all have your own ideas about what loving kindness is, and probably have the idea that someone with loving kindness should be pleasant, friendly and behave sympathetically. But consider this: imagine that the whole world is addicted to opium and that everyone seems happy because they have the drug. The opium is called *avijjā* (fundamental ignorance). People go on and on, round and round in *saṁsāra* forever, and are willing to keep going round as long as they have opium. Then a wise teacher comes along and sees that opium is not a good thing. How will people react when he tries to take their opium pipes away? Would they think he has a lot of *mettā*? No, they'd think he was cruel, even though giving up opium would be to their great benefit. That is one analogy. Another is that your body is covered in painful thorns, and a wise person realises that these thorns are full of a poison that makes you fall asleep. The thorns will need to come out, but this will hurt initially and will continue to be painful until the wounds heal. Unless you know he is helping, would you think he has a lot of *mettā*? No. In the case of medical doctors, we all know that they are trying to help, so we bear some pain and allow them to do their is work. Once the

pain has gone, we will be grateful. On the spiritual path, however, it's very difficult to know what our "spiritual doctor" is doing. He seems to be inflicting a lot of pain, so we ask why he doesn't smile and why he doesn't seem to have any *mettā*.

For the first six or seven years of my time in Baan Taad monastery, my own venerable teacher Than Ajahn Mahā Bua never once smiled at me. Instead, he was always stepping on my toes; whenever I did something wrong, he pointed it out and stepped on my toes. At that time I didn't think he had a lot of *mettā*. When I did the same things that the other monks were doing, he didn't catch the other monks, but he caught me and told me off. So, he always put me on the spot, he never gave me a smile, and there was never a grin hidden in his face. He was very, very serious: "I don't want to see you doing that kind of thing." It took me years of questioning myself and other more senior monks to discover that this was exactly the kind of *mettā* Than Ajahn Mahā Bua had for his disciples. He pointed out the things that were unwholesome within themselves so they could get rid of them. He didn't point out the good things; he didn't show that side. Of course, I'm only talking about the relationship of Than Ajahn Mahā Bua with his *bhikkhus*. He was very different with laypeople because he did not have any responsibility for their individual spiritual welfare. They came and went, and he could joke with them, whereas he was responsible for the spiritual welfare of the *bhikkhus*. So it took me six or seven years to understand that, in fact, he had much more *mettā* for me than for other people, because he stepped only on my toes and the toes of a few other people. He corrected me whenever I was doing something wrong. For instance, I would try to maintain my *sati* (awareness) for four or five days, and he never approached me or seemed to care, but if I got slack in my practice, he would suddenly appear to correct me not to do it again. This kind of *mettā* is different from our usual view of it; we normally think that *mettā* involves someone smiling, cheering and giving encouragement all the time, but that would be giving sugar-coated poison.

Than Ajahn Mahā Bua called the *kilesas* sugar-coated poison, sweet to taste but with a poison that has very long-lasting, deep and bitter after-effects. He always pointed out the dangers, the dangers that lead us to fall into the *kilesas*' trap. So, perhaps you should revise your view of *mettā*. Someone who scolds you or gets in your face is not necessarily lacking in *mettā*. In the long run, whether they have had *mettā* or not is shown by the cure. The process of becoming cured is painful and slow, but in the end you will be very pleased and very grateful that he didn't just look away, that he always noticed when you were doing something wrong. Finally, after seven years, when I went to see him to talk about my practice, I got the first smile; he was satisfied with what I had achieved. But it took a long time. You come here for two, three, four weeks or a few months and then leave because the *dukkha* and torture is too much. You feel you have to go to another place, see another teacher and experience other things. For a *bhikkhu* it is different. For the first five years, he has to stay with his teacher without being able to go where he likes. He cannot leave the monastery without asking permission from his teacher, and a strict teacher like Than Ajahn Mahā Bua will say no. For instance, if you ask to go into town to see a doctor, he may give permission but then say that you don't need to come back. So strictness with the *kilesas* and *avijjā* is the only thing that can help; we cannot fool around. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua was the best example of a person who would not let the *kilesas* get a finger-hold, who simply would not let his disciples go in the wrong direction. He ensured that we would go in the direction leading to happiness and not deviate from it. If one has the endurance to stay with such a teacher, in the end one realises that he is one of the best doctors around because he can cure the patient. He can cure you of these obstinate *kilesas* that bring you trouble all the time.

I want all of you to reach the state of happiness, the basis of practice, the basis of *samādhi*. *Samādhi* is peacefulness, happiness and one-pointedness, where all the problems in the universe dissolve for a certain amount of time. There are three kinds of

samādhi, and the first is *khaṇika* (momentary) *samādhi* when the *citta* drops down into the deep state of *samādhi*, perhaps for just a few seconds, and then comes back. When it comes back, it normally lands in *upacāra* (access) *samādhi*, the second type of *samādhi* in which thoughts cease for a while. In *upacāra samādhi*, the mind gathers in concentration while still seeing and experiencing the surrounding world. It's as though you are in the midst of a storm with thunder, lightning and rain, and come to a glass house that you can enter and close the door behind. You feel safe for the first time; access *samādhi* is like entering a safe place, knowing all the things that are happening around you but having the feeling that they are somewhere at the periphery and cannot touch you any more. When there is pain, it doesn't touch you; you just see things as they are. It's a whole new world. One can talk about *upacāra samādhi* for the rest of one's life, and still not fully describe it, for there are so many different kinds of experiences people can have. It is called access *samādhi* because one can have access to all the different worlds, the thirty-one planes of existence. If you know the pathway, you can go to hell, the heavens, the ghost realm, and so on. It's not difficult for us to attain access *samādhi*, the safe haven within us, a place to rest when we need to. We really need to develop access *samādhi*; if we do not, sooner or later we will be lost, because we will still be swayed by the power of the *kilesas* demanding that we act in one way or another to get relief from pain. If we develop the path that leads to this kind of *samādhi*, we shall always have a haven where we can rest; it's like having a bed where we can rest our head and forget the world for a while. When we come out of access *samādhi*, the world is the same as before we entered, but we know that we have been in a safe place. I want to make this extremely clear — access *samādhi* is something we *must* develop. It's not something to read about in books; it happens within our own *citta*, our own heart, and we access it within our own hearts. It's a must; it's not an option — we must reach it!

The third type of *samādhi* is *appanā samādhi*, the deep state of *samādhi*. Here, the mind gathers into one-pointedness even more. Initially, we start with our meditation object, such as the mental repetition of the word *buddho* or the awareness of the breath. The breath becomes so subtle that we think we have stopped breathing, or the *buddho* becomes so fixed that we cannot even think another *buddho*. When this happens, the mind is so fixed that it has only one way to go — to one-pointedness. Normally, whatever we see in this world consists of I and you, subject and object. In one-pointedness there is no subject and no object; the whole world of duality collapses, and people who have this experience call it a wonder. The whole universe of duality collapses into one-pointedness and everything just disappears. The body and the whole world disappear from our senses, and what is left is the knowing nature of the *citta*. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua calls it "the *Nibbāna* of the little man." Why little man? Because everyone who puts in their effort can reach it; nothing stands in the way. This is why I said at the beginning that if we don't go through the fires of hell we shall never reach the supreme happiness. If we are not able to force our mind into one-pointedness — which means going through the fires of hell — then we shall not reach it. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua has described his own experience of his first three days of this practice. He had the determination not to let go of the word *buddho* from the moment he opened his eyes until he closed them again at night, and the first three days were hell. The mind wanted to go out here and there, but he did not give in. If he had not gone through hell, he would never have reached the deep state of *samādhi*, and he would not have been able to develop *samādhi* to the extent that he got stuck there for five years. When he came out of *samādhi*, he went in again, and out and in again. He said that there was not a day during this period when he did not go into *samādhi*. Eventually, his teacher Than Ajahn Mun told him that he had remained long enough in *samādhi*, and that it was now the time to develop wisdom. So, for all of us on the path of practice, *samādhi* is a must, whether it's access *samādhi* or *appanā samādhi*. For those of you who want to go all the way to *Nibbāna*, *appanā*

samādhi is the state to reach in the beginning, so you can see what it will be like to actually achieve the goal. It's the *Nibbāna* of the little man, a preview of *Nibbāna*. The only difference is that in *Nibbāna* the five *khandhas* — body (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), memory and association (*saññā*), thoughts (*sankhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) — have gone whereas in the deep state of *samādhi* the *khandhas* are still in the background.

We have to do whatever it takes to get into *samādhi*. In Than Ajahn Mahā Bua's case, he was not willing to give in for three days and three nights, keeping his attention on the word *buddho* without letting his mind go out for a single moment. If he hadn't gone through that hell, he would not have found the supreme happiness and peacefulness of this state of *samādhi*. We need the rest, the power, the concentration of *samādhi* on the path of investigation leading to wisdom. If we have a blunt knife and try to chop down a tree, we can work for the rest of our lives without cutting it down. But if the mind is very sharp, great progress can be made in cutting down the tree of *avijjā*. Don't forget this; *samādhi*, the ability to concentrate, combined with *sati*, the ability to be aware, are essentials for the development of wisdom. Imagine that you've caught a fish and want to put it into the frying pan. You have to cut off the head, but unless you grab it very tightly it will wriggle out of your hand, and you'll have to catch it again and again. You could spend the rest of your life trying to catch it. In this case, the fish are none other than the *kilesas*. You grab them but you don't hold them tightly enough to be able to cut off their heads. Please be clear about this; the path to deliverance is the path of *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* and *paññā* (wisdom) — *sīla* is keeping the five precepts, and *samādhi* is the ability to concentrate so you can rest, gain energy and develop *sati*. *Sati* is not just being conscious of what one is doing but rather being fully attentive, full of awareness of what is going on. If you really have *sati*, you are aware of the movement of the arm when you move it, and if you really are aware, you can catch the thought that precedes the movement of the arm. Many things have to happen in your *citta* and the five

khandhas before the arm or the finger move; it's not an automatic process. If the *citta* leaves the body, the body lies still, for the *citta* is the prime mover. The *citta* uses the body for its pleasure; that's why it's in there, and that's why it's stuck there. Normally, the *citta* cannot get out unless the body dies, and then it looks for the next body until that body dies when it looks for the next body, and so on. It never gives up, until we investigate using *paññā*.

The wisdom I'm talking about is not acquiring knowledge; we've all been to school or university, but what good has this knowledge been to us? We've learned about Buddhism, but what good has that been? If this kind of knowledge does not lead us onto our meditation cushions to sit in *samādhi*, or encourage us to do walking meditation (*jongrom*), then it is worthless. What we really need to get to grips with are those teachings of the Lord Buddha that lead us to experience for ourselves; this is what he promised – follow the path, follow the signs and you will experience the Dhamma within your own heart. This Dhamma is apparent to everyone who practices; it's *ehipassiko* (an invitation to come and see to know for yourself). But it's not apparent to anyone who studies, for knowledge is not wisdom. Remember this well; wisdom is gained from insight – seeing into the true nature of things. Insight is the process of connecting with the heart so that the *kilesas* give way for a second, allowing us to see into the true nature of things.

So the path of wisdom is the path of teaching the heart. We have to make it see and see and see again until it understands. We have to investigate and investigate, teaching the heart over and over again. Have you understood the four elements (earth, fire, water and air)? Have you understood the body? If not, you have to investigate, dissect, split the body apart, and observe with the heart until it understands. The heart is the only thing that can let go. Even if you are convinced that greed is not a good thing, you still have greed. Even if you are intellectually convinced that hate is not a good thing, you are still full of hate. Knowledge does not solve the problem; we have to experience the truth – the heart has to know what greed really is. Is it something that I really like, is

it something that I cherish, or is it something loathsome? And we do this over and over again, perhaps even a billion times, until the heart understands and lets go, perhaps after the billionth-and-first time. Then there are no questions left; greed goes and hate goes at the same time. But we need to really teach the heart, using wisdom to investigate the obnoxious *kilesas* that move the *khandhas*. These five *khandhas* are all that actually exists, everything else is made up. It's as though a good cook uses only five ingredients to create all the delicious dishes in the world. Everything is made up of the five *khandhas*, and if we don't understand them we will be fooled by them, just as we are fooled by the range of different dishes unless we investigate their ingredients. So, let's taste each ingredient in its pure form. Let's taste *rūpa* as *rūpa*, *vedanā* as *vedanā*, *saññā* as *saññā*, *sankhāra* as *sankhāra* and *viññāṇa* as *viññāṇa* to experience the flavour of these components that make up the whole universe, our universe, our world — which is the only thing that concerns us. This is the path of wisdom.

To return to *samādhi*, if we don't have *sati* we will never be able to grab hold of what is going on. There are several thousand mind moments in the blink of the eye, and if we can't catch them they fly past like a train that rushes by, taking us wherever it is going. If we don't get our *sati* up to the speed of the rushing train, we will never be able to see who is driving the engine and which passengers are in the compartments. It will just rush forward, and we'll drift along in its slip-stream from one birth to the next. So, we have to sharpen our awareness, develop our *sati*. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua calls this the basis of practice; if we don't have *sati*, whatever we do is worthless. If we do something without *sati*, it has no value. Some people try to look "mindful" by doing things slowly, and Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used to look at them and ask, "I wonder if they have any *sati*?" Eating or brushing teeth extremely slowly, thinking how "mindful" you are, is not really having *sati* but rather being self-conscious of how well or how slowly you are doing these things. That's not *sati*; real *sati* is catching the movements of the body and mind to see which is affecting the other, which of them

is pulling the trigger and what comes after. It's observing cause and effect.

So, make up your mind. Whatever it costs, get down into *samādhi*. *Upacāra samādhi* is not beyond your abilities, and neither is *appanā samādhi*. You just have to centre the mind and not let it go out under any circumstances. Imagine that you have to keep the riches of a king in a room; you are not allowed to let anyone in or out, and this is your only task. You have to stand in front of the door all the time; you cannot take a nap, and you cannot go to the toilet. You just have to stand there, observe what is going on and preserve the riches of the king. And that's how you get into *samādhi*; put your attention on the word *buddho* or the breath and be interested in nothing else. Determination is the important factor – the effort doesn't consist of forcing the mind onto the meditation object, but rather, once you see that the mind wants to go out, in pulling the mind back where it belongs. That's all that we need do; we don't have to use power or force, just a continual bringing back of the mind to the meditation object. This is where we put our effort, and the effort needs to be constant without waning. And we need determination so that when we make up our minds to sit or walk for one, two or three hours, we practice for that length of time. Of course, like everyone else, you will find this to be hell – there's a lot of *dukkha* in just keeping the mind still.

For the time you are visiting this monastery, I want you to get into *samādhi*, to get relief from *dukkha* for the first time. Then once you really know the path and can attain calm every day, you can start doing the practice of investigation to get rid of the obstinate *kilesas* that rule your hearts. Greed, hate and delusion have their roots so deep in the heart that we have to undergo extreme pain to uproot them. We need *sati*, determination and a sharp knife to accomplish the task.

The teaching of Ajahn Mahā Bua

24th November 2006

You have all come to this monastery looking for something. You have come here to hear the teachings of Than Ajahn Mahā Bua and to find the way to *Nibbāna*. Whether you have the intention of reaching *Nibbāna* or just want to put an end to *dukkha*, it amounts to the same thing. You all have the merit (*vāsanā*) to be here at this time. It required a lot of merit to be reborn at the time the Lord Buddha was teaching and to meet him; if one hadn't acquired the merit, one wouldn't have been able to be born in the age when the Lord Buddha attained enlightenment. And it's the same with meeting great teachers here in Thailand; if we hadn't acquired the necessary store of merit, we could never have come to Baan Taad monastery. Even if we knew of its existence, it would have been impossible for us to come and listen to the teachings. The very fact that we are in this monastery means that we have acquired enough merit to be able to stay here and listen to the Dhamma or practice in the way that Than Ajahn Mahā Bua or his teacher Than Ajahn Mun so kindly taught. So, I urge you to use this merit well – put this store of merit to good use.

I recently listened to a few talks on the Internet by different Western *bhikkhus*. And I thought, "Oh, that's nice. They're talking about compassion, about awareness and about *mettā*." Then I listened to a talk by Than Ajahn Mahā Bua, and it was very different. He was speaking to the general public, and from the beginning he was drumming the Dhamma. He wasn't talking about the world, he was talking about Dhamma. At first, he banged the drum very slowly, and then he hit the percussion to talk about *sati* (awareness) and how important it was. Then he talked about *kamma* – our actions in the present, and how we should be aware of what we are doing and the results our actions will have. He also talked about hell and heaven, how easy it is to get into hell and how long we will be there depending on the grievousness of our deeds. We can spend up to one hundred and fifty thousand years there. We

need only kill our mother or father; kill an *Arahant*; draw blood from the Lord Buddha; or cause a split in the Sangha to go to the deepest level of hell for a hundred and fifty thousand years. That's all we need do. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua also talked about greed and hate; about *rāga taṇhā*, the greed for the unsatisfying sense pleasures that we so desire; and *sīla* (morality) and the need for virtue. His talks to the general public almost always concerned these topics; if necessary, he might have elaborated on another topic, but in general his talks to the public were always on these themes.

He also spoke about the danger of the *kilesas*, the power of *avijjā*, and how easily we can be deluded. He certainly didn't talk nicely or compassionately about the *kilesas,* and he made it quite clear that they are dangers we should be aware of. What are the *kilesas*? The *kilesas* are the fangs or the soldiers of *avijjā* (literally, "not knowing") which wants to know or understand in line with the truth but is unable to. *Avijjā* is the magician, the creator of this whole universe. As it says in the *suttas*, a*vijjā pattayā sankhārā* — *avijjā* is the condition for all phenomena to arise — and we live in the universe of these phenomena. *Avijjā* creates the universe, and it is the creator of what we call "self". Remember this well: *avijjā* is the condition for all phenomena to arise, and these phenomena include ourselves.

Another of Than Ajahn Mahā Bua's themes was the importance of *samadhi* and of keeping our attention on a *parikamma* object, such as the breath going in and out or the mental repetition of the word *buddho*, to get into the still space of *samādhi*, to get to a safe haven where we can rest. We rest our body daily, but when do we ever rest the *citta* (heart)? When we come to Baan Taad monastery and have never meditated before, we will never have rested the *citta*. What kind of turmoil must our heart be in if we have never rested it? Think about your own life; if you go on working for five days without rest or food, how depleted will your energy become? Yet the *citta* goes on and on, and turmoil happens because we have never put the *citta* to rest, and if the *citta*

does not rest it cannot perceive things as they really are. The heart is scattered because we have never tried to rein it in. Let's rein it in by doing the practice of *samādhi*, by getting the *citta* still and firm, so firm that we go beyond the world of thoughts. When we first enter the world beyond thoughts, it is the first safe haven we have ever experienced. It's called *upacāra samādhi* (access *samādhi*), and when we come out, we are back to the world as it was before. No matter how often we enter *upacāra samādhi*, the same kinds of problems are still there when we come out, for *upacāra samādhi* is not the cure for our ills.

In *appanā samadhi*, the deep state of *samādhi*, not only do our thoughts disappear but the body disappears, as does the whole world around us. Only knowingness is left; knowingness and one-pointedness are the same thing. As long as we are in this world of duality, there are opposites: I and you, heaven and hell, *dukkha* and *sukha*. The moment the *citta* enters one-pointedness, all the opposites disappear and so all the phenomena of duality must disappear as well. The body and the world have to disappear; all that is left is knowingness, peacefulness and happiness. The moment we come out, everything goes back to the way it was before — our troubles, worries, fears, thoughts and imaginings have not changed. But we know that we have been to a place where we feel at home, where there is safety, where there is no *dukkha*, where there is happiness, peacefulness and complete stillness. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua calls this state of *samādhi* "the *Nibbāna* of the little man", meaning that everyone who applies interest and effort can attain it and experience a preview of *Nibbāna*, a glimpse of what things would be like if they made the effort to overcome greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). Once we get rid of these defilements, we are back in our true home, *Nibbāna*. If we attain *Nibbāna* while still alive as a human being, the five *khandhas* are "pure". Normally, they are "impure" because they are under the power of the *kilesas*, the fangs of *avijjā*. *Avijjā* sends them out to bother and burn us, and to keep us in their power. As long as we stay under their rule, they won't give us much trouble.

It's similar to being a prisoner; if we don't try to break out of prison, no-one will give us trouble, but the moment we try to escape, the guards will come and try to keep us in.

So, the way of practice is to fight these *kilesas*. If you are nice to them, if you have compassion for them, you will never get out of the prison. You cannot have compassion for the forces that keep you in prison. So when Than Ajahn Mahā Bua talks about the fight against the *kilesas*, he compares it to getting into a boxing ring. The first time you get into the ring and fight against the champion (*avijjā*), it will knock you out. But once you regain consciousness, you get back in the ring – and all your effort is needed to get back into the ring and try to understand the blows of *avijjā*. Once you have been in the ring for a while, and have been able to observe the champion's style, you may be able to duck from a blow. And after a while, you can begin to see the places where *avijjā* is vulnerable and land a blow yourself. The first blow against *avijjā* is a great victory; we feel very happy but will be hit again very soon. And this goes on and on until we are finally able, through investigation, through awareness, to land the final blow. If we do not have enough *sati* to observe where *avijjā* is landing the blows, we will never understand how to duck and never see its weak spots. We have to develop *sati* to observe this champion and see the techniques and tactics it is using. Once we see them and understand them, we can hit back. This fight goes on and on and on until we give *avijjā* the blow that knocks it out of the ring and destroys it. And so, from the day we start on the path until the day we give the final blow to *avijjā*, we are in a boxing ring. Of course, in the beginning it is very unpleasant to receive all the blows, but once *avijjā* is destroyed we will have gained our freedom. Nothing in the universe will be able to trouble us again because *avijjā*, the source of all our troubles and all our *dukkha*, will have been eliminated. So, if you want to take the shortest path of practice to the last blow where *avijjā* is destroyed, then every minute, every hour, every day you have to get back into the boxing ring and start the fight again. We cannot just persuade *avijjā* to go away; whatever

we give it, it just takes and still hits us. It has reigned over us for such a long time that it will not give up its rule peacefully; we have to fight our way out.

We have to understand freedom correctly – there can be no freedom in the body, feeling, memory and association, thoughts and consciousness, because each of these five *khandhas* are part of the universe and therefore follow the laws of *avijjā*. The freedom that we gain when *avijjā* is destroyed is the freedom of the *citta* – the freedom from being troubled by the five *khandhas,* by fear, greed, hate, doubt or worries. This is the freedom we can gain, but it is not freedom as we usually think of it, such as the freedom of the body or the freedom to do what we like. In the end, wanting will cease; the freedom we obtain is freedom from wanting this or that and not wanting this or that. This is the freedom we reach – the absence of wanting. Once the wanting has been quelled, there is peacefulness and stillness – *paramaṁ sukhaṁ*, the ultimate happiness. If we are still alive in the body, however, this ultimate happiness will not affect the body or the other *khandhas.* Please understand this; if you are looking for freedom from the body, or from the *dukkha* of the body or bodily feelings (*dukkha vedanā*), this you cannot get because freedom from these can only be gained in *Nibbāna* after death; when there is no body, there are no five *khandhas,* and this is the end – *Parinibbāna*, the final *Nibbāna* after death. As long as we are alive in this world, even if we have been victorious and destroyed *avijjā*, we still have a body that can get sick and have pleasant or painful feelings. These things, however, do not trouble the *citta* of the *Arahant*, who sees them for what they are.

Normally, we don't want to face up to these things. We run away from our pleasant and unpleasant feelings; we run away from the truth, never daring to look. But when we are in the boxing ring fighting *avijjā*, we have to dare to look. How did *avijjā* hit us? How did *avijjā* the magician fool us? How does it make us stay in our seat, even though we have made the determination to go behind the stage and see how he performs his the tricks, how he fools us?

Even if we stand up, *avijjā* uncovers a new trick, and we sit down again because we've never seen this kind of trick before. Whether you describe *avijjā* as a champion boxer or as a magician doesn't matter. The point is that contending with it is not easy. It's tougher than the hardest work in the world, but each step of progress, each stone that we remove from our path, is more satisfying than anything else we can achieve in the world. Our worldly achievements vanish the moment we die. The wealth we have accumulated, the status we have attained — all gone. And in the next rebirth, we have to start from scratch to acquire them all over again.

If you come from Europe, you might remember the myth of Sisyphus who was sentenced by the Greek gods to roll a huge boulder up to the top of a steep hill, only to see it roll back down again, repeating the task over and over again. It was a never-ending task for no reward. Another story concerns Prometheus who was chained to a rock so that an eagle could eat out his liver every day, only for the liver to regrow during the night and the process to be repeated every day and night thereafter. Imagine the *dukkha*; imagine the suffering of Prometheus, suffering without end. These two stories illustrate the fruitlessness of the work involved in this and future lives, as well as the *dukkha* involved. We just roll the stone up; the higher we roll it, the better we think we are, but the moment we die, it rolls back down again. When are we going to stop? When are we going to stop this fruitless work? When are we going to end the *dukkha* of Prometheus, always having our livers torn out only to grow back again? This is what it means to be born, to grow old, get sick and die…to be born, to grow old, get sick and die…to be born, to grow old, get sick and die. When will we reach the end? When will we have the determination to get out of the cycle of rebirth? When?

But then the *kilesas* come along and whisper, "Oh, just one more life. This one wasn't so perfect, but maybe the next will be better. If I make some merit, the next one will be better." But in the next life we simply do the same thing again, roll the stone up to the top of a mountain to see it roll back down again when we die. At

the same time, an eagle eats at our internal organs, ripping them out while we are still alive. How long are we going to continue doing this? Why don't we step out? It's because *avijjā*, the master of persuasion, is sitting behind our ears whispering that the next life will be better, that we will be in the *deva* realms or that we can achieve this, that or the next thing; it always tells lies and we always believe it. If we sit in meditation for half an hour, *avijjā* tells us that sitting is too painful and that we should go out and have some fun. And we believe it; we never investigate whether these other activities really are fun or whether the promises of *avijjā* live up to expectation. Have you ever investigated the kind of effects that your thoughts and actions have on your heart? Do they bring the heart trouble; do they set it on fire; what are the results of our actions? Why don't we prove *avijjā* wrong? Why not investigate its promises and see if it keeps them? In fact, *avijjā* doesn't care about its promises; it promises and promises and promises — next time, in the next life, in ten lives things will get better. The further away the lie is, the more we believe it, and the more we can't prove it wrong. *Avijjā* has had power over us for so long, and has become what we think we are to such a degree that we cannot find the way out.

The way out has three aspects. First, we have to maintain *sīla* (morality and virtue) by keeping the five precepts. Second, we need to train ourselves to stay on one point, to attain one-pointedness so we can see the fruits of our efforts and get a preview of what is possible. Unless we can see where the path leads, it's very difficult to put up with all the difficulties that come along the way. It's good to have a place where we can rest our *citta* and feel safe; this is the importance of *samādhi*. But in the process of training *samādhi*, we also develop concentration and *sati*. In the beginning both seem to be the same but, as *samādhi* becomes more subtle, *sati* and concentration separate out — *sati* is the knowingness of the object that concentration is trying to pinpoint. In fact, *samādhi* trains *sati* and *sati* supports *samādhi*.

The third aspect is investigation, and this involves keeping up with the tricks of *avijjā* — what is it promising and are these promises kept? Most of us never check the promises of *avijjā*, we just believe them. We think that if we get this degree, that job, this salary, that partner, these children then we will be happy for the rest of our lives, just like in the story books. But do we ever actually get happiness? No; at every moment we experience *dukkha*, dissatisfaction, restlessness and sometimes physical or mental pain. At some moments during the day we might experience something pleasant, and *avijjā* uses these moments of pleasure to keep us on its track. It gives us sugar and keeps us in prison, and we are willing to stay there because of the sweetness. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua has compared the *kilesas* to sugar-coated poison. When we put the suggestions of *avijjā* into practice, the first taste is sweet but the second taste kills us; it is poison that slowly kills us. In the end, we will have no *sati* left to be aware of what is going on. How long are we going to do the work of Sisyphus; how long are we going to endure the suffering of Prometheus? When are we going to break out of the cycle?

If we decide to step out, it is a tough road, a stony path. But there is no comparison in the world. Every step we take along the path, even if we cannot reach the end of the road in this lifetime, is work that is more satisfying than any other kind of work in the world. We go one step at a time, picking up one stone and putting it out of our way, and doing the same with the next. We establish our determination and effort to pick up one stone at a time and put it aside, and then another and another. The moment we have cleared the last stone from the path, we will realise that all the stones have been removed. *Avijjā* has been destroyed and we have attained freedom. So, determination, patience and effort are some of the key elements of our practice. We have to train ourselves to maintain *sīla* and develop *samādhi*, the one-pointedness on an object. Then we can investigate impermanence (*anicca*), not self (*anattā*) and restlessness or discomfort (*dukkha*) in the five *khandhas*. We do not have to investigate anything else. It's also possible to

investigate the four elements (air, fire, earth and water), for we can think of all the phenomena in the universe as consisting of the four elements.

Before we can do ordinary worldly work, we have to train the body or the intellect. Similarly, we have to train the *citta* for spiritual work, by keeping it on one object. If the mind is jumping around, it's impossible to set it to the task in hand, so we have to concentrate it on one thing. For instance, if we want to investigate the body, we can reflect on what it is like. Whatever comes in contact with the body has either to be washed or throw away. We have to wash our clothes, bed sheets, sleeping bags and the parts of the body themselves. Where does all this dirt come from? It comes from the inside of the body but we don't think of the body as the source of all the dirt and filth. We see only the beauty of the skin and the form. The body of the opposite sex, for instance, has a special impact on us. This is how we are fooled. What is skin but a covering as thin as tissue paper that hides from our sight the pus, blood, sinews and flesh underneath? If you took away this tissue-thin layer, we would have no interest in the body at all. If you looked in the mirror and saw your face without the skin, you wouldn't look a second time, you wouldn't want to see. As long as there is a covering of tissue-paper skin around the face, or hair covering the head and partly covering the body, we feel satisfied – but tear the skin off and all our interest vanishes. When we imagine the skin stripped away, all our interest in the body ceases for a moment. All our sensual pleasures vanish and disgust comes up, for the fine layer of skin disguises what is really there. This is the way we practice investigation of the body.

These are the subjects that Than Ajahn Mahā Bua mostly talked about to the general pubic, his disciples or his *bhikkhus*. He hardly spoke about anything else. Sometimes, of course, he spoke in more detail about the path from the beginning, through stream entry (*Sotāpanna*) all the way up to *Arahantship*. But he never spoke about the niceness of the *kilesas* or how we should be compassionate towards the soldiers of *avijjā* that keep us in prison. He

said that we have to stand up and fight against them, and he was adamant about this. Maybe some of you don't like the language of the warrior or the soldier, but that is the language that Than Ajahn Mahā Bua and his teacher Than Ajahn Mun used. Even the Lord Buddha said that it is easier to fight against an army of soldiers than it is to fight oneself. So the Lord Buddha used the analogy of the fight, and so did Than Ajahn Mun and Than Ajahn Mahā Bua. If I told you that you should have *mettā* and compassion for the soldiers of *avijjā*, it would not help you reach freedom from suffering. It's a fight, and from my own personal experience it's a fight from minute to minute. We always have to fight against our inner wanting, wanting this or not wanting that. I'm sorry, but if the Lord Buddha talked this way, and if Than Ajahn Mun and Than Ajahn Mahā Bua did the same, how dare I teach any other way. Maybe there are other paths – the Lord Buddha said that his path was the shortest path but that there were other paths to *Nibbāna* – but if you want to get free from this mess, why not take the shortest path by standing up, getting out of prison and getting to freedom, the freedom of the *citta* where all troubles have ended. Think about all the troubles you face twenty-four hours a day. At night you dream, sometimes good dreams and sometimes nightmares. During the day you think, sometimes pleasing thoughts and sometimes awful ones. You have worries, doubts and fears. The freedom I am talking about is the freedom from *dukkha*, from doubt, greed, hate and wanting. Don't think you can persuade *avijjā* to give up its reign. You have to go behind the stage and see through the tricks of *avijjā*, the master magician, the master champion boxer. There is no other way that I can see. It's the way I myself have gone, and it's the way that I know leads to the end of *dukkha*.

The work of a *samaṇa*

24th August 2007

We come to this monastery to practice, to follow the path that leads to the end of *dukkha* (suffering or discontent). This path is the fourth of the four noble truths, and it comprises three columns: *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration) and *paññā* (wisdom). To maintain *sīla*, we have to observe the five moral precepts, and we should keep them while we are in the monastery or outside it. These precepts protect us from going downwards, from the human state to the lower realms. If we don't keep them, we are sure to spiral down and down and down, to the ghost (*peta*), animal or hell realms. The Lord Buddha gave the five precepts to the laypeople as their protection — please remember this. It's not that he commanded us to keep them; he gave them for our own protection because he didn't want people to go down to the lower realms. So, particularly while you are here, you are expected to keep the five precepts: not harming any living being; not taking what is not given; not using untruthful or harsh speech; not indulging in sexual misconduct; and not drinking alcohol or taking drugs. These five precepts make up the first of the three columns of the path that leads to the end of suffering.

The second column is *samādhi*, which consists of *sati* (awareness) and the ability to concentrate, and third column is *paññā*, the development of wisdom. Before developing wisdom, we need to be able to concentrate on one object, to put the mind to rest in the same way that we put the body to rest after doing physical work. If we don't rest, our work becomes fruitless, so we need the ability to concentrate and enter *samādhi*. A person working in a kitchen who needs a sharp knife has to find a knife sharpener; he can't cut things up with a blunt knife. The ability to concentrate, to develop *sati*, is the tool we need to sharpen the mind so we can cut the fetters that bind us to the realm of rebirth. This is why *samādhi* is so important. People from the West tend to ignore *samatha* or *samādhi* practice because they think it a waste of time. But if

that was the case, why did the Lord Buddha teach it? *Samādhi* is important, *samādhi* is not an option, *samādhi* is part of the eight-fold path that leads to the end of *dukkha*, and we cannot neglect it.

We can easily train ourselves, so we should put effort into doing it. We need to centre our minds on just one object, such as the mental repetition of the word *buddho* or the breath as it comes in and goes out at the tip of the nose. With the breath, for instance, once we observe it coming in and going out, we know the quality of the breath, whether it is short or long or whether it is deep or shallow. This is the knowing faculty of the heart (*citta*); the one who observes the breath knows the qualities of the breath. We have to develop this knowing faculty. It's the same with the mental repetition of the word *buddho*; we know if the repetition is fast or slow, and we know the other qualities of *buddho*. The one who observes the mental repetition and the object observed are two different things. You should understand that the one who observes is the knowing nature of the *citta* while the observed object is just the observed object. If we are to get into one-pointedness, we have to bring these two things together. Normally, whatever we observe in the world consists of the observer and the observed object; when we see something, there is someone who sees and there is something seen, and it's the same with hearing and the other senses. Please get this clear; there are two different things, and that's why the conventional realm is called duality. It is dual because there is an observed object and there is the one who knows about it. There is I and you, myself and other things – this is the realm of duality.

All realms, including the human and animal realms that we can see, are part of duality. To eliminate this duality, we have to concentrate on either the breath until it disappears or on the word *buddho* until the word is so "fixed" that we cannot think it any more. At this point, we revert to "that which knows" that either the breath has stopped or that the word *buddho* cannot be brought to mind. This is one-pointedness. In this state, the first thing that normally happens is that the body disappears from our sense awareness. The next thing is that the whole world of phenomena

disappears. Nothing other than singularity is left, nothing other than knowingness. This knowingness of the mind is of such importance that Than Ajahn Mahā Bua calls it the wonder of meditation or "the *Nibbāna* of the little man." If any of you put all your effort and determination into the practice, not letting go of the breath or the word *buddho* and not letting the *citta* go out to perceive all the other phenomena, you will enter *samādhi* and have this preview of *Nibbāna*. Once you enter one-pointedness or singularity, all that is left is the knowing nature of the *citta*, which is its true nature.

Please remember this and keep it in your heart. We have never experienced the true nature of the *citta*, but this is the path that leads to it. We need to put in some effort and determination to reach singularity, to obtain a preview of *Nibbāna*, to see what *Nibbāna* is really like. I want this to get into your hearts; remember this well. If you are sick of speculating about *Nibbāna*, get down to singularity, get down to one-pointedness, which is also called *appanā samādhi* and is the deep state of *samādhi*. *Appanā samādhi* is preceded by the state of *upacāra* (access) *samādhi* in which thinking ceases and we experience the world of phenomena. This state is very peaceful and happy; it is like going to another realm of existence. We go beyond our normal world of thinking and imagination. Once we come out, the mind becomes restless again, and we experience the same turmoil as before. However, as is the case with *appanā samādhi*, we know when we come out that we have been in a very special place. We will never ever forget the experience. Attaining *samādhi* is not easy, but it's not beyond our abilities to accomplish if we have determination and effort.

One of the side-effects of *samādhi* is that it sharpens the mind. The moment you come out of either *upacāra* or *appanā samādhi*, your mind is vigorous and sharp, like a keen knife that can easily cut through objects. It can cut down the fetters and the hindrances; anything that comes into its focus can be cut down. However, the sharpness does not last long. The longer one has been in *samādhi* the longer the sharpness lasts, just as a battery lasts longer if it has been recharged for a longer time. This effect is the main reason

why we train *samādhi*. However, *samādhi* also shows us that there is something beyond the world that we experience from day to day, and this is another reason to attain it. *Appanā* or *upacāra samādhi* show us that there is a state more happy, more joyous and more peaceful than our usual experiences in the world. If this wasn't the case, no-one would ever have walked this path. Experiencing this state gives us a push, increasing our vigour and determination to walk the path. These are the two reasons why we train our minds to enter *samādhi*; if you practice well, you will attain it, and everyone who sets their mind to the task is able to achieve this.

Of course, attaining *samādhi* will take some time depending on our *kamma* or background, and we cannot say how long it will take. Some people reach the state of *upacāra samādhi* within seven or eight days, but others still haven't found it after two years because their determination or practice is half-hearted. Please understand that we have to put our whole heart into the practice, being completely with our meditation object and not interested in anything else. Staying in this monastery is a very good opportunity to let the world go on as it pleases; we cannot change anything anyway. Take this precious opportunity to completely settle your mind into *samādhi* and experience the first wonder of the practice by going down into the deep state of *appanā samādhi* where duality completely ceases to exist. When this happens, all the worry, unhappiness and sadness in our hearts will also cease to exist. Singularity is just singularity, and one-pointedness is just one-pointedness – there cannot be two points. All that is left is the knowingness of the *citta*, which is its true nature. In everyday life, the *citta* has a spoiled, defiled nature – it wants to know this and wants to know that. But in the state of *appanā samādhi*, or even *upacāra samādhi*, it doesn't want to know anything; it is just satisfied with things as they are. It's important for us to train and see this for ourselves. Once we have trained ourselves and are able to get into *samādhi* often or even daily, we can start the practice of investigation – the third column of the path.

The practice of investigation, which leads to the development of wisdom (*paññā*), is necessary to cut down the ten fetters that bind us to the realms of rebirth.[1] The first is the fetter of doubt, especially about the teachings: doubt that heaven exists, doubt that hell exists, doubt about the results of good *kamma*, doubt about the results of bad *kamma*, doubt about the existence of *Nibbāna*, and so on. To eliminate or overcome this fetter, we simply accept on trust, for the moment, the word of wise people who tell us that these things really exist, even if we are unsure whether they do or not. All the religions teach about hell and heaven, and the Lord Buddha spoke about the thirty-one realms of existence, which include the human, animal and ghost realms, the hell realm and the lower and upper heavenly realms. These realms exist, and the law of *kamma* ensures that all our actions of body, speech or mind will have results in the future. We do not need to believe in these things, but as long as we are still unable to see for ourselves, we should trust the words of the Lord Buddha.

The second fetter is being inconsistent with the five precepts, keeping them one day but not the next and keeping them again the day after. To undermine this fetter, we just keep the five precepts wholeheartedly and never let go of them. The third fetter is more difficult to break – the belief that the body and the "I" are the same thing. To take the analogy of the body as a car, this fetter is the assumption that the car and the driver are the same thing. If you think this, you have a problem, but once you see that the driver can get in and out of the car, you understand that they are two different things. You can see that the driver is responsible for driving the car while the car just goes in forward or reverse, left or right. It's the same with the body and the *citta*, which are two different things; the *citta* is the one who commands the body. If the *citta* goes out into a different realm, the body just lies where it is;

1 A list of the ten fetters (*saṁyojana*) is given in the Appendix, For a thorough explanation, see "The supreme attainments", a talk by Than Ajahn Mahā Bua in the book "A life of inner quality", available on the Luangta website (www.luangta.eu).

the heart still beats, the lungs still function and the other processes continue, but that's all; the body doesn't move at all. This is what happens when people sit in *samādhi* for seven days; the body still breathes but it does not move at all. To truly understand this, we have to understand it in the heart, not only with the intellect. We can conceptualise or assume that the *citta* and body are two different things, but this does not help us to eliminate the third fetter. We have to see the truth with our own inner eyes – the body and the *citta* are two different things. The Lord Buddha gave us the practical example of a wagon. Once you break the wagon up into its bits and pieces, where is the wagon? All you have are nuts and bolts and pieces of wood – the wagon has disappeared. And the same thing happens when we see the body in its bits and pieces during the practice of investigation; when we visualise all the body parts laid out in front of us, where is the body? All we see are parts. And where is the one who knows this? Is it in the body parts or is it somewhere else? If you do your meditation practice correctly, you can break the body up into its parts and visualise them in a heap before your eyes. The moment you have put all the parts of the body in front of you, without any part remaining behind, you will realise that something remains, something still sits there. Then your belief that the body and the "I" are one and the same thing will "crash", will fall away for a certain time, even for just a moment. When this happens, you will have understood for the first time.

We have to repeat this process over and over and over again until the heart truly understands that the *citta* and body are two different things. Then, once the first three fetters have been undermined, there will come a time, when we rest in *samādhi* or when our *sati* is at full strength, that the three fetters cut. Once these fetters have been broken, we will have entered the stream, becoming a *Sotāpanna*. The *Sotāpanna* will reach *Nibbāna* within seven lives at most, and the lowest realm he can be reborn into is the human realm; he will never fall back into the lower realms.

So, the three fetters that have to be cut are doubt, keeping the precepts inconsistently, and the identification with the body. The example given above of a way to undermine the identification with the body is just one of many ways it can be done. I've given this example because the simile of the wagon was used by the Lord Buddha – the wagon only exists if all the parts are in place. In your own practice, you can assemble and disassemble the body using the grosser aspects like the head and legs and torso, or in finer detail with bones, vessels, skin, and so on. It's up to you how you choose to do it. So, make sure you understand clearly that these things are required for stream entry. You have to undermine these three fetters until they are just thin threads; once they are thin threads, any kind of deep *samādhi* or any kind of full concentration alone can cut them. Any type of insight that arises can also cut these fetters in one stroke, allowing us to enter the stream. Then, for the first time, we will have arrived at a safe place. We will have started on the way out of the roller coaster of rebirth, of going up to heaven and falling down into hell, again and again, with periods in the other realms in between. This is the endless cycle of rebirth, but calling it the roller coaster of life is a little more picturesque because it illustrates how difficult it is to go up, and how easy it is to fall down and how fast the descent can happen. The strange thing is that people going down on a roller coaster are usually utterly amused and excited, and this also holds for most people going through the rounds of rebirth. They think only about the exciting things and that's how they go down. They think of having experiences but do not keep the five precepts, and that's why they speed downwards. Most of us speed down. How many? Well, when the Lord Buddha's attendant Venerable Ananda asked him how many people will go to heaven and how many to hell, the Lord Buddha gave him the example of the bull, which has only two horns but millions of hairs on its body. The two horns represent the two people who go either to heaven or to *Nibbāna*, and the hairs represent the ones going down to hell. So, think about this very carefully – which one are you? It's up to you to make the choice. It's a very drastic example, but as far as I know the Lord

Buddha never exaggerated anything; if he gave this example, then that's the way it is. So, decide for yourself — are you one of the horns or the hairs? At every moment we can decide to go in the right or wrong direction. Once you train yourself always to go in the right direction, it will become a habit.

The fourth and fifth lower fetters are greed and hate. As these are rooted in the body, we have not yet finished with body investigation. We still have to understand the nature of the body by investigating it externally and internally. The external aspects comprise the hair of the head, hair of the body, the nails, the teeth and the skin, and we can examine these. What happens if we don't wash our hair? Does the dirt come from outside or inside? We ask questions like this for nails, teeth and skin, and we can also consider everything that comes into contact with the body. What do our clothes smell like after two or three days in contact with the body? Where does the smell come from — from the outside or from the body itself? It has to come from the body, as clothes don't smell if we just hang them out on the line. Think about what you do all day long; you care about the body, feed it, house it, rest it, beautify it, train it, and so on. Why are you doing this? Whatever comes into contact with the body becomes filthy and stained. Take food; it may taste nice and come in hundreds of different colours and tastes, but once it has passed our mouths, the taste disappears and it goes into our stomachs. If we throw it up, neither we nor anyone else would want to eat it again, even though it is still nutritious. Whatever comes into contact with the body or goes into it becomes filthy and stinks. We don't even want to look at the contents of our own stomachs or at our excrement. Excrement has one colour and one taste, even though lots of different tastes and colours of foods have gone into our mouths. Have you ever reflected on this? In the world, a factory that had output of this kind wouldn't survive. Imagine a factory that started with fine ingredients but produced garbage — who would buy the products? So why do we have such concern for this body? Why do we put so much effort, perhaps ninety-five percent of our time, into maintaining the body in

various ways, particularly as we have to give it all up when we die? All the resources that we expend on this body are wasted because in the end we have to give it up. We cannot make it live forever. Everything in the universe has to pass away; it comes into existence and then it dies. Certainly, we have to maintain the body, but if you stay in this monastery you realise how little time it takes to maintain — we feed it once a day in the morning, wash it in the evening and put it to sleep for a few hours. That's all we need do to maintain the body, and it still works, maybe even better than the bodies of the people outside who eat three meals a day and don't do much exercise.

So, why do we put up with this body, why support a factory that transforms everything into excrement? We value it because it has the six senses: seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching and thinking. The Lord Buddha once gave a short talk pointing out that someone who is no longer interested in the six senses will attain *Nibbāna*. It is precisely because the six senses are rooted in the body that we have to investigate the body. And the fourth and fifth fetters of greed and hate are rooted in the body too, so body investigation is crucial; we have to dissect the body into its bits and pieces or break it down into the four elements (earth, fire, water and air) to understand its true nature. This is what we have to do to undermine greed and hate. The work involved in understanding *asubha*, the loathsomeness of the body, is the only work, the only work that can eliminate greed and hate. Understanding the true nature of the body in which all six senses are rooted gives us the opportunity to get rid of greed and hate. And once the fetters of greed and hate are cut, once they are gone, we will attain to the state of *Anāgāmī*.

The term *Anāgāmī* is usually translated as non-returner, someone who never comes back into the world of existence. He is not yet in *Nibbāna*, for only the *Arahant* has reached *Nibbāna*, but he will appear after death in one of the five worlds called the Pure Abodes that are reserved only for *Anāgāmīs*. Of the four types of noble beings, the *Anāgāmī* is the first who always advances;

even if he doesn't put any effort into his practice, he will move up to *Nibbāna* within fifty thousand years, since each of the five Pure Abodes has a span of ten thousand years. He can be sure he will never come back, and he is nearly finished, yet he has done only fifty percent of his work, because he still has to cut down the five higher fetters, namely, the attachment to bodily forms, the attachment to non-bodily forms, conceit, restlessness and *avijjā*. Dealing with these is the sole work of the *Anāgāmī*, and it involves investigating the four *nāma* (mental) *khandhas* — mental feeling, memory and association, thought and consciousness. So, for we practitioners, the sole object of investigation has to be the body until we attain to the state of *Anāgāmī* when our focus will become the four *nāma khandhas*. When we are finished with all the work, we will become a fully fledged *Arahant*. Once the five higher fetters have been destroyed and *avijjā* has disappeared, we will have completed our work. There will be no more questions because we will already know; we will already know all the ins and outs. I want you to put your effort and determination in to reaching *Arahant-ship* within this very life.

You have already taken the first step; don't forget this. Don't forget that you took the first step when you ordained as a *bhikkhu*, and that your life is devoted to overcoming *dukkha*. The work to overcome *dukkha* is walking and sitting meditation. It is the only work worth doing, for no other kinds of work can free us from *saṁsāra*. The work of sitting or walking meditation with the aim of achieving calm or insight is the work of a true *samaṇa*.

Dealing with pain and emotions

30th August 2015

When you go back home, you should compare your ordinary life with life in this monastery. Monastic life is not easy sometimes, but most of the time there is a certain satisfaction in it. Where do you find satisfaction in your ordinary lives, thinking about this, that and the next thing until your mind spins around? And when you look at the faces of the people around you, do they look happy? Some have master's degrees and some doctorates, but are they happier? If you think you can find more happiness within your heart than outside, then you are welcome to come back to the monastery. In fact, training the heart is the only useful thing we can do with our lives; what else can we usefully do? This is not just our first life, of course. The interesting question is why are we addicted to playing video games one after another? One game should be enough, and it's the same with lives; why are we reborn into one life after another? We meet the same situations again and again; going to school, falling in love, getting married, earning money, having children and then dying. When are we going to get bored of it all? It's important to compare the things we think make us happy in the world with the calm state we find in meditation practice. Which brings more joy? If you think the world brings more happiness, then live in the world. If you think that the calm still heart brings more happiness, then come back.

Actually, there is a lot of hardship to put up with in the world. Some of the most difficult things to deal with are emotions. Human beings have a lot of them — painful feelings, negative feelings, moods, and so on — but we don't seem to know how to deal with them. In meditation practice, we can learn how to deal with them. It doesn't matter which label we put on them — fear, anger, pain, greed or anything else. We have three tools to help us deal with these emotions, the three characteristics of all phenomena as outlined by the Lord Buddha, namely, *anicca*, *anattā* and *dukkha*. *Anicca* is impermanence — everything that arises ceases.

Anattā is not-self — everything that arises and ceases cannot be ourselves because there is someone who knows that everything that arises and ceases. It's because we attach to things in either a positive or a negative way that we think they are self (*attā*), so we need to train ourselves to see that everything arising in front our eyes is not me and not mine. *Dukkha* is dissatisfaction, and we experience it because we attach to phenomena that are not me and not mine. When we have *dukkha*, we can be sure that we are attached to something.

The first step in dealing with emotions is to learn to sit through pain and to investigate it. If we can learn to do this properly, we can investigate in a similar way all the emotions that trouble us, for the technique works for any kind of emotion, whether mental feelings or physical feelings. It is essential that we learn this technique, even though we find it unpleasant. Usually, the moment we experience something unpleasant, we want to get rid of it. With pain, we look for a way of getting rid of it instead of a way of understanding it. So to investigate pain we have to sit long enough so that pain arises. Then we have to learn how to accept pain; we have to think, "Oh, there is pain. Thank you for coming." We have to breathe in the pain just as we would breathe in the smell of delicious food, experiencing it completely, one hundred percent. After we've done this, we go to the spot where it has arisen and ask ourselves what pain is — we have to understand what the painful feeling really is. Where is it? Is it a point or an area, is it deep or shallow? Is it moving? If we assume that it is fixed, this contradicts the Lord Buddha's teaching on *anicca*, that everything is changing, and it means we have not accepted the pain wholeheartedly. So, we have to go back and accept the pain and start the investigation again. If we do this exercise properly, we will see that the pain is constantly changing. Just as our breath changes all the time, so pain is always changing; sometimes it is more painful and sometimes less. We will find that we can observe it because it's interesting, and, because our interest helps us to concentrate, we will become more concentrated and able to stay with the changing

pain. Next, we ask ourselves where the pain actually is. Is it in the skin, the tendons, the flesh, the bones or the muscles? Although we've had all of these body parts since we were born, the pain has developed only while we have been sitting in meditation, so we can infer that something else is going on. At the beginning of our investigation, we really believe that the pain is in our skin, muscles or joints, but if we examine the pain that comes from sitting practice, we discover that we really cannot find it. After all, if it were really in the parts of the body, it would still be there when we get up, but it vanishes as soon as we stand up. Why does it appear only when we sit and try to meditate, and disappear as soon as we get up?

The next task is to try to find the spot that is the origin of the pain. If we really get concentrated on the pain, on that spot, we find that something "shifts". This shows that our investigation is becoming keen and that we are getting close to finding the spot, for the pain will shift from one place to another, such as from one knee to the other. We then turn our attention to the place to which the pain has shifted and do the same kind of investigation until we are very close to the spot where we think the pain arises. Again, we find that the pain jumps to another place. Sometimes the pain will go to the back, but wherever it goes, we follow it until it shows us its true origin. People who have read a lot about Buddhism assume that the origin is the heart (*citta*), so they go to the heart. But that is not the exercise here. The exercise is to follow the pain from wherever it initially shows itself to the place to which it shifts or jumps. We do this until it leads us to the heart, to the origin of the pain. We can only understand pain if we follow it until it shows us where it comes from, and that is the heart. At the final step, the pain jumps to the heart and creates a pain that is unimaginable. Now, we stay there and try to see the nature of pain and understand it; the heart is the last place where we can investigate pain. In the last stage of the investigation, the pain becomes so strong that we believe we are going to die. Then we go through the first stage of death, after which the pain completely disappears. It dis-

appears instantly the moment we accept that we are going to die, even though it was very strong.

After a while, the pain returns, and it feels as if we are burning alive. We do the same as we did before, accepting death and going through it, and the pain disappears instantly. When the pain has gone, we continue with our sitting practice for another two or three hours (this kind of pain normally comes after two or three hours). Then the last stage arrives, and we feel like every element in the body is being torn apart, for these stages go from difficult to very difficult to extremely difficult. Once we have accepted this extreme pain, the end of the investigation has come. We've reached the end of *dukkha vedanā* (painful feeling) and the limit of physical pain, and it's the end of the fear of death because we have gone through all three stages of pain and death. Fear of death is no more, because we understand what pain is. Even if our physical death is very painful, we will be able to stay very calm because the fear of pain has been eliminated. If we go through these stages, we can deal with any kind of death. This is important because most of the time when death arises we are worried about the pain and are not focussed on our meditation object. We get lost in thoughts about pain and where it comes from, and we go along the wrong track. But if we can stay with any kind of pain, we will not become lost and will see the way ahead. However, this point can be reached only after going through the three stages of the investigation of *dukkha vedanā*, and most people will not be able to get this far in their practice. After all, who is willing to die? And you feel like you are going to die at each of the three stages. Normally, at the beginning of pain investigation, people accept the pain and begin to investigate its origin. But as they get closer to the pain, it stops, and they can continue meditating using the *parikamma* word *buddho* or the breath coming in and out. The pain will only shift after a certain amount of time or experience. This practice goes on in stages, and we cannot reach the last stage without going through the others, so at the beginning of our practice the pain will just stop, after which we simply continue being aware of the primary meditation object.

It's very important that we start investigating pain, particularly because we don't like it. If we get concentrated on pain, it can become very, very interesting, even if it disappears after a while. It can be much more interesting than any of the other meditation objects that we use, for the breath or the word *buddho* become boring after a while. Pain doesn't become boring so it is the perfect meditation object. If we meditate all day long and pain comes up, it's really useful because we can concentrate on it; the mind doesn't wander off, so it's the perfect object for investigation and concentration. At these times, we investigate the pain, we find that it disappears, and then we go back to the breath or *buddho*. So you really should be happy if pain comes up after meditating all day, because then you can concentrate on it easily. In fact, the investigation of pain can lead to *appanā samādhi*, the deep state of *samādhi*. If we really investigate and really focus in, we can easily become one-pointed. Don't despair that pain is coming up but rather be happy, thank it for appearing and accept it. In fact, pain is a whetstone that sharpens wisdom, and it can hone concentration as well.

This method of investigation can be applied to any kind of emotion, such as anger or greed or fear. We can use it to find the point from which they all originate. Take anger: the first step is to learn to accept it, but this can be very difficult as the feeling is very unpleasant. However, if you have used pain as the subject of your initial investigations, you will have acquired some skill. If you can stay with pain for a long time, you will have learned how to do the same with anger. Stay with the feeling of anger and experience what it is like. You can explore the differences between the feeling of anger and the feelings of pain, greed or fear; what is the difference between them? Later, you can go on to explore the feeling of positive emotions like happiness. We have so many names for all these different feelings, but how do the experiences of all these different feelings differ? This is what we need to investigate, because we must learn how to deal with all these different emo-

tions that arise. We can investigate tiredness, laziness, restlessness and boredom in the same way, using the same technique, and some of these, such as restlessness, can be even more difficult to accept than the feeling of pain. We need to understand where they come from – the most important thing is for us to see their origin. For instance, we need to ask what came before a particular feeling spread throughout the whole body. We cannot see the origin as long as we fight against these feelings. Only when we accept them wholeheartedly, breathe them in like the smell of delicious food, feel them with our whole body and become concentrated on them, will we see the origin of these feelings. This is the basic method of dealing with emotions and finding their point of origin.

The important quality is to be able to stay with an unpleasant feeling. Sometimes, when we are at one with these emotions, when we concentrate on them, we can see their origin, but at other times this is not possible and we have to backtrack. For example, when we stay with an emotion, we can sometimes observe the feeling, memory or thought that preceded it, but that is not its point of origin. So, we have to retrace our steps until we find the origin. This applies to the investigations of all feelings, including pain. Essentially, we have to find the little stone that started the avalanche. As it rolls on, it gathers up more and more snow, but we have to identify the first stone. It depends on our concentration; in some cases we find the origin very quickly while in others we have to retrace our steps until we find the stone that started the avalanche rolling. Once we find it, we get relief. Sometimes, we may even be able to laugh at our own stupidity for holding onto the stone for such a long time. It was able to make us fall into depression or get really angry, yet in reality it was so negligible that it wasn't even worth our attention. Indeed, it may not have had anything to do with our anger or depression, just as the stone that starts the avalanche has nothing to do with the snow making up the avalanche.

There's one crucial thing to note. In the investigation of pain and all of these emotions, thoughts will always try to creep in and convince us about the origin of these feelings. We cannot accept

these thoughts. We can only get to the truth of the matter if we go to the knowingness of the heart, and the knowingness of the heart is not born of thoughts. Whatever is born of thoughts is the product of the *kilesas* — it's very important that you understand this. In this context, any kind of thought that explains the situation is wrong. We have to counteract these thoughts; we have to find the origin of pain or any emotion through our knowingness, through the heart. We know the origin of these emotions within our hearts, not our thoughts. Thoughts are always trying to divert our attention, as they do when we are practicing *samādhi* to develop calm, and the moment we believe them, the investigation is over. So, we have to focus our attention onto the pain or the emotion itself; we cannot let the mind go off into thoughts! Every kind of excuse or explanation that arises is a result of the *kilesas*! At the beginning of the investigation, "answers" from the *kilesas* shoot out like arrows, but later the arrows come less and less often until, near the end of the investigation, they come rarely, perhaps once every minute or so. When there are no more answers coming from the *kilesas*, the heart is completely empty and then, in most cases, the real answer pops out of the heart. But not always, for in other cases the result is just deep concentration and no answer comes. If this happens, it means we did not get deep enough with our investigation and will have to do it over and over again, until we find the real answer within the heart.

I encourage the people staying in this monastery to put effort into their practice, not looking right or left but staying with their meditation object from the moment they wake up until the moment they go to sleep again. Whatever the object is — the breath or the word *buddho* or the investigation of the body — you really have to put in some effort. Your practice will not develop if you think about various things or look at what other people are doing. These things just agitate you without you being aware of it, and they divert you from the practice. When walking, just look one metre ahead of you, and stay with your meditation object. It doesn't matter whether you put effort into attaining deep *samādhi* or into the

investigation of the body to see that the body and *citta* are not one and the same. Just choose your method, but whatever you choose, try to get some results. If you don't, I'm just wasting my breath teaching you. Some people practice until they feel comfortable, and then slacken their effort until the *dukkha* increases, whereupon they start practicing again. What kind of practice is that? You must practice steadily and counteract any kind of emotion that comes up. The *kilesas* will bring up all kinds of excuses for not practicing, but remember that you are here to get some results in your practice of concentration and investigation.

In particular, you need to develop *sati*, awareness of what is going on. You don't have to look at things to be aware of them; your awareness, if it is keen, can span the whole world. You don't have to fly to the moon to look down and know what is happening; awareness can be so deep that it knows everything that is going on. So, don't look at what other people are doing. We are brought up to look at other people, finding fault with others but never ourselves. The practice here, however, if you find yourself looking at someone else and disliking what you see, is to point the finger back at yourself: "Oh, that's what I'm like." We should practice in a way that we see the outside world as a mirror of ourselves. If we see something that we dislike in others, the problem lies in our own heart, for where else can it arise? Nothing can arise in objects outside of ourselves, and that's why we don't need to look at things outside. But if we do look outside, we should take whatever we see as a mirror of what is inside our own heart.

McNibbāna
or the real thing?

23rd April 2009

You all seem to have a lot of distractions – looking at this, reading that. Do you think all these distractions help to firm up your practice? Do you think that they help you to develop your concentration? Perhaps you think that practicing for a couple of hours a day is enough, or that fifteen or eighteen hours of practice every day is too much because you won't be able to concentrate for that length of time – but that is the *kilesas* talking. We are used to listening to the voice of the *kilesas*; they tell us what is right and wrong, and we believe them. We've believed them since we were born, so who else should we believe? As children, we believed our parents until they forbade us to do something and forced us to something else, and we certainly didn't like being told what to do. Now we act in line with our own wishes, with our wanting and not wanting, and that's why we think that having a lot of distractions actually helps meditation practice. But, if distraction can help us at all, it's only by showing us the difference between distraction and practice. In fact, if we have no distractions, our practice will become firmer and firmer. The problem is that if we practice correctly, not giving in to distractions and solely keeping hold of the meditation word *buddho*, we feel that the practice is bothersome and futile. The *kilesas* fool us by making us believe that our practice gets better when we give in to the distractions. At this stage of practice, we have no way of knowing what is the work of the *kilesas* and what is the Dhamma.

Some people read about what Dhamma is and what it is not, and come to a certain view. But the beliefs or interpretations they hold concerning Dhamma have nothing to do with Dhamma. They may point in the direction of Dhamma, but what do the texts or the written words have to do with the real practice? Nothing – it's just reading, it's just interpretation. This doesn't mean that books aren't helpful. They are, and the more they are about practice the more helpful they can be. Books like *Paṭipadā* which describe the prac-

tice of Than Ajahn Mun or Than Ajahn Mahā Bua can be really encouraging. They describe fighting tiredness by sitting on top of a cliff where falling asleep means falling to one's death, or going into tiger-infested forests and practicing all night, using the fear of the tiger to keep awake. Reading these stories we might think that these *bhikkhus* of the Thai Forest Tradition were all mad, but they used these methods to overcome *avijjā* and the obnoxious *kilesas* that have ruled the heart (*citta*) for billions of lifetimes. Do you think you can convince *avijjā* to go away just by saying, "*Avijjā*, I want this to be my last life so please go; I don't want you, I don't need you any more." Do you think it will go away if we ask it, or if we do just one hour of practice a day? No, it just laughs behind our backs. When we start reading books on Buddhism or even the Buddhist texts (*suttas*) themselves, we begin to think that we know the Dhamma and that we don't have to practice. But these views and opinions are still within the realm of *avijjā*. We can read as many books as we want day in and day out. But, even though it's better to read books on Dhamma than any other books and as inspiring as they might be, there is danger. As the Lord Buddha said, grabbing a snake by the head is relatively safe, but if you grab it by the tail it will turn its head and bite you. The snake was his analogy for the Dhamma; if it is not grasped correctly it can have dire consequences. Grasping it correctly means practicing it, practicing it in accordance with what the teaching really is, not what we think it is or believe it is.

Two or three months ago, some of the lay practitioners from the monastery accompanied me to an isolated mountain. Some of us spent the time in caves, some living in a primitive *sālā* made for the monks. There was nothing there but the wind and the sun. No locals came to disturb us, and we saw only a few laypeople when we had our one meal of the day. After the meal, we didn't get into conversations with them; in any case, most of the practitioners were unfamiliar with the Thai language. We went up the hill and started to practice, whether it was sunny, rainy or windy. All we had to drink was water, with some coffee in the evening. There

were no sweets, no chocolate and no distractions. This is not an easy way of life; the only thing you can do is practice, otherwise you get bored very easily. One of the practitioners, when he became bored, ran down the hill to see a puppy; he went looking for a puppy dog in the midday heat, even though most people try to stay out of the midday sun. But his defilements, his *kilesas* of wanting, made him run down in the midday heat just to see a little puppy dog. This is an example of the work of the *kilesas*, which govern us all the time. If we don't fight them using the mental repetition of the word *buddho* or with wisdom (*paññā*), they won't give us a moment of free time. If we fight them using *buddho* and drop into *samādhi*, we will realise what it is like not to have the *kilesas* constantly nagging at us, pulling at our clothes, wanting this, wanting that, liking this and not liking that. But we'll only know the difference if we enter *samādhi*; if not, the *kilesas* will nag and nag and nag endlessly. They'll even complain that we haven't attained enlightenment after just three weeks in a monastery. Living on the mountain was difficult, but look at the practice of the Ajahns of the Thai Forest Tradition, dealing with tiredness or sleepiness by sitting at the edge of cliff or living in tiger-infested areas — they couldn't nod off in these places. Take the case of Than Ajahn Chob who wanted to sleep but saw a tiger sitting in front of his cave. He was afraid, so he practiced all through the night. In the morning, the tiger was still there, and when Than Ajahn Chob told it that it was time to go and find some food, it just growled at him.[1] These frightening situations help us to get into *upacāra* or *appanā samadhi* very easily. This is the reason why all of the forest monks, especially those who became *Arahants*, sought out these kinds of extreme situations.

There is a saying in Thai, "If you want to catch the tiger cub, you have to enter the tiger's cave." Do you think that the tiger mother would give up her baby without a fight? This is a metaphor

1 "Patipada, Venerable Acariya Mun's path of practice" (page 166). Available on the Luangta website (www.luangta.eu).

for the spiritual path — fighting against the tiger mother (*avijjā*) who keeps hold of the tiger cub (our true form, *Nibbāna*). Until we fight the tiger mother to the death, we cannot take possession of the cub. *Avijjā* has to be fought to the death before we can enjoy *Nibbāna*. So, please ask yourself this: how much are you willing to give to this path of practice? All of you come from the Western world where McDonald's is a well-known brand, especially in the United States. In McDonald's, you can order a hamburger, and if you want one without onions or mustard or ketchup, or even without the bun, you can get it. You get what you order because you are king — "the customer is king" — and I'm sure they'd even sell you a cheeseburger without the cheese if you asked for one. From what I can see, it's the same with the spiritual life. Let's call it McNibbāna rather than McDonald's. You want to order *Nibbāna* without *dukkha* or without *asubha* practice or without investigating greed and hate. Or you want *Nibbāna* with your pride fully intact, without a scratch on your ego. In the West, they will serve it to you. But this version of *Nibbāna* is very different from the *Nibbāna* of the Thai Forest Tradition, where monks had to nearly die, striving alone in dangerous places full of dangerous animals, trying to establish their concentration on the word *buddho* and develop their wisdom. They went to these places and practiced alone, as the Lord Buddha recommended. He didn't recommend staying in a forest monastery with a group of other people; he said, "There is the forest, there are the wild places, there are the caves, there are the hills — these are the places you monks should go to and develop your practice. Go there by yourself, find a spot that is suitable and then develop your practice." He wanted monks to go on alms round in the morning to get some food, and to spend the rest of the day and throughout the night practicing. Think about that: these are suggestions from the Lord Buddha himself!

We come from a Western background with all its comforts, and we think we can get our spiritual "comforts" in the same way with McNibbāna. We can go to a meditation centre and do a ten-day retreat, or even a one-month retreat. We might even, if we're lucky,

get a fancy diploma to hang on the wall confirming that we attained to the level of stream-enterer (*Sotāpanna*). It's likely that the more these meditation retreats cost the more comfortable they are. This comfort can be translated as the neediness of the *kilesas*. When all the needs of the *kilesas* are satisfied, they don't come up, they don't show themselves. Greed doesn't come up if you get three meals a day with servings of sweets and sugary drinks, or herbal drinks if the centre is so-called spiritual-organic. Essentially, they'll serve you whatever you want, just like McDonald's. Ask yourself — is this the way to overcome greed and hate? We think we are Buddhists and that Buddhists shouldn't have any greed or hate, and when we go to these places greed and hate don't show themselves because we have everything we need. Greed and hate will certainly appear in lonely places, fearful places, places that bring up dread, in places where food is scarce or unpalatable, and where there is just water to drink. Where there is no television, no telephone and no books, you are confronted with just your poor old self, and it's then that you really see the power of the *kilesas*. You see them coming up, and they try to convince you of anything and everything; that this place is terrible, that your practice can't develop because there is nothing but a constant fight against greed and anger, and that it would be much better for your practice if you satisfied your greed and expressed your anger. That is what people think.

Personally, I'm tired of challenging the McNibbāna culture; let the people believe what they want to believe. I've been on the spiritual path of homelessness for the past eighteen years — that's years not months — fourteen of them as a *bhikkhu* in a pretty harsh environment, not a comfortable monastery. In the hot season, I was drenched in sweat after fifteen minutes, in the cold season I shivered, I couldn't lie down to sleep, and in the three-month rainy season my skin became mouldy and itchy. Think about that. How many Westerners would be able to tolerate it? They would think, "This is too much torment, I don't need to punish the body like this", and then they would leave. But when they leave, that's

the end of their practice. They won't get any further, that's all I can say. Yes, the environment here is a bit rough, especially when we come from the West. In the first few years, we have to fight against bacteria we have never known before. We come from a disinfected environment where we use all kinds of sprays to disinfect our houses and cars. Then we come to a country like Thailand, into a forest environment where it is hot and where we are bombarded with bacteria, so we have some difficulties with our body. But we have to train the body to cope with this environment, and in doing so we experience the truth of the Lord Buddha's teaching that the body gets sick, grows old and dies. Going from a disinfected country into a Thai forest, we are faced with this truth. And it's the same with food. Coming from the West, most of our food is pre-processed for easy digestion, but when we enter a forest environment the stomach has to work to extract the nutrients. It has to learn how to digest natural foods. So it is normal to get stomach aches or even food poisoning. Putting up with these conditions is a kind of physical training, training for people from an over-developed country to adapt to more natural conditions in Thailand. Normally, people from the West visit Thailand only between December and February when the climate is relatively cool and pleasant, so they don't know about these difficulties.

So, do you want McNibbāna or do you want the real thing? For McNibbāna, you don't have to put up with rough conditions. You just sit in a nice environment, with a comfortable climate, on your sitting cushion and get whatever you want. But just reflect on the number of *Arahants* that have sprung up in the Thai Forest Tradition in the last hundred years. Of course, Thai *bhikkhus* are accustomed to the climate, so they have to use other methods of challenging themselves, going into tiger-infested areas or dangerous places, overhanging cliffs and haunted caves. There is a chapter in the biography of Than Ajahn Mun which describes his experiences in the Sarika cave, which was possessed by a powerful non-human being.[2] Some of the *bhikkhus* previously staying in

2 "Venerable *Ācariya* Mun Bhūridatta Thera; a spiritual biography" (page 25). Available on the Luangta website (www.luangta.eu).

the cave had died of strange stomach complaints because the cave owner did not want them staying there. Than Ajahn Mun, however, survived and tamed the unruly being because he fought with the spirit of a warrior, putting his life on the line. Do you have the same warrior spirit? Do you have something of the hardwood that *Arahants* are made of? Or are you all made of softwood that can easily be eaten by termites (*kilesas*) leaving only the outer bark? The moment the bark is touched, it's clear that it has been eaten by termites and it falls apart; there is nothing underneath. But hardwood is something that the termites have difficulties chewing, so they avoid it. On the spiritual path, we need this kind of hardwood at our core. I'm sorry to say this but there is no easy way out — we have to fight to the death with the tiger mother of *avijjā* in order to attain *Nibbāna*. If we die while fighting *avijjā*, we die a good death. Otherwise, we give up and go back into the everyday world, the world of the *kilesas*, thinking "This place is much more comfortable", and "This teacher is much nicer and tells us we are doing good work and never scolds us", and so on.

But I'm not that kind of person. I scold if I see the *kilesas*. If I see them coming up in you, I give a heavy scolding. Why? Because I have trained myself this way; the moment I saw the *kilesas* coming up in within me, I fought them, scolded them and tore them down. This has been my way of practice over the past eighteen years — eighteen years of continuous practice. I didn't practice for just a month and then for another month the following year. I did continuous practice eighteen years long until today, trying not to let the *kilesas* get their hooks into me. Sometimes I didn't see them, of course, and then my teacher would point them out to me, sometimes not in a nice way, as if to say, "What the hell do you think you are doing, do you know yourself?" That was the way he admonished. He wasn't whispering, "Dear little brother, you have a black spot on your trousers, maybe you'd like to get rid of it?" He wasn't using soft language like that. Rather he used the language of the tiger, for if there are no tigers in the monastery the teacher has to be the tiger to scare *bhikkhus* who dare show

off their *kilesas*. That's the whole purpose of the teacher's scolding, not to destroy the tiger baby (our true form, *Nibbāna*) but to destroy the tiger mother (*avijjā*) that has the baby firmly in her grasp. When one of the monks asked Than Ajahn Mahā Bua if he could go home to visit his parents, he was told, "Yes, you can go, but don't bother coming back again." Nowadays, monks go anywhere they like, to visit their parents, visit friends or visit places like India. They are just tourist monks. There are hardly any practicing monks left, but Than Ajahn Mahā Bua kept his own monastery in line, kept it strict, because he was the venerable meditation master. If someone fell sick and felt they needed some medicine, he would say, "Sure, you can go and see the doctor but pack your things and don't come back." Think about this: are you, with your Western background, ready to submit to such a teacher, to a teacher who knows only how to scold and admonish you, one who comes and stands in front of you when you have done something wrong, asking "What the hell are you doing; where is your *sati*?" Are you ready to submit to a teacher who is constantly in front of your meditation hut (*kuti*) looking at what you are doing, and who, if he catches you sleeping more than practicing, kicks you out because his monastery is not a place for indulging in sleep?

Maybe I'm wrong, but my experience with Westerners over the last seven years is that they just don't take this kind of admonition, and they leave. "Who the hell is he? How can he scold me like this? I'm not a child, I'm a grown-up, an adult", they'd say. But believe it or not, as far as spiritual development goes, you are just little children still wearing your diapers. The diapers are full of excrement, but because you think you are grown-up you feel you can take them off and throw them at your teacher. We all think we are grown up, we all think we have rights, but that is not the way of spiritual practice. Spiritual practice involves generosity, respect and gratitude. Being grateful for the teaching, grateful for the teacher's scolding, grateful that he is pointing out a flaw in our practice and the things that we still need to develop, grateful that he shows us that anger or greed still lurk within us, grateful that he

puts his finger on these things, and still having respect for him — that's the attitude that is needed. If we don't have these qualities, our practice just ends at whatever level we have reached.

To the people who came to the mountain with me for three months, I explained that I realised how difficult it was for them, being unaccustomed to this kind of harsh and rough training. I said that I didn't mind if people left, they were free to go back to the monastery if they wanted. But they decided to stay on the mountain. Then, some weeks later, one of them got angry and exploded at me, saying, "I don't like this, I don't like that, I only want this." It was this incident that gave me the idea for McNibbāna. With the training, you either take it all or leave it. I can give you the food to help you get to the end of *dukkha*, i.e. reach enlightenment, but you have either to take it or leave it. It's completely up to you, but letting out anger at your teacher is not proper. There have been quite a few cases of people getting angry at me over the past seven years. It seems that simply telling the truth angers some people. Telling people the way things really are can annoy them, and they express their anger, throwing stones and the excrement from their diapers at me. I don't mind, but there is a saying in English, "People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." As long as we haven't got free of the *kilesas*, as long as we are wallowing in mud and excrement, it is not helpful to throw these things at someone whose practice has a firm foundation, who has come far enough along that path that he can reach *Nibbāna*. That person just keeps walking on, while you remain little children wearing diapers swimming in excrement. The moment you take a handful of the excrement and throw it at someone else, you will go under; you'll have to swallow that excrement yourself. But, of course, you don't think it is excrement; you think that you are right and the teacher is wrong.

I'm only saying this to caution you. When you look at it, the true practitioner is on the path of spiritual development; he wants to reach *Nibbāna*, and *Nibbāna* is at the top of the mountain. The higher he climbs, the better he sees and the clearer is his view.

He can see the path that leads up the mountain. Most people, especially people who criticise their teachers, are still standing at the foot of the mountain, putting a lot of effort into throwing their stones of anger up the hill. Speaking personally, I don't know if the stones reach me; if they do, they bounce off. But remember that the higher you throw a stone, the more devastating the effect when it comes back down and hits you. Still, people don't think; they just keep saying, "I know, I know, I know. I know it better; I've read it in the Buddhist texts." For instance, they say that a *bhikkhu* should have right speech, but right speech is telling the truth. If you are insulted by the truth, I can't help that; just close your ears and don't listen, but don't get angry. You don't know where your teacher is standing on the mountain, and the higher he stands the more devastating the effect of getting angry at him or criticising him. Keep yourself under control. The Lord Buddha taught that you should control your anger by stamping on it or drowning it before it can get out. And the best way to drown it is to mentally repeat "*buddho*, *buddho*, *buddho*" until the anger is gone. Letting it out, especially at your teacher, can have a devastating effect, and can throw you off the path completely.

Here I am not only addressing the people in this monastery, but all the people who come to visit or who write to me and accuse me of one thing or another. I went to Germany recently, and several people got very angry with what I was saying. I feel sorry for them, but if I can't open my mouth and speak the truth about what Dhamma is and what the *kilesas* are, who can? If you can't ask me about Dhamma and get an honest answer, who can you ask? Can you ask your own *kilesas* to tell you what Dhamma is and what the *kilesas* are? Would they give you the right answer? Think about this. Most of you are standing at the foot of the mountain — do you know what the view is like from up there? That is exactly the way I trained myself. Earlier in my time as a monk, there were three occasions when I wondered why Than Ajahn Mahā Bua scolded me. But when I asked myself whether he had misjudged me, the Dhamma came up immediately saying, "Who do you think you

are? You are still at the foot of the mountain. Do you know better than your teacher?" And then the *kilesas* would completely subside. This is how I trained myself, and I train you in the same way. If you think this training is too rough for you, if you can't take it, you can go anytime you want. I'm not holding you back.

Sometimes I get the impression that students think I must be very grateful for their interest, that without students I wouldn't be a teacher, and that they're doing me a favour. But I'm not a teacher, and I don't want to be one, especially after how troublesome it has been to teach the obnoxious *kilesas* of the Westerners over the last several years. Take their conceit; they think they know Dhamma better because they have read it all in books. But my Dhamma doesn't come from books; my Dhamma comes from the practice, from fighting the *kilesas* from the time I opened my eyes in the morning until the time I closed them again at night. That's the Dhamma that I have, and I don't have any other. This is the way of the Thai Forest Tradition, and it's the way that Than Ajahn Mahā Bua taught. Of course, some people don't like it, but if we think that everything has to be nice and comfortable and that it's better not to hurt anyone even when teaching Dhamma, we've completely lost the point. The scriptures (*suttas*) tell us that some people tried to defame the Lord Buddha for his teaching, and some even tried to kill him. There will always be people who don't like what *Arahants* say. *Arahants* have to speak the truth in line with the Dhamma. They cannot lie, and they cannot fool other people. Everyone else tries to fool others, and some teachers try to fool their disciples to make themselves important, famous or wealthy. An *Arahant* can't; he's just pure Dhamma. He has destroyed the self that wants. Imagine that. If an *Arahant* is sitting in front of you, who is teaching you? What can it be but pure Dhamma? The *Arahant* has discarded his self, his pride, so who is doing the teaching? Everyone should think about this carefully. An *Arahant* has no more pride, but that doesn't mean he cannot say things. The victorious and glorious Dhamma is the one that is teaching.

When I first came to Baan Taad monastery, I looked at Than Ajahn Mahā Bua's practice and thought, "Oh, his practice is really something", maybe I could do ten or fifteen percent of it. Looking back, however, I realise that I must have had some hardwood in me. I must have had some toughness, otherwise I would have given in to the *kilesas* a long time ago. Without hardwood, you're just soft, swaying in the wind of the *kilesas*. If they blow north you go north, south you go south, east you go east, and west you go west. In the past few years, out of *mettā*, I have taught you and have taken some of you with me on my travels, to help you get a grip on your spiritual practice, but normally I like to stay alone and am happiest when by myself.

I'll tell you a story about the difference in attitude between Westerners and Thais. I was once staying in a cave on top of a mountain. The village was down at the foot of the mountain, about a thirty-minute steep walk. One day there was a funeral in the village. Some of the villagers had invited the monks to chant at the funeral, so I went along. The Thais are virtually all Buddhists, but most of them were just sitting, smoking and drinking, not even interested in what was going on. So, I gave them a real scolding, saying that Buddhists should pay respects to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. I told them that they know about the five precepts but will go straight down to hell because they have no interest in taking them and no interest in keeping them. I scolded them for quite a while. Had I done this in the West, the next day there would be hardly anybody offering food. But to my surprise, the next day when I was going on alms round (*piṇḍapāta*) in the village, twice the number of villagers than usual put food into my bowl. Then when I got back to the monastery, I was amazed that far more people than normal had come to offer food to the monks. So, I asked them, "Maybe I was a little bit rough on you yesterday, wasn't I?" But some of them smiled and said, "Yes, but we need it. We need someone to put us back on track, to put our attention on what is true, on what is right and what is wrong. So, please stay here and scold us more often." When the time came to leave the

monastery, thinking I would be travelling alone, I looked around and there were two cars of villagers and more than thirty people waiting to bring me back to Baan Taad monastery. I was surprised – the more you scold them, the more they love you. This is the complete opposite of the Western attitude. In the West, the more you scold them, the more they hate you. They probably wouldn't give you any food the next day, and you probably wouldn't see them for weeks. They would be angry that you told them the truth.

Living in Thailand, I'm sometimes so surprised by these villagers. As soon as they hear the Dhamma, some of them may get angry but most of them reflect upon what I say and come to see that it is true. They realise they have become so caught up in their lives that they have forgotten the teachings and that it is good to be reminded of them again. If monks are passing by a village where there is no monastery, people invite them to stay there to be a *puññakkhettaṁ lokassa* (a field of merit for the world). I do wonder whether this kind of attitude will ever come to the West. Will the West develop respect, generosity and gratitude for the Dhamma? In my two visits back to my home country of Germany, I have not yet seen evidence of this happening.

I wonder what will happen. Will the real Buddhism develop in the West or will it all be McNibbāna? At present, McNibbāna seems to be the driving force – "I want my *Nibbāna* fast, within two minutes, with customer satisfaction guaranteed." That's the kind of *Nibbāna* or spiritual enlightenment people seem to want. After all, we read in the texts, "He enters the first *jhāna* and enjoys the bliss, and after a while he finds this too exciting so he enters the second *jhāna* and experiences the joy, but after a few hours he finds this joy still too exciting so he enters the third *jhāna* and enjoys the peacefulness, but after a few hours he finds this still too bothersome so he enters the stillness of the fourth *jhāna*, and after this he reflects about his previous lives, understands the nature of *kamma* and then becomes enlightened." This is how things are described in some of the *suttas*. But if it really worked like that, the *bhikkhus* of the Thai Forest Tradition must be completely stupid. They must

really be fools, to drag themselves through dangerous places and situations, to go to cremation grounds, to catch infectious diseases, to almost die of pain, and all to reach enlightenment. From the Western point of view, they must be complete idiots since all they had to do was get into the first, second, third and fourth *jhāna*, reflect on their previous lives and then get enlightened! And that's it!

People don't want to hear anything else, and they certainly don't want to listen to a person who shows them their own greed and their own anger. They'd rather just hide their greed and anger inside. And, of course, if someone obnoxious like me comes and presses his finger on the wound so that their anger comes up, he gets blamed for it. It's almost as if it isn't the owner of the anger who is to blame but the teacher who has pointed out the fault and revealed their own anger to them. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua was constantly showing us our anger and pointing at our faults. One of his senior Western monks once said that when he was serving Than Ajahn Mahā Bua as his attendant he always felt anger boiling up, while being afraid that it would leak out, for Than Ajahn Mahā Bua scolded his attendants very often. When they had duties to undertake at his *kuti*, he would say, "This is not right, that is not right, where is your *sati*?", and so on. Imagine that; it was like a pressure cooker.

Of course, we think we can just go to McNibbāna's and order up enlightenment; within two-and-a-half minutes we get it, and if it doesn't come in that time we get it free. First, second, third and fourth *jhāna*, reflection and — snap — enlightenment! Actually, I would like to meet someone who has attained enlightenment this way. To date, I've only ever met people who nearly died practicing in the forests, putting in continuous strenuous effort, sitting through the night until their skin burst open. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua said that his skin was literally broken and bleeding — that's how he trained himself. Compared with this...well, what can I say? I value his teachings, but people from the West probably don't even understand why it is necessary to go through such hardship.

After all, they can get enlightened sitting on the couch and listening to talks over the Internet, drinking coke and eating a pizza. If this is what you think, you're in the wrong place here. This monastery is the forest university, not McNibbāna.

Shutting down the mind engine

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You really must get the mind calm, get into that calm state where the mind completely shuts down. If you are always in a room where an engine is running, you get used to the noise and stop hearing it after a while. It's when the engine is turned off that you know the difference. When the mind engine is completely shut down, what is left is a preview of *Nibbāna*. When the mind completely stops working, it's an amazing state and one that you won't forget for your whole life. It's called *appanā samādhi*, the deep state of *samādhi*, and it gives the utmost rest. But if you don't put all your effort and determination into keeping your attention on the one point – either the breath at the nose or the mental repetition of the word *buddho* – you will not attain it, I promise you. If you keep your attention on the one point and are not willing to let the mind wander from the "hook" of the meditation object, you will enter the deep state of *samādhi*.

Reaching *appanā samādhi* is worthwhile because it gives us a preview of *Nibbāna*; Than Ajahn Mahā Bua called "it the *Nibbāna* of the little man", as it can be reached by anyone who puts in enough determination and effort. It's not beyond our abilities, so please don't think it is. The *kilesas* tell us what we should or shouldn't do but, in fact, we can do whatever we want. The *citta* has abilities that are unlimited, but we ourselves limit its abilities. Please understand this. We cling to the things that we think we know, not letting go, not letting go of the body, feelings, thoughts, memories or consciousness that make up the five *khandhas*. We cling to this view or that opinion, and we cling to a past that has gone and a future that has not yet arisen. Isn't this strange? We think that we know these things so we cling to them and are afraid of the unknown. This is why the *kilesas* will not let us get into *appanā samādhi*; they are afraid of the unknown but, in fact, the unknown is our true home.

Avijjā can be translated as "not knowing"; it's the master of wanting to know, yet it is completely afraid of the unknown. It wants to know, but is not able to know in line with the truth. It wants to understand everything and to stay with everything it knows or thinks it knows. But *avijjā* cannot stay with the unknown, and it is terribly afraid of the unknown because that is where it vanishes. *Avijjā* vanishes when we have *sati* (awareness) or if the mind is one-pointed on a meditation object. The *kilesas* have no power over us there. Please understand this clearly; if we are completely absorbed into one object, whether the object of investigation or the object of calm meditation, the *kilesas* have no power over us. But the moment we realise that something is pulling our *citta* away from the object, we see the power of the *kilesas*. So, the task is very simple — just stay with one object and put all your determination into doing so. Think about it; why do you want to go over the past yet again? We've thought about the past so many times before, but what benefit has it brought us? It's not lasting, it's *anicca*. Everything is *anicca*, arising and ceasing — feelings, thoughts, memories, all of them are *anicca*. Most of the time we cannot even control what arises and ceases. Thoughts just pop up out of the blue and disappear of their own accord, as do feelings and even consciousness (*viññāṇa*) itself. Things pop up and disappear all the time, but we cling to them because of the power of *avijjā* which wants to know and wants to understand but will never be able to do so. The only thing that can really know or understand is the *citta*, but we have to get rid of *avijjā* before we can access that state of knowingness. We have to pull away the curtain of *avijjā*, the thick curtain that is before our eyes all the time. Please understand this clearly. There is something going on behind the curtain, but we see only shadows, as if we are looking at the dance of shadow puppets. From the shadows, we assume what is going on, but once we pull aside the curtain of *avijjā*, we can clearly see what is really happening. We don't have to assume any more; we simply see in line with the truth, and what we see is completely different from what we could infer through the thick curtain of *avijjā*, the curtain of not-knowingness. Please realise

that everything that comes into your senses, every thought, every view and every opinion is wrong. As close as they might be to the truth, they are still wrong. So let them go and just stay with the one object, seeing it and understanding it with your true *citta*.

However, your experience tells you that meditation practice is very difficult, because things pop into the mind saying, "This is important; this must be done; I am right; I am wrong", and so on. This is where all the problems start, but you must not give in to them. If you don't give in to the memories, if you don't give in to the thoughts, if you don't give in to your views and opinions they must disappear, and what is left is an extremely peaceful state of mind because the thoughts, feeling and memories have ceased to bother you constantly. The same applies to the body; the older we get the more the body bothers us, but we shouldn't give in to concerns about the body either. Once we get close to entering *appanā samādhi*, the *citta* will mostly stay inside. It will wriggle around inside, still trying to get out, but if we can overcome this hindrance, we can actually enter *appanā samadhi*. It's like going through a tunnel and ending up in an utterly peaceful state that we will never forget. Once you come out of that state, you say, "Aaahhhhh." Than Ajahn Mahā Bua called it a wonder, a wonder that we can all experience when we do the meditation practice. It's the first wonder of meditation. There are quite a few wonders – another occurs during the investigation of pain – but attaining *appanā samādhi* is one of the wonders we can experience most easily, and everyone can do it.

Don't let the *kilesas* fool you into thinking that you can't, that you can't enter *appanā samādhi* because you are a Westerner or for some other reason. That's wrong view. Of course, you can enter *appanā samādhi* – I could do it and so can you. It's not so difficult, nor is it as difficult as we think. Not only does it give rise to an enormously peaceful state of mind but it also results in a lot of energy which we can use for investigation. In addition, it gives us a preview of *Nibbāna*, thereby fostering our faith and proving that there is something beyond all the things we see, hear, touch,

taste or smell. It is an experience more amazing than any other in the whole world. The conviction we obtain from the experience of the deep state of *samādhi* helps us go through all the difficulties on the spiritual path, whether during investigation or when removing the *kilesas*. The faith or conviction we obtain, even if the experience only happens once, can be the engine that pulls us through all the problems that arise in meditation practice. We remember the experience of being absolutely calm as the mind engine was completely shut down without any noise at all, and we never forget it. But to reach this state, we have to resist the power of the *kilesas*, the soldiers of *avijjā*, which bring up thoughts of lust or anger, or memories of various things, or thoughts about the future. We have to resist such thoughts, not give in to thinking; when they arise, we have to let them pass by, say goodbye and go back to the object, say goodbye and go back to the object of meditation, again and again. Don't allow these thoughts to obsess your heart, and don't dwell on them or wonder why a particular thought came up — you can think about that for the rest of your life and never find an answer. Thoughts and memories just arise and cease; simply be aware that *anicca* is their nature.

Memory, feelings and the body are also not-self; as the Lord Buddha pointed out in the teaching of *anattā*, "These things are not me, they do not belong to me, they are not myself." And because we cling or attach to them and think they are me or mine, *dukkha* arises. It also arises when we try to get rid of things, clinging to them in a negative way, not wanting them to be me or mine. For instance, if anger arises, we don't want it to be me or mine but we still cling to it; this is wrong understanding, so just let it pass by. Recognising that lust or anger are not me or mine, we let them pass by, neither going for them nor going against them. Understand this clearly; if you foster a thought of hate or some kind of not-wanting, it will become a big problem. Just as an avalanche is built up from the first stone or the first snowball, so the first thought of hate or dislike can, if fostered, become an avalanche of emotion that destroys us. We need to be aware of the process

that leads to the avalanche, and that avalanches can be stopped at the very beginning, if we are to prevent the development of tides of emotion that we cannot deal with. The way to stop the avalanche at the beginning is to recognise that the initial thought is not me, doesn't belong to me and is not myself, and that having arisen it must cease. Don't buy into it, and don't attach to it either by liking or disliking. This is what makes us free of *dukkha*. Please understand this clearly and understand it in your heart. I know this practice is difficult, but one has to bring up some determination and effort to throw out all the thoughts.

Imagine that you are a security guard in an art gallery, and that your task is simply to watch who comes in and goes out the door. You don't follow the people going in or going out. Similarly, in meditation practice you don't follow the things that arise in the *citta* nor do you latch onto them. Your task is just to recognise that a thought has arisen and a thought has passed by, *vedanā* (feeling) has arisen and *vedanā* has passed by, and so on. This is the job of the security guard; he is not paid to follow particular people, because he would miss all the other people coming into the gallery. His job is just to stay at the door and take note of whoever is coming in or going out. So, in the practice, just be with whatever arises and ceases, just know and stay with the meditation object, such as the word *buddho*. If it becomes boring, you can play a little trick — get *interested* in it. Think of something you have been previously been interested in and put this interest into the meditation object. It doesn't matter what the previous interest was. People who are fond of mountain climbing or motor racing get completely absorbed because of the danger that lurks in the background, but when we are on our meditation cushions or doing walking meditation there is no danger, so we get complacent and become less attentive to our task. So, become attentive. Feel that you want to understand the meditation object, such as the word *buddho*; don't just formally repeat it but really try to understand its quality, how it changes from moment to moment. Similarly with the breath; we need to understand its quality, how it changes from moment

to moment. We're not interested in whether we have practiced for five minutes or ten minutes, we're just interested in this one moment, this one *buddho* or this one breath. We need to be there in the present, with our full attention on the one object. Then, the knowingness of the *citta* will *know* about the quality of the *buddho* or the breath, and we won't have to *think* about the quality of the object. We just have to be attentive, and the knowing will arise. Please understand this. Get there. Don't buy into thoughts.

Once you have been in the monastery for a while, don't bother about what other people are doing. Let them do their thing and you do your thing; don't get disturbed by other people but rather live as if you were living alone. You can't blame the trees or the animals for your own dissatisfaction, you can only blame yourself. Everything you need to deal with is already inside you. If that wasn't the case, we would be lost, and the Lord Buddha would never have been able to point the way out of *dukkha*. So let's take control of ourselves, not in the sense of controlling the breath or the word *buddho* but in taking control to stop the *kilesas* coming in to disturb our hearts. A person who owns an apartment has control over who comes in; he can close the door or open the door, and this is the kind of control I mean. Once they are in, however, we can't control how they behave. In the world we can't control other people or situations, and we cannot control our environment; the environment is just what it is, and other people are just what they are. But we can take charge of what happens within us.

You need to understand this. While living in this monastery, your thoughts should not be concerned with what other people are doing or how they are behaving. When Than Ajahn Mahā Bua received complaints from a *bhikkhu* about another *bhikkhu* misbehaving, he would either kick out the *bhikkhu* who had complained (if the other *bhikkhu's* misbehaviour was not serious) or kick them both out (if the other *bhikkhu* really had misbehaved badly). This was because he didn't want us to complain about other people or situations but rather to deal with situations that arise within our own heart, not to find scapegoats for them. We have blamed

others for our negative feelings all our lives, but now it has to stop. We shouldn't look for scapegoats for our unpleasant feelings, and nor should we find targets for our pleasant feelings. If we do, we will not be able to stay with the feeling itself to see its arising and ceasing, because when a good or pleasant feeling arises, we immediately wonder how we got it, how can we prolong it and how can we get it again in the future. Similarly, when an unpleasant feeling arises we immediately look for a scapegoat, such as someone who looked at us in a strange way, or the bad weather or the quality of the food. With both unpleasant and pleasant feelings, we usually look around for reasons why they have arisen, but we should instead just accept that they arise and cease. This is the first step. Before we start our investigation, we have to accept, accept both the good things within us and the bad. This doesn't mean that we go on doing the bad and neglect doing the good, but simply that we should accept that both good and bad are within the range of the heart. We have to take stock of what is in our hearts, otherwise how do we know what is there and what to get rid of? It's like a merchant who has goods that are stinking and rotten but is unable to identify the rotten ones because he hasn't made an inventory of his stock. Instead, he blames his neighbour for the rotten smell that comes from his own merchandise. We need to take stock of what is in our hearts; accept the good things, go on doing them and do more of them, and accept the bad things and resolve not to do them again. This is how we can slowly change our ways of behaviour to become more and more content and happy. If we start doing it now, we can experience a more satisfying life within a few years and, of course, have a better rebirth in the future.

However, doing these things alone will not eradicate the underlying causes for our greed, hate and delusion — they will just reduce it a little. If we want to get rid of our unwholesome tendencies, we have to tread the eightfold path that consists of three columns: *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. For laypeople, keeping *sīla* means keeping the five precepts, and for the monks it means keeping the two hundred and twenty-seven monastic rules. *Samādhi* is the ability

to concentrate on one object and stay with it without the *citta* running around like a monkey jumping from tree to tree reaching for this or that banana. *Samādhi* also provides rest. People who work a lot need to rest in the evening and put their bodies to sleep, and similarly we have to be able to put our minds to sleep. You rest your body every day, but when have you ever rested your *citta*? When was the last time you went into deep *samādhi* or at least *upacāra samādhi*, where the *citta* is rested and untroubled by external things? We need the ability to concentrate to get such rest. *Paññā* is investigation, and it is only through investigation that we can cut the roots of the tree of life, the tree of rebirth. This kind of investigation does not try to reach conclusions. Rather, it leads to insight, which takes place in the heart, in the knowingness of the *citta* which is its true state, not in thoughts. Once we get a quiet moment, we go into that knowingness of the *citta* and start investigating. We investigate things over and over and over again. When we first come to the monastery, we start with the investigation of the body. We tear the body apart, from top to bottom, from outside to inside. We break it into bits and pieces, detailed or coarse, to see and understand the nature of the body. As long as the heart has not understood the nature of the body, it will not let go. The heart is the only thing that can let go, not our minds.

It is possible, by controlling our minds, to let go of unwholesome things and develop wholesomeness. This kind of "letting go" can be compared to cutting the leaves of a tree. If it is a large tree with lots of leaves, we can't see what is underneath the foliage, but when we cut off the leaves the trunk and branches become clearer. Control of mind is a way of pruning back and removing the leaves. However, trees grow back their leaves over and over again, so we have to keep cutting them back over and over again. I hope you can see that these efforts are ultimately useless, as the capacity of the tree to regrow is left untouched. Similarly, the underlying causes of the unwholesomeness in our hearts are untouched by simply controlling the mind, by "letting go" alone. The practice of not following our desires is equivalent to cutting the leaves. The

leaves have to be cut, but that is all we will achieve unless we practice investigation. Once there are no more leaves, investigation allows us to see the branches which give rise to new leaves. The heart can then cut the branches off one by one until the whole tree of rebirth is uprooted.

We can think about "letting go", letting go of our greed and hate for the rest of our lives, but it will not change anything; greed and hate will still reside within our hearts. Only if we understand the nature of the pot of earth that supports the plant of greed and hate, can we destroy it. When the plant pot is completely destroyed, greed and hate cannot grow any more. And this plant pot is none other than the body. The body has to be completely understood, stripped down to its bits and pieces and into the four elements, over and over again. Once we really see it clearly with our inner eyes, with our *citta*, understanding will arise. Then, the *citta* will know the danger of the body and will let go of its own accord. We do not have to tell it to let go; once the *citta* understands the true nature of the body or feeling, it will let go of it immediately, just like a little child touching fire and immediately retracting its hand.

Day in and day out, moment by moment, are we touching the fire, and that's why we have so much *dukkha*. So, at first, we have to develop concentration. Investigation is not very worthwhile if the mind cannot concentrate on one object. You need to be able to stay with one object for at least ten or fifteen minutes, otherwise your investigation will just revolve around in *saññā* (memory and association) and *sankhāra* (thoughts). If *saññā* and *sankhāra* helped us reach the end of *dukkha*, we wouldn't need to come to this monastery and go through all the hardships of practice. The solution is not to be found in our memories and thoughts. It is to make our hearts empty and see things as they are. *We cannot force the heart to let go, the heart lets go of its own accord!*

How to practice body contemplation

14th February 2016

The word *buddho* which we use as a *parikamma*, a preliminary meditation object, is a reminder of the Lord Buddha. We should be grateful to him for going through an unimaginably long training to attain enlightenment and for revealing the Dhamma twenty-five hundred years ago. Without him, we would have no idea of *kamma*, the law of cause and effect through which intentional acts of body, speech and mind have results in future lives. We would have no idea that we are caught up in an endless cycle of birth and death. And we wouldn't know that there are thirty-one realms of existence populated by beings who revolve through them life after life, or that there are five moral precepts (*sīla*) which, if we keep them, prevent us falling into hell or the other lower realms. We should be very grateful to the Lord Buddha, not only because his teaching still exists but because it is still alive. When I say alive, I mean that the teaching is not only written in dead books, but that it is still being put into practice. In the present day, it still produces the results promised by the Lord Buddha, namely, the attainments of the four kinds of noble persons (*ariya-puggala*) — *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmī*, *Anāgāmī* and *Arahant*. In the Thai Forest Tradition, these noble beings can still be found today, and this shows that the teaching of the Lord Buddha is still alive. We should be thankful to meet with a teaching that remains alive, teaches us the four noble truths and shows the way to freedom from *dukkha* (discontent and suffering).

The first noble truth is the truth of *dukkha*, which exists in all realms of existence; in the higher realms there is less *dukkha* and in the lower realms there is more, or perhaps exclusively, *dukkha*. The second noble truth concerns the origin of *dukkha*; all our desires — the desire to be or not to be, the desire to become or not to become, and so on — cause *dukkha*. The third noble truth states that *dukkha* can be ended, and the fourth noble truth is the path of practice that leads to the end of *dukkha*. This is the path

of practice that we are following in this monastery, and it consists of three columns: *sīla* (morality or virtue), *samādhi* (concentration and awareness) and *paññā* (wisdom through investigation). So we should be grateful that we have encountered the living teaching of the Lord Buddha that reveals the truth, the truth about our existence, and that allows us to meet, here in Thailand, representatives of his teaching who have become noble ones, whether *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmī*, *Anāgāmī* or *Arahant*.

The Lord Buddha taught that there are ten fetters [1] binding us to the realm of birth and death. If we cut the first three fetters, we become a *Sotāpanna*, the first of the four stages of enlightenment. The first fetter concerns right view and the need to overcome doubt or uncertainty, especially about the teachings. For instance, we need to be clear that heaven and hell exist and that there are beings in these and other realms. This is different from the prevailing view today that heaven and hell exist only on this earth. We need to accept that they truly exist; there are about twenty-six different realms of heaven and twenty-five different kinds of hell. The belief that we have just one existence and that death is the end of everything is simply wrong view. The Lord Buddha taught that if we do not make the decision to break out of the vicious cycle of rebirth, we will have to go through life after life after life. He also taught that *kamma* exists, that our thoughts, speech and actions have results and that these results come back to us, whether good or bad. If you do not believe that other realms exist and that *kamma* exists, if you do not trust these teachings, you will remain bound to the endless round of birth and death. The second fetter concerns morality and being inconsistent in keeping the five precepts; keeping them, breaking them, then keeping them for a time and breaking them again or even not keeping them at all. This fetter

1 A list of the ten fetters (*saṁyojana*) is given in the Appendix, For a thorough explanation, see "The supreme attainments", a talk by Than Ajahn Maha Bua in the book "A life of inner quality", available on the Luangta website (www.luangta.eu).

also binds us, and to remove it we need to resolve to keep the five precepts from this moment on for the rest of our lives. Once we make this decision, this fetter does not interfere with our practice.

The last of the first three fetters is the belief that the body is me and mine — and this is the most problematic fetter. To remove it, we have to investigate the object that we are most attached to, namely, the body. As I said before, the cause of *dukkha* is wanting, wanting to be or not wanting to be, and wanting or not wanting a body is also *dukkha* and comes under this fetter. We have to investigate the nature of the body and understand that it is nothing but a biological robot that we inhabit. We drive it, we move it and we make it do things, but it has nothing to do with the *citta* that sits inside. The *citta* tells the body to move, to open and close its eyes, to sleep, eat and drink. Without the *citta* there would be no movement. Attachment to the body is one of the more difficult fetters to deal with. To overcome it, the Lord Buddha taught *asubha* practice to see how loathsome and repugnant the body really is. This does not mean that we have to *make* the body loathsome as some people think, but rather that we need to *see* its loathsomeness. The body is the biggest hindrance in our practice, particularly for people from the West. When they come to the monastery, all their questions and all their problems are related to the body, whether walking or sitting meditation, or being tired, hungry, hot or cold — these are all problems related to the body, problems that start with the body. They say, "I can't sit long enough" or "I can't walk long enough", but this has nothing to do with the training of the *citta* that sits inside the body. Attachment to the body really is a big problem for people. Of course, this attachment can also be in the negative direction; some people really loathe their body but that does not release the fetter, for disliking the body is just as much of a fetter as loving it. For example, older people tend to dislike their bodies because they do not work as well as they did before, but they would still be happy to have another younger body that was healthy and followed their instructions. Release from this fetter comes about only by investigating the body as the Lord Buddha

advised, by asking the question, "What is this body?", and seeing it as loathsome and decaying. We have to observe it. What is the body? Is it earth, air, water or fire? These four elements make up the body, and to understand its true nature we have to investigate the body in all its aspects.

The practice of investigation of the body continues during the first three of the four stages of enlightenment. The results of this practice enable us to break through to the first stage of enlightenment, *Sotāpanna*, when the fetter consisting of mistaken identity view — the view that this body is me or mine — is broken. The second stage of enlightenment is *Sakadāgāmī* (once-returner). To attain it, body investigation is necessary in order to understand that the body is the pot in which the plant of greed and hate is rooted, so that the illusion of the body can be destroyed. Someone who has destroyed greed and hate by fifty percent has attained to the stage of *Sakadāgāmī*. Only the *Anāgāmī* (non-returner) has finished the task of investigating the body because he has completely destroyed the illusion of the body and destroyed greed and hate. The *Anāgāmī* has destroyed the pot in which greed and hate are rooted; he has seen the nature of the body as it is. He has seen each part of the body broken into the four elements — earth, air, water and fire; he has seen it as loathsome and as not-self. He has understood both the nature of the body and the nature of greed and hate that are rooted in the body, since greed and hate are attachment to the body, whether wanting it or not wanting it.

Most of the work we undertake to develop wisdom on the spiritual path is concerned with investigation of the body. We have to do it thoroughly, year after year after year until we know we have finished the task and advanced to the stage of *Anāgāmī*. The *Anāgāmī* still has another five fetters to overcome, however, and still has to complete of the work, which involves investigation of the four *nāma khandhas* (mental feeling, memory and association, thought and consciousness). He has finished the investigation of the first of the *khandhas*, body (*rūpa*) together with bodily feeling, but still has to investigate the remaining four mental groups, and

he does this in the same way that the body was investigated, by seeing how they work and knowing them for what they really are.

Investigation of the body constitutes a large part of the practice, yet it is something we do not like doing. The body is the favourite toy of the *kilesas*, and they know that if we break through and see it for what it really is we will never, ever return — not to the heavenly realms, not to the human realm and not to the hell realms. So, the *kilesas* make it very difficult for us to break through, and that's why we have to put lots of effort and determination into the practice. We also need to develop *sati* (awareness) — this is most important. *Sati* is like a flashlight that looks inside the body and sees it as it is. We all know that when we open up the body, we don't like what we see. This is a natural response, so we don't have to teach ourselves that the body is loathsome; the feeling just comes up. In fact, we don't even have to open the body up; we just have to look at what comes out of it. We like, love or think beautiful whatever we put into the body or onto it, but we are disgusted by whatever comes out of it. This seems natural to us and accords with our views. We don't like to see the excrement coming out but we like to stuff the food in, and we don't like the urine that comes out but we like to drink liquids. We don't like the sweat that comes out, the dirt that comes from the pores of the skin, because it stinks. The dirt doesn't come from outside, it comes from inside — the grease, the smell and the rotten odour of a fart coming from the intestines. Do we like these things? No. And why not? Because they destroy the idea that the body is something beautiful, perfect and desirable.

All we ever do with this body is feed it, house it, clothe it and take care of it when it is sick. Our whole life is built around this body. When we look back over our own lives as the body has grown and developed, we can observe that we have had to train it, make it comfortable and develop its intelligence so that it can be useful to us. After sixteen or eighteen years, once the body is capable, we consider ourselves grown up and independent of our parents. Then we start working to earn money to feed the body, house it, clothe it and take care of its health. When we look at the

life of the average person, this is all they do. How much time does the average person really have to use the body for his pleasure? Very little. He works for eight hours, comes home, feeds the body, rests it, watches television and goes to sleep, waking up the next morning to do just the same thing. He goes to work day after day, and for what? To house, clothe and feed the body and take care of its health. When we look at a normal twenty-four hour day, how long do we actually spend not thinking about the body, feeding it, housing it and clothing it? Very little. Even on weekends, we still have to feed and rest the body, and we still have to care for it. Some people exercise, training the body to be healthy by running, cycling or climbing. It's all about the body, so imagine how difficult a task it is to practice investigation of the body, to break it down and loosen the attachment to it. Think about it; it takes three stages of enlightenment to get rid of the attachment to the body, and each step is a major step. The step to *Sotāpanna* is probably one of the biggest – the break with the identification with the body.

The Lord Buddha gave us an analogy to help us break the attachment to the body – the example of a cart. We can take it apart and lay the bits and pieces side by side, the wheels, the planks, the nuts and bolts, and ask ourselves "Where is the cart?" When we look at the pieces, we cannot see a cart, but when we assemble them again, the cart suddenly reappears. We can do the same exercise with the body, mentally disassembling it into its component parts. Start with the hands: we can cut off the left hand, see what it is made of and lay it in front of us. Then we take the next hand, cut it off, look at the bones, the flesh, the tendons, the skin and the blood vessels, and lay it in front of us. Now there are two hands out in front, and we should be able to visualise them clearly. Having cut them off, they are no longer hands but simply body parts. Then, in the same way, we cut off the right lower arm, put it in front of us and look at it, doing the same with the left lower arm. Now we can visualise two hands and two lower arms. We do the same for the right upper arm and left upper arm and place them in front, and then continue with the right and left feet. As we

take off each part, we look at it, seeing the bones, the vessels, the skin, the flesh and the tendons. As any one part is placed out front, it ceases to be me or mine, because something remains, sitting there, observing the parts. We continue doing this with other body parts, cutting them off slice by slice, piece by piece, and placing them in front. Even though many body parts are no longer in the place where we are sitting, we still have the feeling that the body is me and mine. So we continue placing body part after body part out in front until the head becomes the last thing to be placed there. We place it with the eyes towards us so we can see it clearly. Suddenly, all the parts of the body are in front, and we find ourselves looking at the whole disassembled body. You can do this practice with the larger, coarser body parts as I have described, or you can do it in finer detail. Also, you can order the pieces nicely in front of you, or you can just throw them in a heap. But whenever you take a part off and put it in front of you, it's important that you see it there, really see it there. When you do this practice often, there will sooner or later come a sudden moment when the "I", the *citta*, separates from the body. This insight, this sudden realisation, stemming from body contemplation of this kind is all you need to be able to cut the self-identification with the body.

This is just one method of practicing body contemplation, and I have described it because the Lord Buddha gave the analogy of the body as a cart which can be disassembled into its component parts. Where is the cart when it is disassembled and where is the body when all its parts are laid out in front of you? But please understand that you have to make the experience real – really see the parts in front of you and really feel that they are no longer part of your body when you have cut them off. In the end you will see just one thing – the *citta* sitting there watching the body parts. And if you do this often enough, the illusion, the self-identity with the body, will break. Then, if you are free of the other two fetters, this fetter – the belief that the body is me or mine – will be destroyed.

Of course, you can also do *asubha* practice and see the loathsomeness of the body. For example, when you close your eyes,

you can visualise yourself looking in the mirror and take off the skin to see what it looks like. But you have to make it real, not just a vague imagining. You have to feel it, as if you are taking a sharp knife and cutting through the middle of your face, cutting downwards from the top of the head and slowly pulling the skin away. What do you see? Pull away more. What do you see? A bloody mess. Then, pull away more and even more until there is no skin left, and look in the mirror. Of course, it hurts – a shiver runs down your spine when you bring the knife down, and you see blood dripping off. You need to feel it is real; all you need to do is feel it is real. When you pull away the skin you see what is underneath. You can take out your eyeballs, you can cut off your nose, take off your lips, remove the flesh and get down to the skeleton. You've all seen skeletons so you know what they look like. You can remove the skin from your head, from your shoulders and go bit by bit down the body, and then remove one organ after another. When you've removed the skin, take a close look at it – the outside and the inside. It has hair on the outside, particularly the skin of the head, it has pores, and on the underside there is greasy yellow fat. The skin is the covering that stops us from seeing the loathsomeness of the body; it is the skin which produces the form that we desire. Normally, we view the body as a fine thing – the hair on the head, the hair on the body, the teeth, the nails and the skin. These things make us think there is something beautiful and desirable, but the moment we cut into the skin we see that there is absolutely nothing desirable. If we cut open the skin of friends or lovers, we have no desire to hug them since all we see is a bloody mess with the greasy yellow fat hanging down, the flesh, the tendons and a soft, watery mess inside. Do you really want to hug someone like that? Do you feel like kissing them? Would you dream about having intercourse with someone with no skin? The moment you see the loathsomeness of the body without skin, thoughts of desire just disappear. The *kilesas* need to paint pictures full of desirable skin and beautiful forms; these are what they want, but the moment we show the *kilesas* the loathsomeness of the body – phut! All of a sudden they get disgusted. The *kilesas* that become excited are

the same *kilesas* that get disgusted, and that's why we do investigation of the body, that's why we have to destroy the illusion that the body is something beautiful. Of course, if we continue doing this practice, we will irritate the *kilesas*, and they will hit back. The moment we practice body contemplation correctly, they will start to react. First of all, slight irritation arises — we become irritated about things that did not bother us before. This shows that the practice is going in the right direction, because we really have to upset the *kilesas* if we are to destroy their attachment to the body.

Continuing with body investigation, we can take away the skin, peel off the flesh, remove the tendons and muscles, saw off the ribs, take out the slimy, quivering lungs and feel them, take out the heart and feel it, and do the same with the kidneys. Then go to the stomach which has just been given something delicious to digest. Open the stomach, look inside and see what has happened to the food — smell it, feel it, dig your fingers deep into it. Please remember, though, that the point of this practice is not to make the body loathsome; disgust arises by itself. The moment we see the reality of the body, feelings of disgust automatically arise within the heart — we don't have to make the body loathsome because it is loathsome and we don't like looking at it. For example, whatever goes in seems beautiful and whatever comes out seems disgusting, so we don't have to bring up disgust as our natural instincts are to see the output as filthy.

The more we do body investigation, the more we become accustomed to it; pulling out the organs, cutting them open, seeing them, feeling them, holding them in our hands, seeing the quivering, slimy mass that constitutes each organ. Every surgeon knows what the body looks and feels like inside, but he does not associate that knowledge with his own body, and he would be reluctant to open the body of his wife or girlfriend. The memory would reside within him and could alter his ability to sleep with or caress her body; he might feel disgusted whenever he saw her. This is why surgeons tend to operate only on other people, not on their families or partners. You don't have to tell surgeons that bodies are

disgusting. The first time a doctor opens up a body he can faint or vomit, even though the older students warn the younger students that this can happen. The automatic reaction of the *kilesas* when they see an opened up body is either to faint or throw up. They want to hide the loathsomeness under the skin, but we have to look at it. This is why we really have to investigate the skin, tear it off, put it back, tear it off, put it back, and see the difference. Try it with your loved ones, with your favourite old girlfriend or boyfriend, or with your wife, husband or partner. The moment you see them as a whole there is lust; the moment you open them up, it is gone. Then, when you put them back together, the lust reappears but when you disassemble them again it vanishes.

One of the most difficult things in meditation practice is battling *rāga-taṇhā* (sensual or sexual desire). This is a major battle, and the *kilesas* don't give in easily. As I've said already, if you do body contemplation correctly, irritation comes up at the beginning, but it slowly deepens and turns into hate. Suddenly, not only are we irritated but we become spiteful; the deeper our practice digs into the body, the more the *kilesas* react and the more hate comes up. This means that you have to be careful when doing body investigation. If you practice it at home as a layperson try to keep away from other people because, without noticing it, the hate that comes up during investigation can erupt at someone else, anyone else. Hateful thoughts or words can arise, and the other person won't even know what is happening. So be careful and be warned; really intensive body investigation brings up hate. For the practitioner, however, this is a great opportunity, as one of the reasons for investigating the body is to see the hate that arises and to learn how to deal with it.

In this practice, we have to be able to deal with hate, greed and lust in a manner that is wholesome. In the beginning we investigate hate because greed is difficult to get a handle on; with greed, we tend to just grab something and most of the time we give in, but hate is easier to investigate because it stays longer and it's not easy to get rid of. The way we deal with hate is similar to the way

we deal with pain. When we sit for a long time, pain comes up, and the practice is simply to stay with it for however long it takes, investigating the pain and looking for its source. Body investigation also involves comparing greed and hate when they arise, investigating one then the other and asking what the difference is between them. Then we can go back to the basic feeling of hate and the basic feeling of greed; the deeper our investigation is, the less difference we see. Greed and hate are two sides of the same coin. The mind says this is desirable (greed) and that is detestable (hate), but this difference is just an illusion created by the *kilesas*. What the *kilesas* want is greed and what they don't want is hate, but the underlying feeling is one and the same.

At the beginning, body investigation will be very, very difficult. Of course, we don't really get a knife and cut the body open, we do it in our imagination, and it's usually necessary to play with images at first, as it can be hard to see the body as it really is. The *citta* already knows the body as it so, if we train the *citta*, we will eventually be able to bring up images of our own real body. We can also use images of other bodies instead of our own – it's completely up to you which you choose to use. It might be easier initially to train the *citta* using other people's bodies, cutting them up into bits and pieces to see the loathsomeness. Or you can use the dead body of an animal like a chicken, or watch a dead rat decay over fifteen days; look at these things, smell them. Our body is no different. If you visit a slaughterhouse, you are greatly reminded of your own body hanging there. The body parts called flesh and meat that we love to cook, grill or fry, and love to stuff into our mouths, are not so different from our own. If you hang up your own body in a slaughterhouse and cut off the head, arms and legs it doesn't look very different from the torso of any other animal. The animals that we love to eat all have hearts, stomachs and kidneys – where is the difference?

At the early stages of practice, the *citta* or the *kilesas* are not willing to reveal true images, so we may have to rely on anatomical images that we find disgusting from books or other sources.

We can choose one that we find most disgusting, stare at it for five minutes, close our eyes and, in meditation, reproduce the mental image until we can hold it still and see it clearly. Once we have learned to use images in this way, we can take the next step to see the real nature of the body. We take a tour through the body, looking at the thirty-two parts listed in the *suttas*; one part will become more interesting than the others, and you can take it as your subject. If you are really interested in the liver, for instance, instead of using the word *buddho* as a meditation object, you can think "liver, liver, liver", trying to produce the image of liver in your mind until it becomes clear and you begin to see it. It might take some time to do this, not just one or two days but months or years. So don't give up and say, "This is not working for me" — don't say that to yourself. In fact, it is working, but it might take some time depending on the ability of the *citta* to visualise. We need to be able to visualise images to investigate the body, even at the early stages when placing bits and pieces of the body out in front of us. We have to train ourselves to visualise somehow, and there are books of *asubha* images, or pictures showing the result of accidents, which are sometimes shown in graphic detail in Thai newspapers. Once you have trained yourself using such images until you can visualise them internally, you can visualise your own or someone else's body and proceed to cut it up. You can take a different part each time; if today you are investigating hair, you can focus on a strand of hair, mentally repeating "hair, hair, hair" until you see the image, and then cut it up, seeing it for what it is, seeing its true nature. Any body part will do — hair, kidneys, heart, teeth, lungs, and so on. Again, you can take the whole body, visualise it decaying and light a fire underneath it; as it burns, see the substances that exude at various stages, and observe what is left at the end. You can choose to work with the whole body or part of the body — whatever interests you on that day. Any one of the thirty-two body parts listed in the *suttas* will do, and you can take a different one each day or stay with one of them for several days. Whichever you choose, pick it up, feel it, smell it and understand its nature. You could, for instance, see how it falls apart into the

four elements of earth, fire, air and water, realising that every body part is made out of the same four elements.

Don't get frustrated or upset that it doesn't work the first day or the first week or even the first year. You have to do it every day, and you also need *sati* (awareness). If *sati* is not strong enough, body contemplation will take a very long time, but if it is keen the practice will be faster. So, when doing investigation of the body don't forget to sharpen *sati*, to sharpen the knife that you use to cut up the body. In fact, this practice is similar to developing *samādhi* when you repeat the word "*buddho*, *buddho*, *buddho*" internally over and over again. In the early stages of body contemplation, we repeat "hair, hair, hair" and try to visualise hair — it's similar to *samādhi* practice but with visualisation. Later on, however, the image becomes clearer, and we cut the body up, let it burn, or do anything to it in order to understand its nature. We can investigate anything in this way, including pain, greed and hate — what is their nature? It is particularly important to discard any medical knowledge you have about the body. In this practice, you want to be like a newborn baby; whatever it sees it touches, puts in its mouth and plays with in order to understand. In body investigation, we have to become like this newborn baby who touches and plays around with an object until its function is understood and everything about it is known. Normally, we know the names for things, such as liver, but we really don't know what "liver" is. What is the difference between the liver and the kidneys, between greed and hate, between lust and hate, between pain and ecstasy? You have to investigate, to come to know these things and understand their true nature.

We have to put in a lot of effort to do this practice, and how long it takes depends on each person's character. But please don't tell me that it doesn't work. It will work. It will work in its own time. For one person progress will be fast, for another slow. For some it might take a whole lifetime, for others a few years. For Than Ajahn Mahā Bua, whose *samādhi* was excellent, it took eight months; his *samādhi* was super-sharp, like a laser, but it still took him eight

months. Wherever he put his attention, it cut through. Our attention becomes diffuse within one or two seconds, so we don't see what we are investigating objectively; if this is the case, we will not understand the true nature of the body. Also, we get deluded by our views and opinions, especially scientific views and opinions about the body that are useless for this kind of investigation. People with medical backgrounds, for instance, tend to have a hard time investigating the body because they have an anatomical atlas in their minds, but this is not what we want to know or understand. So they have to make the investigation more real by taking a coarse saw and cutting up the body, really feeling the pain. Only in this way can they investigate the body.

To summarise, investigation of the body will reveal its true nature. This practice will destroy greed and hate, especially sexual or sensual desire. This practice takes us through the first three stages of enlightenment, namely, *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmī* and, finally, *Anāgāmī* or non-returner.

Investigating fear, contemplating death

27th December 2009 & 9th May 2016

People are afraid of many things — going hungry, meeting new people, seeing creatures like scorpions or snakes, and so on. Fears like these are really about being injured or dying; we all have them, but the more you practice the less afraid you become. Fears arise through thoughts, so if you replace every thought with the meditation word *buddho* or with the awareness of the breath, fear cannot come up. However, there is more to our fear than meets the eye. It's not just that we are afraid of scorpions, snakes or whatever; there is a more lurking fear inside all of us that comes out when we see a frightening object like a snake. What is this fear? This is something everyone has to investigate for themselves. You have to be aware of what happens before fear comes up — what happens? Meditation practice, by enhancing awareness, can bring us to the point where we know what is happening. This awareness is called *sati*, and if we can't develop it we have no means of knowing what is occurring. As human beings we try to make conclusions quickly to know what is going on around us — but the fear of scorpions or snakes is not the real thing. Rather, something inside us is afraid, and it looks for a reason outside that it can project fear onto. In meditation practice, we have to look within ourselves and ask what we are afraid of.

When we die, we are reborn, and it may be that we are now afraid because we had a terrible death in our last life. Whatever the origin of the fear, we have to recognise that anger, greed and fear exist in every human being; they are not specific to us. There is fear inside everyone that is looking for things to latch onto, and we have to get to the root of it. Using meditative concentration (*samādhi*), we can make the mind clear of thoughts and start to investigate the situation — not investigating by thinking about things but by pulling up memories or fears so that we can re-experience them. This can be tough for some people, but we have to get used to the unpleasantness if we are to see clearly. We have

to experience memories or fears over and over again, ten times, a hundred times or a thousand times until we really know what is happening.

This practice is very different from going to psychiatrists or counsellors. These professionals try to find solutions that seem to suit the situation, such as finding someone or something to blame, whether mothers or fathers or the society itself. However, there's a fundamental aspect ignored by the Western world – the *kamma* that brings about rebirth. In the Thai Forest Tradition, *kamma* from the past is an important underlying determinant of everything we experience, including fears in the here and now. We are reborn in a particular country because of our *kamma*. Some countries are quite wealthy and secure, and being reborn in them is a consequence of good *kamma*, but we also have bad *kamma* and experience difficulties because of actions in past lives. In young people particularly, problems may come from their previous life, so they may have to do some digging to get to the bottom of their fears. But, whether young or old, we can't just use reasoning to overcome fear; the calm of *samādhi* is necessary to see what is really happening.

To investigate fear, we should calm down the mind until it doesn't think any more, and bring up the fearful situation. Bring up an encounter with the object, whether a snake or a scorpion, and see what is happening. Just see but don't judge – this is a very important point. Don't think about it, just look at it. It's similar to looking at a documentary on the television and knowing that something is happening on the screen. What we are really doing is showing the heart (*citta*), and we have to do it a second time and a third time, again and again. We do it until the heart tells us that it has understood. But don't be impatient; this can take months or years. When you do this practice, you are learning how to deal with fear. Fear is just an emotion that arises and ceases; after all, we are not afraid all the time. We might be afraid of snakes, but we're not afraid of them when we are eating lunch. Fear comes only in certain situations, and this aspect is also something we

have to investigate. But before we can do that, we have to make the mind calm, to drop into a state where there is no thought. This state can help so much in overcoming fears. Only then can we see and understand those things hidden beneath our thoughts. We tend to think about situations over and over again and never come to a solution, but when there are no thoughts we can see more clearly because there is no fog. Fears that are caused by *kamma* are not so easily revealed, of course, but we can at least make a start in learning how to deal with fear and how to overcome it.

In essence, you are saying, "Alright – there is fear" but recognising that the fear is not you. You have to understand what is going on inside yourself. Go to a film and see how you are pulled into the story, how your anger flares up or how you empathise with some of the characters, yet the movie is not you and not yours, is it? Similarly, fear is not you, so when you see it coming up, just say, "There is fear" and create a distance between you and it. At the same time, you can observe the thoughts that create the fear, the thoughts associated with the fear. If you reverse these thoughts for a while, to counteract them, you'll see that no fear comes up; for instance, there is no fear if you replace the image of a snake with the image of a stick or a piece of rubber tubing, is there?

These are things we have to do alone – other people cannot solve our problems for us. We have to solve them ourselves for we have created them, after all. Because of our *kamma* we have created our own lives; society or the people around us have not made us the way we are. We are all born of greed and hate; these make us do bad or unwholesome things, but we also have good and wholesome things inside us. If there is more good than bad, we are born in the higher realms; if more bad than good, in the lower realms, though this is often difficult for people in the West to accept. The moment we accept ourselves, accept that we are both good and bad, we can start to deal with our problems using *sati* and *paññā*. However, if we don't accept that there are unwholesome qualities within us, they will just stay where they are. We can keep pushing them down but, in the moments when we don't have

sati, these things can come out and ruin our lives. By the time we think, "Goodness, what have I done?", it's too late. However, the moment we accept the unwholesome things within us, we can deal with them. We can investigate them, and chuck them out of the heart.

There are also bad habits, of course, and other habits, such as dwelling on fears, that are very difficult to break. That's why we have to hold on to wholesome things with all our strength, whether keeping the five precepts or fixing our attention on a meditation object. The longer we drive a car into the mud, the deeper it gets stuck and the longer it takes to get it out. Habits are very deep tracks in the mud, but if we don't do anything about them, the tracks get deeper and deeper. The moment we see the habit with awareness, we should try to counteract it, and if we don't succeed, we try again and again. To break a habit, we need both awareness and the will to fight it; it can be done, but we have to be patient. When a car is stuck in the mud, we need patience but also effort or persistence, and effort is one of the seven factors of enlightenment.[1] In fact, we can change any kind of bad habit using awareness, will and persistence. Of course, it is not easy, and we can come up with all kinds of reasons for not breaking habits. One of the most useful things is to tell yourself, "I really don't want to do this any more", and recall that the habit is harmful and does not bring happiness. This will help to firm up your resolve, so your determination will be a little stronger the next time you try to counteract the habit.

The Lord Buddha never said that practice was easy; rather, he showed us methods of counteracting the defilements within the heart (*citta*). We need to accept whatever is in our hearts and deal with them accordingly. If you see things that are unwholesome, let them go and don't follow them. If you see things that are wholesome, put them into action and develop them further. The Lord

1 The seven factors are awareness *(sati)*; investigation *(dhammavicaya)*; effort *(viriya)*; rapture or happiness *(pīti)*; calm *(passaddhi)*; concentration *(samādhi)*; equanimity *(upekkhā)*

Buddha put it very succinctly in the *Anguttara Nikāya*: "Develop the wholesome and abandon the unwholesome." And remember — don't give up, for that is what the *kilesas* tell us to do. If it doesn't work out today, it might work out tomorrow, so keep going. Never, ever give up, otherwise you will be lost, and your practice will go down the drain. Imagine there is a great river with a waterfall that you are heading towards. Wouldn't you do everything you can to get out of the river, to swim against the flow? Swimming against the flow of the *kilesas* needs awareness, and that's why *sati* is so important. Every time we remember that we should act on the wholesome or avoid acting on the unwholesome, we should trust in this awareness and act on it.

One of the most common fears is the fear of death, but all of us are going to die, so what are we afraid of? At the moment of birth, death is programmed into the body**,** so we are going to die whatever we do, even though we don't know when death will come. What is it that's going to die? Well, the usual answer is that I am going to die, which we take to mean that everything is going to die. But the reality is that this "I" consists of the five groups or *khandhas* — the body (*rūpa*), and the four mental (*nāma*) *khandhas* of feeling (*vedanā*), memory and association (*saññā*), thought (*sankhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) — plus a *citta* which is reborn again and again. When we die, it's the body that dies. The *citta* does not die, however, and after death it just looks for somewhere else to be reborn in a bodily form with *nāma khandhas* appropriate to the new state. This is why suicide is not a good idea, because killing the body does not solve the underlying problem. In fact, rebirth can take place in an animal body or a heavenly (*deva)* body or in hell or in a realm where there are no bodies (in which case there will be mental feelings but no bodily feelings). We shouldn't think that bodily forms and mental *khandhas* exist only in the human realm. Beings in the heavens and the hells also have *khandhas;* if they didn't, how could they experience the fruits of their past *kamma*?

So, does it really make sense to be afraid of death? The moment we fall asleep, we are not aware of the body, and the moment we wake up, we are aware of it again, but most of us are not afraid of sleeping. Yet, the fear of death drives some people crazy: "Oh, I'm going to die" or "I'm frightened because I'm going to have a lot of pain." And other people can use our fears against us. We are afraid of people and animals that can hurt us, and this fear can drive us to do unwholesome things. But what is it that's afraid? Let's try to locate this fear. There is fear – where is it hiding, and where does it come from? There is fear of death and fear of pain, but the moment you say, "I am afraid", or "I am in pain", you cannot separate out its elements and cannot observe it objectively. So, the first step is to distance ourselves from whatever is happening and say, "There is fear" or "There is pain." Then we try to locate it. Where do these things come from, and who is it that knows about them? Ask yourself this – does the pain really know that it's pain, or fear know that it's fear, or depression know that it's depression? So who is it that knows all these things? Can the one who knows these things be the things themselves? No. To give a simple example, when we see an object, such as a spittoon in a Thai monastery, we look at it and say, "That's not me"; we don't call it me or mine. We just recognise that there is a spittoon, and use it for our own purposes. Similarly, with fear we can look at it and say, "There is fear" and examine where it comes from.

We spend our lives afraid of something or other. Some people use our fear to threaten us; they say that if we don't act in a certain way, we will die a horrible death or be tortured or die of starvation or thirst, and we obey them out of fear. People in power use others' fears to control them, and the strategy is quite successful. You can see this for yourself when you look at the world and how it works. But if we overcome the fear of death, no-one can threaten us ever again. We will experience a certain level of freedom.

Actually, what is going to die? In fact, what dies is the body or what we think of as our existence, but the *citta* itself doesn't die – it just looks for a new existence in a another realm. Imagine that we

have lived all our lives in a dark cave, and that one day we stroll towards the mouth of the cave, see a beautiful lush meadow and start to wander off through the meadow. Have we changed? No! If we assumed that we were the cave, that the cave was me and mine, then the only things that have died are the cave and the memory of our time in it. But that's all. The *citta*, the never dying wanderer, just wanders on and beyond. Some people see a desert rather than a meadow, but whatever the landscape the *citta* just wanders on, even if the wandering is just from the back to the front of the cave itself. From the start of the meadow to the end, from the start of the desert to the end, from one new landscape to another, we wander through what Buddhism calls the realms of existence (*saṁsāra*). If a *citta* has amassed enough merit, it can get another human body – a cave in the example above; if the merit is even greater, it can get a heavenly body – the lush meadow; and if the merit is less, it will go to the lower realms to an animal or ghost (*peta*) body, or into the hell realm – the desert. But the wanderer, the *citta*, does not die. What dies is the "I" that you think of as yourself but which is nothing more than the five *khandhas!*

To understand this, we have to investigate these five *khandhas* in our meditation practice, the five *khandhas* that make up what we call ourselves. The Lord Buddha taught that, "This is not me, this does not belong to me, this is not myself", and he was talking about these five groups – body, feeling, memory and association, thought and consciousness. If these things don't belong to us, what does? It's hard to imagine, but nothing belongs to us. And what is it that knows these things? There must be something remaining, and if we practice meditation we can discover for ourselves what that thing is. In the practice of *samādhi*, we can find out what it is.

When we practice *samādhi* concentrating on one point, sooner or later thoughts stop and we enter a completely different world, which is called access or *upacāra samādhi*. Then, when we get one-pointed, everything, including the *khandhas,* has to disappear, and this is called *appanā samādhi,* the deepest state of concentration. Once consciousness disappears, everything else disappears.

What is left is one-pointedness, and that comes closest to what we can really call ourselves. The moment we go into *appanā samādhi*, there is no longer any personality because the personality disappears with the five *khandhas*. What I mean is that during the time we are one-pointed the five *khandhas* are no longer working; they are not interfering with the true state of the *citta*, which is knowingness. Clear, crisp knowingness — that's what is left. There is no personality about this knowingness. There is no notion of "I know"; there is just knowing. And it's certainly not knowing an object; there is just knowing. Unless you have experienced this for yourself, it is beyond imagination. Thoughts and memories don't work in this state, so the closest description is clear, crisp knowingness. It's up to you to get into this state and experience it for yourself. There's no other way; if you really want to know what is left over, you have to go into *appanā samādhi* and see for yourself. Actually, it's not so difficult. All you need to do is concentrate on one object until you become one-pointed. However, you need to put a lot of determination and a lot of effort into your practice so that whenever the mind goes astray you bring it back to the one point, whether the mental repetition of the word *buddho* or the awareness of the breath as it comes in and goes out at the nose.

When I say that what is left is the knowingness, I want you to understand the method that brings us to this knowingness. We are employing this method the moment we repeat the word *buddho* — we know if it is fast, if it is slow, if it is deep, if it is shallow. Or, if we are practicing awareness of breathing, we know if the breath is coming in or going out, if it is shallow or deep, or if the in-breath is at its height or changing to become the out-breath. In each case, we speak about knowing the breath or knowing the *buddho*, and this kind of knowingness leads us to the knowingness of the *citta*. That's why this method works. It must work, and it works for everyone who practices it. And, of course, this *citta* never dies. It can never die because it has never been born. It has never arisen and it will never cease. This is why sometimes in our daily lives we have the feeling of being immortal. The *citta* is

immortal, but the things around it are not. The five *khandhas* that are associated with it are not immortal because they follow the law of impermanence (*anicca*). Each of them is *anicca*; it is born and it dies, it arises and it ceases.

The body is born and then it dies sooner or later depending on the law of *kamma*. Feelings are also *anicca*. They are constantly changing, now pleasant, now unpleasant, now neutral. So, feelings cannot be me or mine. If we want to consider ourselves immortal, we have to find the thing that doesn't change, the thing that really is immortal. Feeling, memory, thoughts and opinions are constantly changing; they cannot be me or mine and they cannot be immortal. Consciousness is also changing all the time, but it is more difficult for us to see because the moment consciousness disappears the world disappears. In fact, our *sati* has to be very keen, and we have to be extremely aware to see consciousness disappear. When we're sitting watching a film, it's very difficult to see the individual frames as they appear and disappear, and it's the same process with consciousness. Between one frame of consciousness and the next there is, in a manner of speaking, a frame of darkness where consciousness ceases to exist, but it comes back with the next frame. However, we draw a line between one frame of consciousness and the next, and label them as the past and the future. This is really all that's happening. So, consciousness is also *anicca*, and the Lord Buddha told us that whatever is *anicca* is not self (*anattā*). The five *khandhas* are not our true self, but what is? In fact, there is a true self, but there is no personality in it.

Our true being does not differ from that of the people around us, because we all have the same nature. You can use the analogy of a water drop, which has the nature of water. Individual beings are like water drops falling into the ocean. They are water drops as long as they are falling, and they can compare themselves with each other, thinking they are more beautiful, bigger or more powerful than the others. But the moment the drops reach the sea and disappear to become part of the ocean, they all have the same nature; the nature of water. Similarly, one true *citta* is the same as

all the others – it has no size, no individuality, no personality; it has nothing. Each true *citta* has just the same nature, water, so we cannot say that we exist or do not exist in this state. It's not wrong to speak of immortality as far as the true *citta* is concerned, but as long as we do not realise the truth of this for ourselves, we do not know. The thing that makes us go from one life to the next is *kamma*, and it is the *kilesas* and *avijjā* that create the *kamma* that keeps the cycle of rebirth going round. When you understand the mechanism, you can let go of it, and make an end of the rounds of rebirth.

The first thing that happens when we practice is that we get calm; we get into a state of one-pointedness. It's not difficult – we just have to put all of our effort and determination into it. When you know one-pointedness for yourself, you will have the assurance that what I am saying is true. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua says that it is a preview of *Nibbāna*, albeit that it is only a preview and not the real thing. The Lord Buddha said that we should see for ourselves; he didn't say that we should *think* for ourselves or *assume* for ourselves. There are infinite ways of understanding Buddhist texts, but they are just pointers to the truth and are not the truth itself. The moment you open your eyes and see, you will realise that the truth is just the way that the Lord Buddha described it, without any doubts. But you have to walk the path – you won't get there by sitting reading in your armchair. Other people might tell you that they have reached the truth, but you won't know if they are right or wrong unless you have realised it for yourself. Someone might say he has been to Rome, but you only know for certain that he has been there if you have been to Rome yourself.

On this path, you don't need a lot of cleverness, and you don't need praise from other people. It's all really very easy. The body plus the four mental *khandhas,* the five groups that make up what we think of as ourselves, are really just like five wheels constantly turning within themselves. They continue to turn, like the mechanism of a mechanical watch. We can open the watch and see them, see that they are just five rotating gears. The moment we

close the watch again, we see the face, the hands and the display of time from the past to the future. But the moment we understand that there are simply five gears, we can let go of them and all that comes with them. This is all that we have to understand.

So, the path of practice is to go into *upacāra samādhi*, into the world beyond thoughts, or into *appanā samādhi* where we see reality, the true nature of the *citta*. From then on, we practice investigation, starting with investigation of the body (and the six senses) inside and out, from top to bottom, until we understand its true nature. Then, having gone beyond greed and hate, we can let go of the body and begin investigating the other four (mental) *khandhas.* These consist mainly of thought and memory and association, which make up delusion. Once we understand delusion and how it is created, we will have removed two of the three main armies of *avijjā*, namely, the greed and hate rooted in the body and the delusion rooted mainly in thought and in memory and association. Only *avijjā* remains, and once that is gone we have finished our work. That's all – it's so simple.

Generosity, respect and gratitude

8th January 2010

When a great master like Than Ajahn Mahā Bua gave talks to the general public, he spoke 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. He 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 Ajahn 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 sometimes criticise the things they receive, though I don't understand why. They criticise this, and 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 carp. 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? There's a saying in English, "Don't look a gift-horse in the mouth." We've all heard it 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 cul-

tivated by people who want to practice the Dhamma. I often talk about the path of practice — *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* — but there are actually three prerequisites we need to cultivate 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 for donations. Giving up material possessions is much easier than letting go of our views, 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 about how the world, our partners or our families and friends ought to be, 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 con-

cerned with the kind of *kamma* we are creating for ourselves. If we are constantly criticising other people, we can't see the unwholesomeness in ourselves. This is why Than Ajahn Mahā Bua didn't allow *bhikkhus* to complain about each other; if that happened, he would kick out the one who had first complained. 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 criticise 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 won't be able to 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 bad 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. They see their parents as cows to be milked 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 Ajahn 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 during our formative years or our teachers later in life. 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 Ajahn 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 that 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, and 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 the 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 meditation 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 and the unwholesome ways of behaviour 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've made?" 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 we've been given. 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 Ajahn 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.[1] 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*

1 "Shedding tears in amazement with Dhamma." A Dhamma talk by Than Ajahn Mahā Bua given on the 2nd May 2002. Available on the Luangta website (www.luangta.eu) as a video with subtitles, or in the book, "Paying our last respects" (page 91).

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 twenty-four 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 was invited to give a meditation course in the USA, but the organisers of the course asked him not to 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*, however, so he mentioned *asubha* and body contemplation in many of the talks he gave. He could see that if discussing the loathsomeness of the body was discouraged, it must be something people needed to know about and investigate. He talked about things that people

don't want to hear but need to hear, and it seems that he was never invited to give another course. 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, pus, 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, we are afraid, and so on. 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*) – *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmī*, *Anāgāmī* 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 fifteen years to train this biological robot before we can use it properly, and then we have about thirty 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 routinely 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 can be places of utmost misery, and that's why we don't like going along. 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 to 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 myself am 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. And it's really

so simple to do; we just have to keep our 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 a specific object of investigation. When I first came to this monastery, I did nothing 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 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 they arise from there. 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* (awareness), and the Lord Buddha said that if we can go for seven days, twenty-four 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*.

Kamma – is there still free will?

21st June 2016

Someone asked me an interesting question recently about free will and how it interacts with the concept of *kamma* which has such a prominent place in the Thai Forest Tradition. There is free will, of course, since otherwise no-one would be able to break out of the cycle of birth and death. If there were no free will, we would only be able to increase our *kamma* or move it in another direction, but we would not be able to end the cycle of becoming which is driven by *kamma*.

One of the disciples of Ajahn Mun had very strong, solid *samādhi* and a lot of experience with *jhānas*, and he was able to observe that within one mind-moment there are seventeen instants at which "choices" can be made. Sixteen of them are determined by *kamma*, but one is completely free of *kamma* and allows us to choose to go in a new direction. Of course, if we are unable to "catch" these seventeen instants, we are most likely to follow the path determined by our strongest *kamma*. Please understand that we have to be aware of every moment and aware that we can choose one way or another or neither. The most important part of the Lord Buddha's teaching concerns this awareness (*sati*). If we are not aware of what is going on, we can only follow our *kamma*, increase it or change it from one lane to another; we can turn right or left if there's a path going right or left, but we cannot create a new path. With free will, however, we can decide not to go right or left but to walk straight on and create a new lane of *kamma*. *Sati* is the key; the Lord Buddha told us to always have *sati*, *sati*, *sati*, and Ajahn Mun stressed the same thing. *Sati* is the awareness of what is going on, not within the world but within ourselves. When we close our eyes in meditation, there may be feelings, thoughts or memories, and we need to be aware of them, seeing how they interact and how they build up the world that we call self. If we are really aware, we can observe how we constantly build up our self-view. In particular, we can notice how we repair it when some-

one says negative things about us or bolster it when someone says positive things. After negative comments, we repair the damaged wall of the castle of self-view, and after positive comments we add another tower to the castle to make it more impressive.

Sati is crucial. It's also an important part of the fourth noble truth, the path that leads to the end of *dukkha*. To make progress on the path, we need to develop *samādhi*, and with *samādhi* comes *sati*. For instance, when we meditate on a meditation object such as the breath, at first we are aware only of the breath going in or coming out, and we feel the breath as it does this. Later, when the mind gets calm and there is no more thinking, we find ourselves moving slowly into the heart. It's usually said that the concentration drops into the heart (*citta*), but that's not really what happens. Actually, the concentration stays at the tip of the nose, but we suddenly feel our *sati*, the knowingness of the breath, coming out of the heart. We get so calm, so concentrated that we feel that concentration and *sati* have parted company and that *sati* has gone back to where it came from. This is how we follow the track of the ox: the track is the breath and it leads us to the ox, the heart. This is the way we get to our heart; please understand this. So in the second phase of *samādhi* there will be two things: the point of concentration on the breath at the nose and the knowingness that comes from the heart. In the last phase of *samādhi*, everything drops into the heart. We just have to follow the *sati*, the knowingness that comes from the heart, and become one with this knowingness. At that moment the whole world disappears. It has to disappear because we are one-pointed; there is no longer a subject and object because they have merged into one thing, into the knowingness which is the true nature of the *citta*. We can call this knowingness a preview of *Nibbāna*. It can also be called our true essence. We can reach it for a while, although the moment we come out again we find that the world is unchanged. We know, however, that we have been in a very special place, and most of us want to go back there immediately.

It's important to be clear about *kamma* and free will. At the time of the Lord Buddha the dominant religion was an early form of Hinduism which had a caste system and saw *kamma* as unchangeable. However, the Lord Buddha denied this view of *kamma* since, if it were true, there would be no way out of the cycle of birth and death. He realised that without free will we would be unable to alter our *kamma*, unable to change lanes whenever we like or create new paths. The ability to do this is the only hope we have of becoming free. At any particular moment there is *kamma*, but we can decide how to deal with it. We can make a decision, and this relates to the knowingness. We can call this ability free will; we can decide to go this or that way, or in neither direction, and so we can control our *kamma*. Normally, everyone is controlled by their *kamma* unless they fight for their freedom, and free will is part of that freedom. In the end, an *Arahant* is a free person able to do whatever he wants. He can follow this or follow that, and the results of his past *kamma* still come to fruition, but there is no reaction in his heart. He neither likes the results nor dislikes them. Our problem is that we either like or dislike *kamma* from the past when we receive it, and new *kamma* is made depending on our reaction to it. For instance, if we are cold, we react negatively and look for a blanket or a coat to put on or for a way to make a fire. An *Arahant* does not react like that because he is free. If he is living in the forest and it is cold, but there is no fire or firewood, he will just accept the situation. If there is firewood he can light a fire to make a hot drink, but not to warm himself as *bhikkhus* are forbidden by their monastic rules (*Vinaya*) to do that. The whole purpose of training as a *bhikkhu* is to learn to be content with the way things are. People in the world are not content, of course; they are not happy when it rains for seven days or when it is too cold or too hot, but *bhikkhus* have to learn to accept whatever situation they are in. They have to learn not to view things as either good or bad but rather to distance themselves from them. It's good for laypeople to train themselves in this way too, to be content and see that whatever happens is *anattā* — not me, not mine and not my self. The body, feelings, memories and associations, thoughts and

consciousness are all not me, not mine and not my self. They are just phenomena that arise, stay for a moment, change and then disappear. They have nothing to do with us; we just observe these things. As a *bhikkhu* or a lay practitioner, you have to realise that you have no control over these things and learn to be content with whatever comes along. This is our training – contentment and peacefulness. We should aim to live with whatever is given and with the situation as it is, without asking other people for things or trying to make changes. Some people find the training tough, both *bhikkhus* and the laypeople who live in monasteries. Some can bear the conditions for two or three days, others for a few weeks. Some say that they like life in the monastery and want to come back, but they never do, probably because they found the training too harsh.

So, *sati* is the most important thing. It is the only way we can free ourselves, by being aware of this very moment and seeing what is happening. We need to be aware that there is a sensation, that one of the senses has been triggered, whether hearing, seeing, smelling, touching or tasting. In our practice, we try to follow up the sensation to observe what happens next. For instance, if we are really aware, really concentrated, we can see that each thought has a little feeling attached to it. This feeling can be positive, negative or neutral. As we continue to observe, we see that the feeling attached to the thought triggers another feeling or a memory depending on the situation. The memory that it triggers also has a feeling attached to it, and this adds to the previous feeling. Then another memory brings another feeling, which adds to the growing "snowball" or avalanche of feeling. In the blink of an eye there are several thousand mind-moments and with each moment this avalanche can build up, so within no time we find that a really strong emotion has come up. We all know, for example, the emotion that arises if a person we dislike comes around the corner. We don't even have to have a conscious thought about it, do we? Whoops – it just comes up as if out of nowhere. This is why I say that emotion is not something real. It's just like candy floss; you heat up a little

bit of sugar and add some air, and it inflates into fine insubstantial floss. This is what happens with emotions — they blow up out of all proportion and are not real. This is why I ask you to get down to what is real in your practice. When you start to experience an emotion (fear or hatred, for instance) roll back the avalanche, seeing what came before, and what came before that, and what came before that, until you come to the source. This kind of avalanche starts with dropping a stone into the snow, or in our case the first sense input. As it falls, it picks up more and more snow. Similarly, each thought, each memory, each feeling adds up, rolling and rolling. Given the number of mind-moments in the blink of an eye, you can imagine how fast the process is, and how acute and keen your *sati* has to be to catch what is going on. We have to train *sati* to be up to the speed of light to catch these things as they happen, and once we can do that, we can stop the process anytime.

None of this is written in any book, but in my own practice I observed what was going on and saw how all of these things are created. However, your *sati* has to be up to speed; otherwise you won't be able to understand. You'll continue to think that emotions like greed or hatred are natural, but they are not. If they were natural, the Lord Buddha would have said so, and would have pointed out that there was a sixth *khandha* called fear or greed or hate. In fact, he said there are only five *khandhas*: body, feeling (bodily or mental; pleasant, unpleasant or neutral), memory and association, thought and consciousness. The *kilesas*, which consist of greed, hatred and delusion, use the *khandhas* as their tools. When we mix together these five *khandhas*, we get everything that exists in the world. We can have some inkling of how this works by considering a computer. A computer's operations are based on two information states, two *khandhas*, namely, 0 and 1. Look at the amazing things computers can do using just these two *khandhas*; they can play music, act as work-stations, show films and do a plethora of other complicated tasks, even though there are only two *khandhas* operating. Imagine what can be done with five *khandhas* if they are combined together properly. Our five

khandhas have created the world that we see, the world that we all live in.

Our task is to understand what is real and what is not. We have to accomplish this if we are to free ourselves from the cycle of birth and death, from the roller-coaster of ups and downs that we find ourselves on. This is why the Lord Buddha appeared and told us, "Dear friends, there is a way out, a way to be free from *dukkha*, to stop the wheel of *saṁsāra*, the endless round of birth and death." The way of escape involves the development of *sīla* (morality) as a first step, then *samādhi* and *sati*, and then *paññā* (wisdom). Wisdom involves observing everything that is not me and not mine. If things were us, we would not be able to observe them. That is why we can't observe the *citta*; we can't observe something that is us, the one who knows, the one who observes all these things. *Samādhi* leads us to this knowingness, and when you fall into one-pointedness, into the knowingness, you experience a preview of *Nibbāna*. That is the reason for practicing *samādhi* — to get a preview of *Nibbāna*. We simply have to concentrate long enough until we get one-pointed, until subject and object merge into one point. This is where we experience what Ajahn Mahā Bua called "the *Nibbāna* of the little man", the preview of *Nibbāna*. Of course, a preview is not the real thing, and the moment we come out of *samādhi* the world is just as it was before. Nothing has changed except for one thing: we are sure of what we have experienced. Buddhist practice is based on experiencing, observing and understanding, but not in the way that we usually understand. We understood things in school or at university, but the understanding that comes from meditation practice is quite different. It comes from observing what is going on. The Lord Buddha's advice was to begin by observing the breath at the tip of the nose. When there are no more thoughts, you will reach a state of calm and, as you go deeper, it will become quieter and more peaceful and then utterly still and finally you will drop into one-pointedness. This was how he described it, but he also made clear that the practice should then continue with the development of wisdom.

Developing wisdom involves investigating the five *khandhas*, and we start with the body. What is this body we identify with so much? What are these bodily or mental feelings we so cherish? We need to investigate them until we understand their true nature; when that has been achieved, birth and death are at an end. It's that simple. When we have removed the greed and hate that are rooted in the body, we will never be reborn into the world; we will have attained the state of *Anāgāmī*. However, at this point only half of our work has been completed because we have investigated only the first *khandha* (the body) and a little of the second (bodily feeling). The rest of the work concerns the mental (*nāma*) *khandhas*. We have eliminated greed and hate that are rooted in the body, but now we need to investigate delusion (*moha*), which is rooted in two *khandhas*, memory and thought. They are so intertwined that they seem like the Gordian knot, and it is extremely difficult to rip them apart to see each *khandha* for itself and to see how they interact and create the delusion or illusion that we live in. Investigating them thoroughly takes a long time. Ajahn Mahā Bua's practice is a good example, and he often spoke about it. Early in his practice, he became stuck in *samādhi* for five years, but then he started investigating the body and completed the task in eight months. However, investigating the two *khandhas* of memory and thought to overcome delusion took him a further two and a half years. And even then his work was not finished. He still had to confront the master, *avijjā* itself, the master of ignorance, the master of wanting to know and understand but not being able to. *Avijjā* is the master that maintains the whole universe — *avijjā paccaya sankhāra* (*avijjā* is the condition for all phenomena to arise) — and investigating it took Ajahn Mahā Bua another three months. It took three full months to get down to the source, the very focal point of fundamental ignorance, as some of his talks describe.[1]

1 Ajahn Mahā Bua's talks describing his practice have all been transcribed into English and German, and are on the Luangta website (www.luangta.eu).

The ability to practice successfully depends on being able to observe using the power of *sati*. Wisdom involves knowing which questions to ask and devising tricks to overcome the *kilesas*, and for this *sati* is crucial. You can think of practice as going into a dark cellar with lots of different paths; *sati* is the torchlight – the brighter the light, the clearer we see. Wisdom is the ability to select the correct path to get to the centre. But without the strong bright light of *sati*, we will not be able to see the path. In our lives we usually go round and round and round in circles as if on a roundabout or on a roller-coaster going up and down. In fact, when you look at a roller-coaster, it has no starting point and no endpoint; it goes round and round and up and down, and it's a good metaphor for spiritual development. There is no spiritual development that only goes up. If it advances, it can retreat again, and whether you progress or regress is entirely in your own hands. If you develop yourself spiritually in this life but simply enjoy the fruits of your spiritual development in the next, you will decline spiritually. We have the choice whether to progress or decline. If we are clear about our present situation, and we are free of greed or aversion in this moment, we have the opportunity to choose what is best for us. However, if there is even a little greed or aversion involved, we most likely make the wrong decision.

If we are attached to the body, we are usually disinclined to do body contemplation, even though it's a practice we ought to do. We love the body, and even if it is old we dream about the body we had when we were younger, going back into memory to create the illusion that our body is always young. The *citta* is always young, of course; it doesn't know any age, but the body begins to feel old, so people retreat into their memories. Old people love playing with memory, looking at photo albums all day, creating the opportunity to be born again, trying to forget the feelings they have in the present. But we have to understand what old age is. The first noble truth is the *dukkha* that comes with birth, old age, sickness and death. Think about how we handle a situation when we are ill. We think, "I am sick" or "I am dying", but in a few days

once the sickness has passed the thoughts of sickness and death are all forgotten. This is how we fool ourselves all the time. We don't want to accept the reality of being sick, and we don't want to accept the reality of being old.

Actually, when I come back to visit Germany and look at some of my audiences, I get the feeling that I am spiritual director of an old-folks home! Most of us here are old, but we have to realise what old age is, and reflect that we will have to go through old age in the next life and the next and the next. Each time you are reborn, you go through birth, old age, sickness and death, and birth and death are extremely painful. Birth involves being squeezed through a narrow tube and is traumatic for a short time, and death is also painful and often more long-lasting. Most people are not particularly afraid of going to another realm of existence (unless they know they are destined for hell), but they are really afraid of the pain of death, particularly if it lasts a long time and is combined with sickness. At death, all the elements that have come together are ripped apart. In meditation practice during the investigation of *dukkha-vedanā (*painful feelings), we can go through the three stages of death and free ourselves from the fear of death. Thereafter, when the moment of death actually comes, we can decide for ourselves where we would like to go. We have paths to choose from, the paths opened up by the *kamma* we have created, and can decide which we would like to take. Normally, at the moment of death, we are driven by pain and are looking for a way out of it, so we take the first exit that comes our way, and this is the exit associated with our strongest *kamma*. Everyone takes the first exit, except for the person who understands what pain is; that person has the freedom to choose, to look at all the possible exits and choose the most appropriate one. This is why we have to investigate painful feelings, so that at the moment of death we are able to decide where to go. Under normal circumstances, we cannot be sure which realm of existence we will go to next. Even if we made lots of good *kamma* in the last ten years, the memory of an unwholesome deed that we committed fifty years ago can come up and drive us to take the first exit.

Please understand the importance of using wisdom in your meditation practice to develop understanding of *dukkha*, of old age, sickness and death, and of pain. Investigate *dukkha-vedanā* so that at the moment of death you are free to choose which way to go. If you don't understand what pain really is, you are not free, and you will just take the first exit, normally the path of your strongest *kamma*. It's similar to life, actually; we usually go the path of our strongest *kamma*, though some of us (including those gathered here today) can decide in a mid-life crisis or a late-life crisis to go another path. In fact, we have these choices around us all the time but most of the time, driven by our strongest or fastest *kamma*, we miss the proper exits. So, now that you know the dangers and are aware of helpful methods of overcoming them, please strive to have *sati* even during the most intense pain. You have to strive to understand pain and what its nature really is. Once you understand pain, you need not be afraid of it and will not be driven by intense pain to take the nearest exit. You will have developed the ability to choose any exit at the moment of death. Please take this to heart.

Sati is the key to practice

An overview of several Dhamma talks 2009–16

Sati (awareness) is the key to practice, and it is the only short-cut given in the Buddhist scriptures. In the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Lord Buddha says that anyone who maintains *sati* for seven days and seven nights, 24 hours a day, can expect one of two fruits: final knowledge (*Arahantship*) here and now or the attainment of *Anāgāmī*. If *sati* is less strong, it might take seven months or seven years, or for most of us seven or seventy lifetimes because we have *sati* only once in a while. Progress depends on the strength of *sati*. But the *kilesas* are lazy; they don't want to practice. They want to live in a dream world and, even when we think we are doing walking or sitting meditation, our minds can be off in a dream much of the time. The *kilesas* love it when this happens, but it has nothing to do with *sati*. *Sati* is pure awareness in which there is no judgement, no association, no thought and no labelling of things as good or bad; there is just knowingness, whether of the body, feelings, memories or thoughts.

Than Ajahn Mahā Bua was once travelling in a car, and he saw a man at the centre of a busy intersection picking up things that had fallen from his truck. There were cans and bottles scattered all over the place, and he had parked his truck right in the middle of the crossing, quite unconcerned as he retrieved the fallen objects, oblivious to the cars trying to avoid him and the traffic becoming snarled up. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua recognised the situation as a good illustration of the lack of *sati.* If the heart (*citta*) does not have *sati* to govern it, it is like a person who is thoughtless or even crazy. This is the reason I use the word *sati* in preference to the word mindfulness. That truck driver may have been mindful when picking up all the fallen objects, but he certainly had no *sati*, no awareness of what was going on around him, even though an accident could have happened at any time. He was concerned only with what he himself was doing at that moment, unaware of everything else going on.

Sati has an objective quality, and it lets us see what is happening. It's not the same as seeing a tree and deciding whether we like it or not – that's not *sati*. When we have *sati*, we see colour and form, and know that they are matched within the brain to a certain kind of object, whether a leaf, flower, tree or person. The eye, ears and other senses only receive sense inputs, but the mind identifies and knows them. It seems to do this instantly, but what really happens is that *viññāṇa* (consciousness) has identified a sense impression which is then processed and recognised, after being matched with sample data stored in *saññā* (memory and association). This is a sequential process, similar to what happens in a very fast computer. *Sati* is knowing that this is happening. If we don't have *sati* at this level, we are really just robots controlled by an internal program that runs on and on and on. In our case, the program is conditioning, and it can be very difficult to go against it because we don't want to escape our conditioning. Why do you think the Lord Buddha described *Nibbāna* as the unconditioned? If we can't remove the conditioning in our hearts, we are no more than robots acting out a program. We have to remove the "if–then" condition: if I see, hear, taste, smell or touch something then I get greedy or lustful, or if I don't see something then I get angry, and so on. It's all conditioning, and we won't be able to see this fully unless we develop *sati*.

We need *samādhi* to train *sati*, and *samādhi* means focusing attention on just one point, on a meditation object (*parikamma*) such as the breath at the tip of the nose or the mental repetition of the word *buddho*. We need to be clearly aware that the breath is long or short, deep or shallow, or that the *buddho* is fast or slow, clear or unclear. This training develops *sati*; our concentration is on the *buddho* or the breath, but the sharp, clear awareness of the meditation object is the thing that develops *sati*. We should aim to know everything about the meditation object and not let go of it, until thoughts quieten down and disappear. This is all hard work, of course, and most of us don't want to do it. It is much easier to live in a world of fantasy, of idle dreams, wondering about the state

of our meditation practice or whether we will become enlightened this year or the next. Such dreams are useless.

We need to concentrate on one point until *sati* goes back to the heart. This is the level of *sati* that we must have to advance in our practice. It's not the same as mindfulness, which is related to our "mind" being "full" of one thing at one time without knowing anything else. Of course, initially we are aware only of the meditation object, whether the breath or the *buddho*, but then our awareness widens to knowing that there is a thought, a feeling or a memory. When that happens, we are aware of these things, and we can bring the concentration back to the meditation object. The crucial thing is that we *know* — that's the point. We know what is going on. In time, thoughts, feelings or memories don't bother us; they pass by like clouds, though we still know them. This knowingness is a function of the *citta*, and it's what we have to develop. Without it, we are blinded by whatever comes in through the senses and by thoughts that arise. If we hear a dog barking, for instance, it can stay in our minds for hours, but if *sati* is present we simply know there is a barking dog and go back to the *buddho* or the breath. When *sati* goes back to the heart in *upacāra samādhi*, it's an amazing experience, even though no-one is taking hold of it. There is no-one to say, "I'm having this wonderful experience" or "This experience is marvellous or awesome." It's simply a pure experience, for there are no *kilesas* to take hold of it or comment upon it. Normally, the *kilesas* are like fog obscuring our ability to see clearly, but once they are gone we can see things as they are. *Sati* is the clear view that just sees whatever is there without attaching to, commenting on or colouring it.

Upacāra samādhi, the world beyond thought, is amazing in itself. It's a safe haven where we feel relieved, relaxed and energised. If we have been there long enough, we realise the extent to which thoughts, and particularly memories, stir up all our troubles, fears and doubts. Without thoughts, there are no worries, fears or doubts, and no loneliness or sadness. Actually, it's astonishing that thoughts can create all these things that trouble us so much

and cause us such pain. When we have been in *upacāra samādhi* for a while, when thoughts have quietened down, we feel that we're in a safe house where nothing can bother us, even though we still experience the world. We experience phenomena, we see inner images or hear inner sounds as they come and go, but we know we are safe. The moment we come out of *upacāra samādhi,* the engine of thought starts up again, and all the troubles return. This is why people want to go back into *upacāra samādhi* again and again — it's so calm, quiet and peaceful. Once in *upacāra samādhi*, if we continue to keep hold of the meditation object, we will find that everything converges to one point. This is *appanā samādhi*, and it is the first wonder of meditation. When everything converges, the object and the observer become one point. That point is just knowingness; that's all we can say — clear unobscured knowingness. When we come out, all we can say is that we have been recharged, that we have not been asleep and that we just "knew". When the *citta* converges to one point, the five *khandhas* disappear; they are put aside or excluded for a while and have no impact on the *citta*. The body disappears and feeling disappears; you can sit or stand in the same position for six or eight hours without moving a muscle. This experience tells us that the *citta* and the five *khandhas* are not the same, for the *citta* is the one thing that does not disappear. Everything else just vanishes; the whole universe falls apart, becomes dust and disappears, though it returns when we come out of *appanā samādhi*. It's similar to the experience of a deep dreamless sleep when we are unaware of what is going on. In deep *samādhi*, however, we wouldn't feel anything even if the body was carried off somewhere or chopped into pieces. We would only know what had happened to the body when we came out of *appanā samādhi*. It's similar to leaving your car to take a walk through the woods. If thieves came and smashed your car, you would only notice the damage when you returned.

Are you beginning to get some inkling of the relationship between *samādhi* and *sati*? Training in *samādhi* develops and nurtures *sati*, because *sati* is none other than the knowingness that we

discover when everything else has dropped away. That knowingness is there all the time; it has always been there and will never disappear, and it is the only true home we really have. Everything else is fake, like the hairpieces, spectacles or false teeth that we attach to our bodies. These items make us appear to be something we are not, just as wearing a white coat makes us look like a doctor, or driving a Mercedes makes us look rich. It's stupid, isn't it? These are all external things and they change, but the *citta* does not change. The external things make up what we call the threefold universe,[1] and they are constantly changing from one state to another. We know that our present universe has arisen and will cease, and that we ourselves have been born and will die, though we don't like to think about it. The only thing that does not change and is eternal is the *citta*.

Once we have trained ourselves to have *sati*, we can get down to work, the work of observing and overcoming our attachment to the five *khandhas* we think of as ourselves. What we think of as I, mine or self is nothing more than a very clever combination of the five *khandhas*. Taking the example of the computer, it has only two states, off and on or 0 and 1. Yet it is amazing what computers can do — word-processing, video-editing, playing music or showing films. Now, imagine what can be done with five states, and you can see the reason for all the different personalities in the human realm, which is only one of the thirty-one realms of existence; most beings inhabit the animal, ghost or hell realms, while heavenly realms contain many beings and the human realm relatively few. Whenever you think of yourself at a particular moment, try to see which of the five *khandhas* is involved; if there is strength or sickness, that's the body; if there is sadness, that's feeling; if there is planning for the future, that's discursive thought, and so on. All our experiences fit into one of these five categories, and they

1 In Buddhism, there are thirty-one realms of existence, and these can be classified into three great divisions *(tridhatu)*: the realms of sensual desire, the realms of form or matter, and the realms of formlessness.

make up what we usually think of as our self. Can you grasp this? Do you get it? We all know that the workings of a computer are an illusion, albeit a useful one, but the same is true of the constantly changing five *khandhas* of body, feeling, memory and association, thought and consciousness. Their combination produces that thing we call I or self, and if we look back twenty years we can see how our personalities or roles have changed over that time. As Shakespeare says, "All the world's a stage…and one man in his time plays many parts", and all because of the *khandhas* working in combination.

Without *sati*, we are groping aimlessly in the dark. *Sati* is the shining light that reveals what is actually there, without any kind of judgement. It tells us there is a feeling, thought or memory, but it doesn't see the body or the other *khandhas* as good or bad; *sati* just sees them as they are. So, why is it so difficult to train *sati*? Did we come into this world as robots, as human beings acting just like robots? It's vital that we examine our conditioning and go against it, though it seems to me that very few people, particularly young people, are interested in taking up the challenge. Even in this monastery, I see people going through the motions, doing things without reflection. A true human being is able to reflect on his actions and their outcome, but people seem to lack this ability. That's why I encourage my students to undertake daily reflection, to recollect each evening what they have done during the day, so they can be aware of what they are doing and why. This practice can help to develop the kind of awareness needed to progress in meditation. This kind of introspection or reflection is new to most people, however, so they either find it too difficult or forget to do it at all. But it's important. The point of evening reflection is not to tell ourselves that we have been good or bad, but to see our actions by body, speech or mind and realise their effects. Daily reflection is part of the training in *sati*, and is the starting point for the development of wisdom.

The more we know what we are doing and why, the more we come to see that our actions are caused by greed, hatred and delu-

sion. Behind these lies *dukkha* – the first noble truth. We need to be able to see *dukkha* if we are to find a way out of *dukkha*. We don't want the moments of restlessness or boredom, so we paint them over with things we enjoy, like drinking a cup of tea, smoking a cigarette or going for a walk. Moments of *dukkha* are instantly covered up by the *kilesas*, for they don't want to see or understand *dukkha*, just as they don't want to see the true nature, the loathsomeness, of the body. The *kilesas* don't want to see the truth; they want to have fun. When we remember our lives, we mostly remember the fun parts, don't we? That's why most people don't think they have *dukkha* and don't see the point of meditation practice. If we think like this, we have fallen for the *kilesas* again, just as we've fallen for them for innumerable lifetimes. You shouldn't underestimate the power and cleverness of the *kilesas*. If you see red, they paint it white, and it happens in a flash. Whatever our experiences, the *kilesas* paint them over so we cannot discover the truth, just as they make us love the body by focussing only on the skin and not the disgusting things inside. In fact, the *kilesas* would be completely satisfied if bodies consisted only of skin filled with air like a balloon; all they want to see are the forms, the externals to which they are so attached. They don't want to see blood, pus, grease, faeces and urine, do they?

The truth is that we have *dukkha* all the time, but it is painted over by the *kilesas* which divert our attention, just like a magician performing a trick. Without *sati*, without determination, without overcoming our laziness, we will never, ever come to know the tricks of the magician, and we will continue to fall for them time after time. Imagine being at a circus watching a great magician; we fall for his illusions because we are too lazy to get up and look behind the stage or because, even if we have the determination to go behind the stage, we become distracted by another of his tricks. Please don't underestimate the power of the *kilesas*. In most people, the power of the Dhamma is very weak. Though it is hidden in our heart and sometimes shows up, most of the time the *kilesas* are in the driving seat, telling us what to do, how to think and how

to react. When *bhikkhus* ordain, their *kilesas* don't ordain, so at first we have to train them to be "good" *kilesas*, though it can be hard work. For example, when we see stinginess in ourselves, we can turn it into generosity, or when we see greed or hate, we can turn them into renunciation or *mettā* rather than falling for them. Again, we can purposely do the things we don't like doing, such as fasting, and refrain from doing the things we like to do, such as talking. The Dhamma has to be strong to cope with that, of course, but it does really confuse the *kilesas*. The *kilesas* maintain their stronghold by liking this or disliking that, wanting this or not wanting that. But the moment you do the opposite of what they tell you, the *kilesas* have lost their authority and don't know how to control you any more. They can only be undermined or confused for a while though, for they are experts at finding a way round, a new way of which you were previously unaware.

This is because the *kilesas* are us; they are what we are. The have been with us since the beginning, and they know everything we know. Whatever we learn, they learn as well, including our tricks against them. This means that we have to come up with new ways to fool them time after time. You have to understand the kind of enemy you face. The *kilesas* that fool us into thinking, "This is me, this is mine, this is myself", have been with us for billions of lives, and they have become extremely skilled. But we have the Dhamma, and the *kilesas* cannot match the Dhamma. The more we develop the Dhamma of virtue, of morality, of generosity, respect and gratitude, the less opportunity the *kilesas* have of giving us a beating. When we develop the power of *sati*, the power of awareness, the *kilesas* have no weapons that can withstand it. Developing *paññā*, which includes doing daily reflection, is a way of undermining or cutting off the *kilesas*, but without the light of *sati* to see what is going on *paññā* cannot work. Wisdom cannot work in the dark; without the sharp light of *sati*, it will remain at the level of guesswork or speculation, and it will not be able to cut down the *kilesas*.

So, please understand how important *sati* really is. When a dog barks, we usually think, "A dog has barked", and memories and associations instantly come into play. When that happens the *kilesas* have drawn us away from our meditation object and interrupted our concentration. Instead, with *sati*, we are aware of just the sound, whatever sound it is. Without this level of *sati*, *paññā* cannot get to work, so we have to develop it to the point where we can keep with the meditation object for at least ten minutes without being drawn away by the *kilesas* into thoughts, memories or feelings. Sometimes, as we get more and more concentrated, thoughts diminish and calmness increases, and *sati* can be lost at that point. This happens because, after concentrating on and knowing the breath or the *buddho*, we jump to the feeling of calm and stay with it. After a short while, however, the calm diminishes, for our *sati* has stopped working. This happens because we have forgotten that calm is the by-product of developing *sati* through concentration. If we just stay with the feeling of calm without knowing the breath or the *buddho*, *sati* will not develop. I'll give you an analogy. Our work is to stay with the *buddho* or the breath, and this practice can be compared to digging a hole. As long as we dig at the same place, the hole gets deeper, and in the context of meditation this means that the calm, peace or happiness that arises gets more intense. If we keep on digging, these feelings will increase, but instead, because they are pleasant feelings, we jump onto them and forget to do the work of digging. This is a common problem, and we have to overcome it by being aware that our attention is switching to the pleasant feelings. The moment we are aware that this is happening, we must switch back to the *buddho* or the breath and try to increase our interest in observing them. The switch happened because we were more interested in the pleasant side effects. So, the solution is to be interested only in our meditation object and not the results or side effects of our meditation.

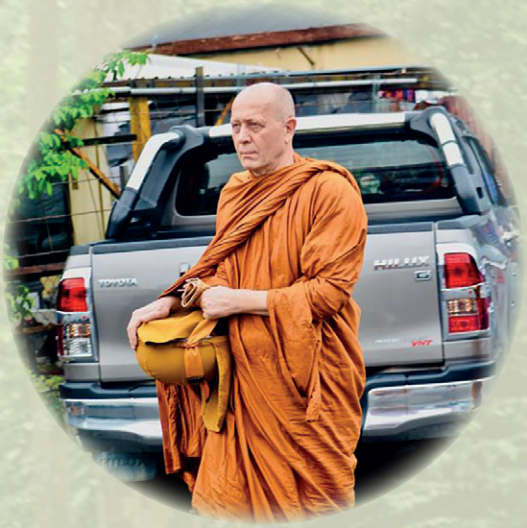
We need *sati* to fight the *kilesas*, and they are extremely powerful — the best magicians in the world. We need *sati* to recognise

the *dukkha* that is always present; the moments of *dukkha* that we experience every day are uncountable, but we usually don't notice them. How can we get wiser if we don't recognise that there is *dukkha*? If we don't see it, we can't investigate it, and if we don't investigate it, we can't gain wisdom. *Sati* is crucial, and we can only develop it in *samādhi* practice, by staying with our meditation object and developing the knowingness that comes from the heart. Sooner or later, *sati* will lead us to the heart; it will reveal how, in the stillness of *samādhi*, something starts to "ripple" as the *kilesas* try to get into motion. If we are really aware, we can see the *kilesas* trying to get out, but if the Dhamma is powerful at that moment, it can keep them at bay. Over time, the more practice we do, the calmer we get and the stiller the heart becomes. Then, when the *kilesas* have died down completely, we reach the stage of *upacāra samādhi* or *appanā samādhi*. It's when we come out of *appanā samādhi* that we see the power of *sati*, for then it is full-blown. It has enormous power at that point, and no *kilesas* can stand up to the power of *sati* combined with *paññā*.

Sati is like a torch-light that shines in a dark cellar and reveals what is hidden there. Wherever we shine the torch, we see, and the *kilesas* can only work in the dark. Wherever the light shines, the *kilesas* have to hide, and that's why Than Ajahn Mahā Bua says that when there is a moment of *sati* there are no *kilesas*. And when there are no *kilesas*, there is no intention, and intention is the thing that creates *kamma*. So, *sati* can help us steer clear of making unwholesome *kamma*. If we have developed *sati* to the full, we can have *sati* at the point of death. This can bring great joy because we can decide where the *citta* goes next. Because of *kamma*, we have many possible paths at death, and if *sati* has been fully developed we can choose to take the most wholesome path. For example, if you want to continue with meditation practice and if your *kamma* allows it, you can choose to become a human being again, or if you want to rest, you can go to the *deva* realms. If one of the paths is leading to hell, you don't have to go and can follow other paths instead. This is the freedom that we gain from developing

sati, *samādhi* and *paññā* and using them for investigation, specifically the investigation of pain, but it takes a lot of determination. That's why I invite you to put effort into developing *sati*. From the moment you wake up, have nothing else in mind but the meditation object, the breath or the *buddho*, whether sitting, walking or lying down. Do this until concentration and *sati* separate out; you will feel them "snap" as *sati* goes to the heart. You have to understand that concentration and *sati* are two different things, and that *sati* is the faculty that has to be nurtured and developed to the full through the practice of concentration.

Dukkha is a very profound teaching



30th October 2009

The teachings of the Lord Buddha are utterly profound. It's hard for us to grasp just how profound they are. When we come across them, we hear only what we know and understand based on our experiences in the worldly realm. Take the first noble truth — that *dukkha* exists. It's such a simple statement that we think we understand it, but the truth of *dukkha* is far more profound than we imagine.

What does it mean to say that *dukkha* exists? It means that there is restlessness, dis-ease, uncomfortable feelings, pain and suffering in our lives. The people who tell me that they don't have *dukkha* are thinking in terms of outright suffering and pain, but *dukkha* encompasses all kinds of discomfort and dis-ease, and all of us experience it. If we could just understand, at a deep level, the first and second noble truths — the existence of *dukkha* and its origin — there would be nothing blocking our path to the attainment of *Sotāpanna*. The reason that we don't progress in practice is that we don't want to see *dukkha* and its origin. Instead, we try to eliminate *dukkha* from our lives, to hide it out of sight. We spend our lives running after pleasant things, not realising that we are trying to get away from the *dukkha* that is present every moment. In an ordinary day, everything we do is because of *dukkha*; if we were truly content, there would be no need to change things, no need to do anything. We don't recognise this because it has become natural for us to be driven by *dukkha* — we think it's how things should be. Hunger is *dukkha* and we try to eliminate it by eating to create a feeling of fullness, and an itch is *dukkha* and we scratch because of it. We don't usually think of these things as *dukkha*, but they are *dukkha* all the same. If we really, deeply understood *dukkha* and its origin, we would understand the teachings of the Lord Buddha completely.

The origin of *dukkha* is *taṇhā*, sometimes translated as wanting or desire. It's the desire to be or not to be, to become or not to

become, to have or not to have. When we experience *dukkha*, we find things to do to evade it – eat food, drink alcohol, commit suicide, scratch or fall asleep. These are all ways of avoiding *dukkha*. Every movement of the body, every action we take, every thought we think and every memory we bring up is caused by the *dukkha* that pervades our lives. Can you sense how profound this teaching is? People spend their lives running after soap bubbles that they call *sukha* or pleasant feelings, the opposite of *dukkha*. But the moment they come close, the bubble bursts, and they go running after another and another, like excited children running from one soap bubble to the next. People don't even realise that they are running because of *dukkha*. They think only of the fun involved in running from one soap bubble to the next. This is because, inherently, they don't want to see *dukkha*; they want to evade it or eliminate it, even to the extent of becoming addicted to alcohol or heroin.

In a sense, *samādhi* meditation can be seen as a way of avoiding *dukkha*. In *upacāra samādhi*, when there is calm and the *kilesas* are gone for a while, there is no *dukkha*, and as long as we are in *samādhi* we do not create any bad *kamma*. However, just being in *upacāra samādhi* does not remove *dukkha*, for it is just waiting to hit us when we come out. This is why people want to go back into *upacāra samādhi* again and again. In the West, the teaching of Buddhist meditation focuses on *samādhi* practice, but this can be just another way of fleeing from *dukkha*. I'm not saying that it isn't worth doing – finding calm and developing concentration are necessary first steps on the path – but *samādhi* practice doesn't remove the *kilesas* or lead us to the understanding of *dukkha*.

The way to get free from *dukkha* is to face it, but this is difficult for most people as *dukkha* is much more than just pain and suffering; it's the experience that drives us to do everything. We change posture because of discomfort, which is an unpleasant state of mind; we fall asleep because of drowsiness, which is an unpleasant state of mind; we eat and drink because hunger and thirst are

unpleasant states of mind, and so on. The body doesn't care if it's hungry or thirsty — it doesn't even know. A car doesn't know that it has run out of petrol, does it? It's the driver who knows, because he has looked at the meter. From the moment of birth, we have eaten things when we are hungry, without realising that the process is driven by *dukkha*. So, the path of practice is to look *dukkha* in the face and investigate it, to completely understand the profound teaching that *dukkha* exists and that it has a cause — craving or *taṇhā*, the desire to be or not to be, to have or not to have, to obtain *sukha* or get rid of *dukkha*. We want the world and the people in it to be other than they are, and this is the kind of wanting that creates *dukkha*. By running away from *dukkha* we create new *dukkha* — it's a vicious circle, and we really have to do something to stop it, otherwise we will continue to be reborn again and again to face more *dukkha*. Think about this: each of us has a mountain of *kamma* to experience. How many aeons of rain would it take to wash away this mountain? If we don't want to see the mountain, or don't care about it, will we ever find the way out of *dukkha*? No, because *avijjā* doesn't want us to see, and doesn't want us to care. So, we have to face *dukkha*, and that means being aware of everything that happens to us, from the moment we open our eyes to the moment we close them again, to see the *dukkha* constantly arising. You have to investigate what is driving you to act, to scratch, to move or to eat, and whether a feeling, thought, emotion or memory is involved.

Looking carefully at ourselves, we can see that we are running programs like a computer. We think that someone or something has programmed them into us — our parents, our biology or a divine creator. But actually the programmer is right in front of our eyes — it's us. We have programmed our reactions, and once the programs are working nicely we don't even question them; we just scratch, move, eat and sleep unthinkingly. We will follow the program automatically unless we stop and ask what is going on. In meditation practice, we have to look carefully at everything happening inside ourselves. If we stop and look, we will notice

that one of the five *khandhas* — the body (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), memory and association (*saññā*), thought (*sankhāra*) or consciousness (*viññāṇa*) — is activated at every mind-moment. Each sense contact that arises has a feeling attached to it, and this feeling produces another thought or memory which itself has another feeling attached, and so on. This is the way that a feeling builds up, and in a flash it can turn into a very strong emotion. When we see someone we dislike, hate comes up — as if out of nowhere! If we hear a crash of thunder, fear comes up — bop! We think these reactions are natural, but they are not natural at all. What is natural is the five *khandhas* and their interaction. For instance, *viññāṇa* is simply aware of a sense contact; it doesn't label the sense data coming in from sight, sound, smell, taste or touch. Memory and association labels the sense contact, and tells us what it is. Think how fast this process happens — it seems to be instantaneous but it's not. There is a process — memory has to find the association, for example — but because our *sati* is not fast enough, we can't see the workings involved. Under normal circumstances, our *sati* is too slow to catch every mind moment, but if it were super-sharp we would see how a feeling triggers a memory, and the memory with another feeling attached then triggers a thought, which triggers another memory, until the feeling grows and grows and grows and becomes an avalanche. When this happens, we blame someone or something else for creating the avalanche, not understanding that we have created it ourselves.

If we understand the truth of *dukkha* and its origin, we can go a long way in our practice. *Dukkha* is not something we should evade; it's happening all the time, and it should be investigated: What am I doing? Why am I doing it? What results does it have? Once you put effort into recognising it, it's so obvious. All you have to do is open your eyes and see: as the Lord Buddha said, the Dhamma is *sandiṭṭhiko* (self-evident and visible here and now), *akāliko* (timeless) and *opanayiko* (found by looking inwards). If you don't want to see or don't care to look, that is just blindness, an example of *avijjā* pulling the blinds down over your eyes. A skilled

practitioner is aware of everything that's happening. The moment he is aware of an unpleasant feeling, he notices the tendency of his mind to run away but remains determined to face it and experience it. He has to experience it again and again and again until, after perhaps after a million times, he understands the truth and doesn't need to flee from it any more. Pleasant feelings are harder to investigate for they are easier to get lost in, but these too have to be faced and experienced. When we fully understand, there is no more desire to change feelings, to evade the unpleasant or embrace the pleasant.

If we constantly run away, how can we ever see the truth? If the *kilesas* constantly lead us astray by fooling us with soap bubbles, we will never understand the truth. The strange thing is that most people look back on a day spent running after soap bubbles and think it was all great fun. They don't see the monotony of it all; if they'd spent the day running around in a soap bubble-free zone, they'd feel exhausted, wouldn't they? And that's what happens after a couple of hours of meditation practice — they feel exhausted and say they are tormented by pain. But where does the pain come from? It's not because of practice but because *dukkha* is there all the time; it's just that for two hours we've had no soap bubbles to run after. When we sit in an aeroplane for twelve or fourteen hours, we don't complain about the pain, yet in meditation we become aware of the pain very quickly. Actually, pain is there all the time, but we don't see it for running after soap bubbles — memories, thoughts, sights, sounds, and so on — and ignoring what is happening in the heart (*citta*). The moment we force our mind to stay with one object, we see it all. So, let's investigate *dukkha*.

The first thing we have to do is stay with *dukkha*, not wishing it to go away or be other than it is, because to do that would be desire, and desire creates more *dukkha*. Just be with it completely naturally and observe it with your inner eye. You don't have to think about it or where it has come from or why it has arisen; that's just the same kind of rationalisation we've been doing all our lives. People think that if they sit in meditation for a long time

their back or legs will be damaged, but these are just thoughts that pop up, and we believe them. See how stupid we are? Even if the leg seems to go to sleep, it's a natural if unpleasant event, so we should observe it and see what is actually happening rather than move on impulse as we usually do. Understanding is the only path out of delusion. I don't mean understanding in the way of the *kilesas*, by reading books or watching the television. No, the understanding that leads to freedom comes through observation alone, observing the same thing over and over again until *sati* is so acute that it can catch each step of the process occurring within the five *khandhas*. When we truly understand, we won't need to read books or ask anyone else, because the understanding will have been born of experience — from insight in the literal sense of seeing inside. This is the understanding we need to overcome *avijjā*. Of course, we need intellectual understanding to grasp the teachings of the Lord Buddha initially, for that is what brings us to practice, but thereafter the only understanding we need comes through investigation. After all, the Lord Buddha didn't teach from books; he told his *bhikkhus* to go alone into the forests, mountains and caves to see the truth undistracted by other things.

The truth is there all the time. The truth that the Lord Buddha proclaimed twenty-five hundred years ago is still there, and the moment we open our eyes we can see it for ourselves. You can get an inkling of this by being aware for a few hours each day of how you run away from *dukkha* — the truth will shimmer through. Whatever you do, think about why you are doing it, and you'll usually find there is an unpleasant feeling somewhere. It may only be restlessness of mind, yet you find yourself looking for something to do to avoid bearing with the unpleasantness. In *upacāra samādhi*, there is contentment and not the slightest desire to do anything or change anything. But the moment we withdraw from that state, the *kilesas* come back like a troop of forest monkeys, jumping from this tree to the next, after this banana or that banana. They want us to change something or do something else. If we are meditators, they urge us to change our method of medi-

tation or our posture, but this is just another example of the *kilesas* making us run from one soap bubble to another. If you sit long enough in *samādhi*, you will start to experience the power of *avijjā*, how it constantly lures you out to do this or that, to change this or that, to evade *dukkha* in this way or that, to comply with this but not with that, to doubt this or doubt that, to think about this or that. The moment we come out of the contentedness of *samādhi* where there is no desire, we experience the force of the *kilesas*, the fangs or soldiers of *avijjā*. And when we come out of the deep state of *appanā samādhi* — in which the world, the five *khandhas,* has disappeared — the change is astonishing. It's like walking into a world war with bullets coming from all sides; we are hit by greed and then by hate, bang, bang, bang. People, particularly the "good" Buddhists in the West, sometimes tell me that they are not greedy or hateful, yet they have likes and dislikes, don't they? These are forms of greed and hate. People also say that they don't have to bother practicing as they don't have *dukkha* and don't suffer; they intend to practice only when they have pain. But this shows a lack of understanding of the teachings of the Lord Buddha. It's when we come out of *samādhi* that we really see the force of the *kilesas* and the *dukkha* they cause.

This all happens because of *avijjā*, the fundamental ignorance which keeps us blind. It's because of *avijjā* that we don't see the *dukkha* that is present every moment, and why we need to be reminded of its existence every day. All we need do is open our eyes and see it, but *avijjā* keeps us in the dark and makes us not even want to see. This is where the problem lies — we don't care, and don't want to see *dukkha*. People say that they don't want to get enlightened because they like sex, or because they love being in love! When they say these silly things, they really mean that they don't want to see the truth. But if they could see the truth of *dukkha*, they could walk through and make an end of becoming. When the Lord Buddha set the Wheel of Law rolling by giving his discourse to the five ascetics in the deer park at Benares, all five became *Arahants* while listening, simply because they real-

ised the truth of the teachings at a deep level. The moment they experienced the truth, they became enlightened. At other times during the life of the Lord Buddha, people attained to *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmī* or *Anāgāmī* just by hearing his teachings and experiencing the truth for themselves. On realising the truth that had been hidden inside themselves, they were able to pass through to the other side. We, by contrast, are stupid because we have been educated, trained to understand using the brain. We focus on the person teaching Dhamma and try to understand his words intellectually, but this is another trick of *avijjā*. If we listened with our hearts, the message would strike deep and bring real insight. If our hearts were open and the truth of *dukkha* really hit home, we would be almost there; we could pass through in a moment. Dhamma arises in the heart, and it originates in the heart, so we need to put our attention back to the heart where everything arises. The *kilesas* are all in the *citta*, and whatever we see or experience comes out of the *citta* as a projection. Once we put our attention back to the *citta*, we can see how these projections are made and stop falling for them time after time.

I want you all to understand the Lord Buddha's first noble truth, that *dukkha* exists, that it is present every moment and that it drives our lives. It comes from desire, greed and hate, likes and dislikes. If you set aside one, two or three days to observe it, you will begin to understand it profoundly. The Lord Buddha's teaching gets to the root of all causes, but we listen to it and understand it superficially – it goes in one ear and out the other. You might think that you want to get rid of *dukkha*, but that's just thought. Yes, everyone wants to get rid of *dukkha* from the moment they are born, but they run away from it instead of facing it and understanding it. It's nothing to be afraid of; it arises because of the nature of the world – *anicca*. Everything is constantly changing from one state to another and from one form to another, and the only time we don't notice it is when we are asleep. We have to have *sati* to be aware of impermanence and the *dukkha* associated with it. *Sati* and *paññā*, awareness and investigation with wisdom,

can lead us to the end of *dukkha*, and, of course, they culminate in the great weapons of *maha-sati* and *maha-paññā* that lead the *Anāgāmī* beyond *avijjā*.

Sati is trained in *samādhi*, and *paññā* is developed through seeing, experiencing and investigating. Using *paññā*, we don't just accept what the *kilesas* are telling us — we question them instead. What do I want to do? Why do I want to do it? What will the results be? What is the body? What is feeling? You have to investigate and interrogate in this way, not just once but thousands of times. Don't assume you know and understand after investigating only once, for the thought, "Now I know!" comes from *avijjā* and its fangs the *kilesas*. *Avijjā* is not only fundamental ignorance; it is wanting to know but not being able to know, because it can only know within the bounds of conventional reality. It cannot go beyond conventional reality because it itself is conventional reality. This is why *avijjā* can never know the truth.

To get down to the true knowingness we have to use any means that come to hand. The easiest method is to go into *appanā samādhi* where everything disappears and only the true nature of the *citta*, knowingness, remains. That's where we see the fallacy of the world, which is simply this: *avijjā* drives us to know and to understand, but we know everything already. The heart already knows, and all we need to do is open the heart and see for ourselves. Normally, we think, assume, memorise and fantasise, but this is the way of the *kilesas*, the way of *avijjā*. However, when the heart opens up, it sees and understands immediately — this is what we call insight. Some people try to figure out where insight comes from, but they can't; it arises from the nature of the *citta*. It's there all the time; all we need to do is open the heart and set it free. As the Lord Buddha said, the Dhamma is *sandiṭṭhiko* — right in front of our eyes, to be experienced by the wise here and now.

The power and deceitfulness of *avijjā*

13th January 2010

When we see a corpse being cremated – the skull bursting open and the brain sizzling and popping – we get disgusted, don't we? Seeing a human being burning on a funeral pyre can make us faint or vomit, but when parts of a cow or pig are being roasted, we don't feel sick but start licking our lips at the thought of a nice meal. Why is this? It's because watching a cremation is as close as we can come to seeing our own body on the pyre. We can't bear to watch, because we know that one day the same thing will happen to our own corpse. But the body is just the body; what does it really have to do with us? When a car is scrapped, we may feel sad but we don't become afraid, so why are we afraid of losing the body? It's because we don't yet know our true self. A cremation is actually quite fascinating to watch, but *avijjā* – that power within the *citta* that drives us from life to life – doesn't want to see it. *Avijjā* doesn't want to know the truth that the body is born and dies. The *citta* itself is not afraid to know the truth for it knows all about birth and death; it has toured every one of the thirty-one realms of existence. Rather, it is *avijjā* that is afraid. *Avijjā* always thinks it is seeing everything for the first time, for it is deluded in itself.

Avijjā has the power to delude us, even to make us miss the chance of seeing things like a cremation that it doesn't want to see. This is the way it works. The Dhamma wants to see such things, but *avijjā* blocks it. For example, when our meditation is progressing, *avijjā* puts our attention onto something other than the meditation object to make us go off track. This is how it tricks us like a master magician. Just as we are getting close to striking a blow against the *kilesas*, it performs a new trick, and we become mesmerised, forgetting all about our original intention to focus exclusively on the meditation object. Never underestimate the power of *avijjā*; it is the power which rules over the *citta*, even to the extent of persuading us that it is us! And we believe it, just as we believe a radio broadcast that we listen to all the time. We can

call *avijjā* the *Kilesas* Broadcasting Company (KBC) or the *Avijjā* Broadcasting Company (ABC). It has been broadcasting in our hearts for countless lives, so how can we not believe it? The whole world believes it.

How can we fight this master magician? One way is to shock the *kilesas* by taking them out of their comfort zone. For example, we can look at the disgusting things the *kilesas* don't want to see, and avoid looking at the beautiful things they find attractive. We can do what they don't want to do, and avoid doing the things they want. In other words, we can confuse them until they don't know how to rule our hearts. Usually, the *kilesas* have a reasonably reliable set of rules about how to stop us progressing in meditation; they bring up pain or fear or disgust so that we stop practicing. But when we do the opposite of what they suggest, they get completely confused for a while and don't know how to exert their control — this means freedom for us. As we can see in the *Paṭiccasamuppāda, avijjā* is the condition for all phenomena to arise; phenomena are the condition for consciousness to arise; consciousness is the condition for name (meaning) and form to arise; and name and form are the condition for feeling to arise. So, when go against the rules or the conditions of *avijjā* and the *kilesas*, we are "unconditioned" or free for a time.

Of course, the *kilesas* soon catch on to our tricks, as they are masters of magic themselves, and sooner or later we find ourselves in a new pattern of thought or behaviour, a new set of conditions, through which they can exert their control. That's why we need something to hold onto — the awareness of the breath or the mental repetition of the word *buddho*, and the practice of *samādhi* or investigation with *paññā*. No matter what the *kilesas* tell us, we can all do this practice. It's very simple work, and as long as we don't forget to do it *avijjā* and the *kilesas* can have very little influence over us. If feelings, such as discomfort or anger, come up during meditation practice, this shows that we are practicing correctly, that we're digging at the right spot, for the *kilesas* have reacted by bringing up unpleasant feelings to stop us practicing.

Another of their tricks is to blind us to how things really are. At a cremation, for instance, the proper way of reflecting is to see ourselves on the pyre, sizzling and burning, with our own brains exploding. However, the *kilesas* make us disengage and believe that the burning body has nothing to do with us. They tell us that our bodies are beautiful and that nothing is loathsome about them. But what's really beneath the skin? Blood, pus, urine, excrement – these things are all in the body, but we don't want to see them; as soon as they come out the body, we wash them off or flush them away. We look in the mirror and fool ourselves. Remember the book Gulliver's Travels? When the tiny Lilliputians found Gulliver's body on the beach, they thought it disgusting, a giant body with greasy oozing skin and body hairs that seemed like a filthy bamboo forest. They saw the truth, but we are just not perceptive enough. We see only nice soft skin with fine hair. We buy skin care products and use special shampoos to wash off the grease, fooling ourselves all the time without realising it.

To see the truth of the body, we must start to practice meditation on *asubha* (the loathsomeness of the body). We have to see what's really inside our own bodies and the bodies of other people. We can view the people around us as skeletons going about their daily activities; two skeletons making love is quite a bizarre image, isn't it? We can also try to see the body without its skin. The truth about the body, however, is something that most people don't want to see, and the practice of *asubha* is something that most people don't want to hear. This is why we hardly come across it, and why it isn't taught in most meditation centres across the world. Only monks in the Thai Forest Tradition teach *asubha* today, yet it is a practice that comes directly from the Lord Buddha. For instance, one of the disciples of the Lord Buddha fell in love with a courtesan. When she died the Lord Buddha asked this *bhikkhu* to stay and contemplate the loathsomeness of the body while watching her corpse decompose. The Lord Buddha also recommended *asubha* practice to his own son Rāhula.

In the West, however, we prefer not to see the unpleasant things. We put old people in old-folks homes, so we rarely see any really decrepit people. We keep sick people in hospitals and see them relatively rarely, and we bury or cremate bodies quite quickly and never see dead bodies. Most of the people we see in the street are young, fresh and healthy. We are rarely confronted with ageing, sickness and death. If we have to go to a hospital and face these things, we feel very uncomfortable with the smell or the weeping of the sick and their friends or relatives, and try make the visit as short as possible. It's the same when we visit an old-folks home; we find it very depressing because the residents don't know what to do with themselves or have no friends, and young people don't want anything to do with them, thinking of them as useless creatures. We find these places uncomfortable, and it's the same when we visit a cemetery.

This should tell us something, shouldn't it? It points to the fact that we are experts at avoiding everything we find unpleasant, particularly in the West where all the unpleasant things are hidden away. In India, we can still see old or sick people on the streets and bodies being cremated on the Ganges river, but in the West we have swept these things out of sight and are rarely confronted with the ugliness of life. Only when we become sick or old ourselves do we realise the truth, when our own children suddenly push us into a retirement home. We might feel out of place in the home at first, but it doesn't take long to become totally helpless like the other residents. Young and healthy people enjoy their freedom out on the streets, of course, but their time will come; the old-folks home awaits them too!

When it's time to die, we end up in hospital. How many people die in a hospital every day? Probably many if it's a big hospital. You could call it a factory, a factory of sickness, pain, suffering and death, and that's why we don't like going near one. Why don't we like to see these things? Because we know that sooner or later we'll find ourselves in the same situation; in five, ten, twenty or forty years, we'll be in the same place. We'll drop dead or fall sick,

depending on our *kamma*. Then we'll be cremated in the fire, just like at the cremations in Thailand, and it will be our skull cracking and our brain sizzling and popping. Try to bring up this image in your inner eyes, for one day it will happen to everyone. This body, which we think of as I or mine, will be burned up one day, just like bodies on a funeral pyre. Actually, the body has nothing to do with us; the moment it dies we will be gone, and most of us won't even care what happens to it. Our family might prepare a very proper funeral, but we will have already gone, pulled towards our next rebirth. Some people do have time to stay around for a while, and their family and friends can sense that they are still there. In most cases, however, the moment people die they are drawn straight down to hell.

People don't like to hear this, but it's reality, and we should try to face up to reality, shouldn't we? In Thailand, people do face up to reality. On the front page of the Thai newspapers they show traffic accidents, such as a dead motorcyclist with his skull cracked open and the brain flowing out onto the road. This is unimaginable in the West, where such images are suppressed. This is because Buddhism is the main religion in Thailand, and *asubha* is one of the teachings of the Lord Buddha. *Asubha* is the only practice which allows us to overcome greed and hate. I'm sorry to say it, but it is the only way, almost without exception. Of course, we don't like to be told this. We want to hear that we need only enter the first *jhāna*, then the second *jhāna*, then the third *jhāna*, then the fourth *jhāna*, reflect on our previous lives and enter *Nibbāna*. We often see this sequence written in the *suttas*, and it sounds so easy that we forget about the other *suttas* which give clues to what the Lord Buddha was really teaching. For instance, he advised his *bhikkhus* to go alone into the forest, living in frightening places that other people avoid. He also talked about *asubha* in some *suttas*, such as when he advised a *bhikkhu* to observe the decaying corpse of a courtesan with whom he had fallen in love, as I mentioned before.

Why did the Lord Buddha teach like this? Do we think we know better, that we can pick and choose which of the teachings

to follow to reach *Nibbāna*? Yes, we do. We think this because we studied at university and the Lord Buddha did not, or because we've read the *suttas* and he did not. We think we can choose which of the teachings to follow because the times have changed. The times have indeed changed, but the *kilesas* haven't changed one little bit. *Avijjā* has not changed at all; its tricks are just the same. The only thing that has changed are the toys it plays with, the objects it uses to fool us.

There are a few rare exceptions to the rule that *asubha* practice is the only method capable of overcoming greed and hate. One example in the *suttas* concerns a new *bhikkhu* who was taught *asubha* practice by Venerable Sāriputta, the Lord Buddha's chief disciple, but had gained no results after a long time. He went to see the Lord Buddha who saw that the *bhikkhu* had been a goldsmith in many previous lives, making the most beautiful objects. The Lord Buddha told him to reflect on the impermanence of beautiful things rather than the body, and the *bhikkhu* became an *Arahant* in no time. In another *sutta*, a very beautiful woman came to see the Lord Buddha. As she had become conceited about her beauty, the Lord Buddha, using his supernormal powers, created an image of a very beautiful girl sitting near to him. Each time the woman looked at the image, she was surprised to see that the girl had aged a little more. Finally, the girl appeared to die and her corpse became bloated and oozing. The women was shocked by this, but she saw the impermanence of the body and entered the stream to become a *Sotāpanna*, the first of the four stages of enlightenment. These examples show that, in some people, greed and hate can be overcome by looking at the impermanence of beautiful things, but just don't imagine that you are one of these exceptions. It is, of course, beneficial for to reflect on the impermanence of beautiful things, but for most of us *asubha* is the perfect practice.

There is nothing wrong with visualising the inside of the body in meditation practice, taking out the intestines, opening them up and looking at the excrement. There's nothing wrong with it. We like to take apart all the gadgets and playthings inside our

houses to see how they work, so why can't we take the body apart and see how it works? It may be because we come from Christian societies which considered the body sacred and where opening corpses was taboo; anatomical dissection was forbidden by law for many centuries. That is probably why, to this day, we still don't see dead bodies in newspapers in the West as we do in Thailand. It's because we don't want to let go of our delusion about the body that why we have to force ourselves to see reality by doing *asubha* practice. *Asubha* is something that you really have to hammer into the *citta*, for *avijjā* does not want to let us know the truth about the body. *Avijjā* won't just invite us to combat it, saying, "Here are my weak points, please come and hit me." *Avijjā* disguises its weaknesses and sends us astray in our meditation practice. It can suggest that we work on a particular meditation practice for years without results, and all because *avijjā* was leading us on. If Dhamma leads our meditation, then we are sure to get results sooner or later.

If you have the chance, go to see a cremation for yourself. Use the experience to picture your own body on the funeral pyre, smouldering and burning. Here in Thailand, they usually keep the dead bodies in an open casket for a few days and invite the monks to come and chant for the dead. You can sometimes see from the expression on the faces of the deceased where they have most likely gone, what their destination has been. They are not smiling and peaceful; they are longing for something. It's clear from their faces that they have gone down to the lower realms. Their families have invited monks to chant for them, but their *citta* has already gone. The monks chant, "May your good deeds lead you to heaven...", but some of the dead never performed a good deed in their lives. If they are still around to hear the chanting, you can feel that they can't bear to listen to it. So, what is the use of the chanting? At the moment of death, these people realise that they have wasted their human birth by never doing good and by constantly breaking the five precepts. Of course, I realise that talking like this might bring up some very uncomfortable feelings within

you. If that's the case, then so much the better. It shows us where our sensibilities lie and where we have to investigate in our meditation practice. If we can bring up these feelings and investigate their causes, we can overcome the problems that lie within the *citta*.

There's really nothing to this body, but we think that it belongs to us, that it really is us. Get rid of this idea. The body is nothing more than a biological robot. It's just like a car; when a car is scrapped, the driver doesn't die, does he? So what has the car to do with the driver? What does the *citta* have to do with the body? Nothing. The body is one of the *khandhas,* feeling is another *khandha*, memory and association is another *khandha*, thought is another *khandha* and consciousness is another *khandha*. These five *khandhas* have nothing to do with the *citta*. Try to see this for yourself through the practice of *samādhi*. At the stage where thinking ceases, you will get an inkling of what this means. Then, go into *appaṇā samādhi,* deep *samādhi*, where all five *khandhas* disappear completely, and you will know that something remains. This thing that remains is what we should really care about, not the body. We need only ensure that the body is healthy enough to be used as a tool, not worry if it is sick, dying or dead. It is simply a tool we can use to help us dive into the stream, the stream that leads to *Nibbāna*. Once we have entered the stream, we won't have any concerns about going down to hell, for a *Sotāpanna* is in the stream that leads out of *dukkha* and cannot possibly be reborn in the lower realms. As long as we have not entered the stream, however, we will constantly be swirled around in the thirty-one realms of existence.

Kamma and rebirth

4th December 2009

The Buddhist religion strikes people from the West as something very rational and logical, and they can accept most of its teachings. But they often ignore or push aside *kamma* (the law of cause and effect) and rebirth, two related concepts that are taken for granted throughout Asia. They probably do this because they find the idea of rebirth uncomfortable, or because their Christian education has taught them that there are only two destinations after death, eternal heaven or eternal hell. In Buddhism, there are thirty-one planes of existence which include the heavenly (*deva*) realms and hell, but our stay in these is temporary, not eternal.

Kamma is actually one of the central teachings of the Lord Buddha, and it is the force that drives the cycle of rebirth. I'm often asked what it is that is reborn, so let me explain. It can't be the body, for the body dies. Actually, it is our *kamma* that is reborn, and it includes the effects of our past actions, the abilities we have developed in our lives and our character traits. These character traits and abilities (in other words, *kamma)* form the basis of a new existence. This is why some people show extraordinary abilities at a young age. The most famous example is Mozart who started composing around the age of five, while other people study music for twenty years but never manage to compose anything worthwhile. Also, we know from our own time at school or university that some students immediately understand what is taught while others struggle with the information as if it were a foreign language. Where do these early abilities come from? At one time, the *tabula rasa* theory was popular; every child was supposed to be born with a blank slate which was later filled by parents, society and the surrounding world. Today we have added genetic explanations for the differences between people into the mix, and we think they explain the great differences in character and abilities we observe everywhere. But Buddhism has a different explanation — *kamma*.

Most people who accept the idea of rebirth think that the personality as we experience it in the present will be reborn, but that is not correct. What is reborn is a part of our *kamma*. We can think of our accumulated past *kamma* as a huge pile of stuff in an ancient mansion. When we decide to take a long trip around the world, we take only the things we think we need. On the journey, we will acquire a lot of new things, so when we come back the pile of *kamma* in the mansion will have changed; it will be enlarged by the new things acquired and reduced by the things used up. That is what happens from rebirth to rebirth. In heaven, we use up the good *kamma* acquired, and in hell we use up the bad; you can think of these births as trips to a landfill or waste dump where we offload good or bad items. Of course, *kamma* also includes the character traits that we have developed, and we can change them; for example, someone who is stingy at the start of his life can, by developing generosity, strengthen that character trait by the time of his death. When he is reborn, he will be generous from the start. The same holds true for people who start to develop *mettā* (loving kindness) in this life; they will carry this trait over into the next.

Rebirth is similar to going to sleep and waking up next morning. Our state of mind on awakening is different from when we went to sleep. Some mental phenomena like thoughts, memories and feelings have disappeared, while some remain and others will come along throughout the day. It's quite difficult to foretell what is going to happen, whether tomorrow or in the next life, but in the main what happens will be determined by the *kamma* we have made in this and previous lives. In general, the *kamma* that is ripe at the time of death is the *kamma* we will reap in the next life – the destination of our rebirth will be determined by our *kamma*. People who have trained their minds, however, may have the ability to choose where they go after death. If we have awareness in the present moment, we can choose whether to take one path or another, but if we are unaware we just follow our character traits and habits. Let's give an example. Suppose we go for a walk and come to turn-offs or crossroads every now and then. If we see

these junctions while walking, we can choose to take one of them, but if we are busy with thoughts we just walk straight ahead. It will be like this at the moment of death; if we have *sati* (awareness), we can choose our next rebirth. However, to have *sati* at the moment of death is rather more difficult than in everyday life because of the pain, fear and suffering that we will experience at that time. We have the choice, at every moment, to do good or bad, to follow our good traits or bad traits depending on the thoughts and memories that come up or on whatever we happen to encounter. It will be the same at the moment of death, as death is just another moment. So, people who do lots of meditation practice, such as *bhikkhus* or *samaṇas* in the Thai Forest Tradition living as recluses, are much more likely to have the choice of where to go after death.

Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used to tell the story of a *bhikkhu* who had died of malaria and remembered everything that happened afterwards. He recalled that he was walking along a path and met an old man who said, "This is the way to heaven, and this is the way to the human realm. You are free to go to heaven, it's up to you." Then the *bhikkhu* thought, "I'm so thirsty, I want to get some water before I make my decision", so he went in search of water and saw a woman drawing water from a well. He thought, "Oh, that looks good, I'm so thirsty", and the next thing he remembered was being reborn into the family of the woman at the well. Thereafter, during childhood, he always referred to himself with the personal pronoun *Attama* used by *bhikkhus* in Thailand, though his parents implored him not to use it. However, as he grew up he still felt that he was a monk, and eventually ordained as a novice. One day there was a gathering of *bhikkhus*, and he was asked to identify his old teacher. He pointed out the Ajahn, and then asked him, "Do you remember a *bhikkhu* who died of malaria a few years ago?" The teacher replied, "Yes, I remember him", and they had a talk about it. We know this story because Than Ajahn Mahā Bua happened to be witnessing the incident, and he asked the young man about his experience. It illustrates that the *bhikkhu* must have had *sati* at the time of death, despite the pain he must have experienced.

Most people, however, don't have enough *sati* to be able to overcome the fear and pain that can occur at the time of death. This is why the Lord Buddha advised us to remind people close to death about the good deeds they have done in their life. Then, at the point of death, positive memories can come up and lead them on to a good rebirth. But if they recall a negative action, such as stealing, this memory can bring up regret that may lead them downwards. They may go down to hell or to the ghost realm just because of that bad memory. Of course, if the theft had been their only bad action in a virtuous life, they may return from those realms quite quickly. We should think of *kamma* as being just like the legal system. When we break the law, we are sent to prison for a length of time that depends on the severity of the crime, but we become free again once released. Similarly, if we have broken the moral precepts only a little, we go down to the lower realms of existence for a short time; if we have committed lots of evil acts, we go down for a long time. When our sentence or punishment is over, we come back up to the higher realms.

There is an example of this in the *suttas*. Queen Mallikā was the wife of the King Pasenadi and a very devoted follower of the Lord Buddha, but she did a foolish thing that we today might consider to be a fairly minor wrongdoing [1]. When she was approaching death, she remembered the incident and felt remorseful. After death, she went down to hell for seven days before being reborn in heaven. Some actions are so grave, however, that the punishments can last a very long time. In particular, there are five heinous deeds that should never be done: killing one's mother; killing one's father; killing an *Arahant*; maliciously wounding a Buddha so that his blood is spilt (it's impossible for someone to kill a Buddha); and instigating a schism in the monastic Sangha. Each of these five deeds leads to hell for around a hundred and fifty thousand years.

1 The full story is given in the commentary to verse 151 in "Treasury of Truth, Illustrated Dhammapada" by Weragoda Sarada Mahā Thero. 1994

It's very important not to get the idea that the personality you have today will be the same in the next life. That's certainly not the case. You can see how your personality has changed over the past few decades. We acted and thought differently as children from what we do now, and we will look at life in a very different way in another twenty years. In fact, the thing that goes from one life to the next is nothing that we can call me or mine. It's actually a very impersonal thing – *kamma*. Our actions have results that will come back to us in the future. When a farmer plants wheat, he has to wait until the wheat ripens before it can be harvested. The same is true for the *kamma* we make; we may have to wait for sixty years, one lifetime or several lifetimes before it ripens and we can reap the consequences, whether good or bad. For instance, killing a person does not necessarily mean that we go straight down to hell when we die, although that is a likely outcome, particularly for notorious killers. People who kill in a single moment of anger might go to hell after three or four lifetimes or not at all. It all depends on the intricate workings of *kamma*, so it is very difficult to predict exactly what will happen. And please remember that a lifetime can be in any of the thirty-one planes of existence, not necessarily in the human realm. We should resolve to make the best *kamma* we can using whatever we have to hand. We should try to do our best to ensure that the entity that is reborn – which is part of our very being now – will reap a lot of good *kamma* in future.

To enable us to make positive *kamma*, the Lord Buddha gave the five precepts (*sīla*). He saw that if we kept these precepts, we would not be reborn in the lower realms – the animal, ghost (*peta*), demon (*asura*) or hell realms. The five precepts are, in short, to refrain from harming any living being; from taking what is not been given; from sexual misconduct; from telling lies or being deceitful; and from taking alcohol or drugs that cloud the mind. Alcohol and drugs are proscribed because they can make us do things we will later regret, for under their influence we tend to do and say things that hurt others and break the other four precepts. Also, alcohol and drugs increase delusion, and they help to foster

the power of *avijjā*, keeping us under its rule; when sober, we have an awareness and a conscience that helps us refrain from doing harmful things, at least most of the time. So, keeping the five precepts lets us avoid rebirth in the lower realms. If we want to stay in the human realm, we need only keep the five precepts, but to go upwards to the higher realms, the *deva* realms, requires the development of some additional virtues in addition to keeping the precepts. These virtues are generosity, respect and gratitude, and they also help us on the path of practice. They are not the practice itself, of course, but they are necessary for the practice of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*.

The training we undertake today will come with us into future lives. If we train the ability to meditate, we will still have this ability after ten years or in the next life or in ten lifetimes to come. If we've studied science, the skill will not be lost and might come in handy in a future existence. The memory of these accomplishments doesn't fade away; it is the memory of this life that fades away when we die. In the next life, we might not remember anything about our previous existences, but the skills we have acquired will come back if we need them, in the same way that a foreign language one hasn't used for many years can be brushed up. The memory of everything we have done is within the *citta* – it is complete. That's why an *Arahant* can remember his previous lives, all the times he went to hell, all the professions he had, and so on. He knows the actions that led him to hell and those that led to heaven. He can remember his previous lives, because everything that was kept in the dark by *avijjā* has been revealed, while we remember only parts of our present existence. So, if we start to learn the art of dancing, learn to play an instrument or learn other subjects, the moment we have the opportunity to do these things again in future lives, we will find them easier. For someone who has never learnt these skills, it will be more difficult. This is what makes the difference between each person in each profession.

In the *suttas*, the Lord Buddha says that we can view the physical body as deeds of the past that have come to fruition – as our

past actions made flesh, if you like — and that all beings are beautiful and ugly, inferior and superior, fortunate and unfortunate in accord with their *kamma*. So, it's possible that someone who spends his whole life sitting in a chair, never taking exercise, will not have an athletic body in his next life. If he constantly eats too much, he may have problems with his inner organs in his next life. *Kamma* does not explain illnesses like the common cold or various infections which are caused by the environment, but it underlies the more serious and chronic illnesses. If we have an illness that is very difficult to cure, but we find a doctor who can cure it, this is also the result of our *kamma*. *Kamma* is certainly one of the reasons why some people are cured of particular illnesses while others are not. The medicine has been effective, but *kamma* has also been involved. Nearly all that we experience is the result of past *kamma*, whether our physical form, our gender or the illnesses we suffer during life.

What we have done in this or in past lives determines what will happen to us in lives to come. But because we have had so many previous lives — millions or billions — it is very difficult for the average person, or even for an experienced meditator, to link a kammic cause to a present or future effect. The Lord Buddha was able to do it, for he could see the actions in a person's previous lives that led to the kammic results he was experiencing in the present. If, however, we decide to keep the five precepts from this moment on, then we can be sure of wholesome results in future. We may still receive some bad *kamma* from previous lives, but our future lives will be much brighter because we will make only good *kamma* going forward. Good *kamma* is the best insurance — it's far more valuable than any insurance policy that the world can offer. You could say that you are receiving today the reward of premiums paid in past lives. People born in Buddhist countries have probably respected the Dhamma in previous lives whereas Westerners have not, apart from those who come East to find it. You cannot change the past, but you can accept the *kamma* that comes, learn from it and do good. Accepting the truth of *kamma*

does not mean we have to be cruel to others or indifferent to their suffering, of course, for how we treat others today affects how we are treated tomorrow – it's vital to have compassion.

Just think about the things that have happened in our lives. When I was travelling around the world, I was amazed that I never had anything stolen, while my friends on the same trip had several things taken. Our possessions were muddled together, so it was bizarre that the thieves stole their things but not mine. This not only happened once but several times with different friends involved. So, for me, it clearly shows how *kamma* works. Of course, most people would say that I just had good luck but, in fact, luck or chance rarely occurs, for much of what happens to us is the result of our previous actions. The Lord Buddha said that chance can occur, but you can be pretty sure that if you're childless, it's *kamma*; if you have many children, it's *kamma;* if you're born male or female, it's *kamma;* if you're born into a rich or a poor family, it's *kamma.* If your father teaches you to kill people, it's your bad *kamma*, but if he teaches you what is right and wrong, it's your good *kamma*. If you find a good meditation teacher, it's your good *kamma*. Lots of people are looking for the Dhamma. Some find a good teacher who doesn't mislead them, and that is their good *kamma*, but most people find teachers who, probably unintentionally, mislead them. This is because they have misled others in previous lives, so they are misled themselves. People who were righteous in their previous lives will find other righteous people in this life, not people who deceive them.

Kamma is most important. As I said before, if you were to say that *kamma* is the thing that goes from one life to the next rather than a "person", you would be quite correct. At the moment, you are experiencing *kamma*, aren't you? You're happy with some of the *kamma* you have received and unhappy with some of the rest. There is something – the *citta* or the observer – that knows *kamma* and the results of *kamma*, and this is also the thing that says, "I want to be reborn, I want to have another chance." So, the *citta* experiences *kamma*, but *kamma* itself is what determines

the next rebirth, whether in the heavenly or human realms, or the animal, ghost, demon or hell realms. This *citta* – or whatever we call the one who knows – is driven into the next life along with its *kamma*. Actually, *kamma* is attached to the *citta* and is integrated into the five *khandhas* at the moment we are reborn. An *Arahant* has destroyed *avijjā* and with it the creation of new *kamma*. The *kamma* that was attached to his *citta* is also destroyed, with the exception of the *kamma* integrated into his five *khandhas* which remains and functions there until the moment of his death. This remaining *kamma* retains the appearance of a self that others can recognize as the personality of the *Arahant*.

It is for us to discover the *citta*, the one who knows about *kamma*, about good and bad *kamma*, about pleasant and unpleasant feelings and about the five *khandhas*. These things are for us to find out, and it would be wonderful if we could see them for ourselves through practice, for then we would have a better understanding of what is happening and why. If we can't discover the one who knows about these things, we will remain in the dark and become muddled, because in the dark we stumble over a lot of things that we don't see. This darkness is nothing other than *avijjā*, the power that rules over us.

Please reflect on these matters. Let them sink in. I know that *kamma* and rebirth are very difficult subjects for the Western mind. They are becoming more accepted in the West, but people still don't really understand what they mean, unlike in most Asian countries where *kamma* and rebirth have been accepted and taught for millennia. These concepts are relatively new for Westerners, though this does not mean that they have never been in touch with them. When we look at *kamma* with an objective eye, there is no injustice – what goes up must come down and a kammic cause must have its effect. *Kamma* may seem unfair, but that's because we are aware of only one life or part of one life. We should see rebirth as a logical conclusion to the observation that nothing ever comes to an end, that everything changes into something else. We throw away rotten food and it becomes fertiliser that

can be used. The body itself, once it has died, decomposes into other forms of energy or is eaten up by insects, worms or other beings. Nothing comes to an end, everything changes, so why should we think that everything comes to an end when we die?

Glossary

The table below gives a list of *Pāli* terms, and a few Thai terms, used in this collection of talks, together with a brief explanation according to the Thai Forest Tradition, which may differ from definitions found elsewhere.

Ācariya	Teacher, mentor; a term of respect for a senior *bhikkhu*.
Ajahn	(Thai) A polite way of addressing a senior monk with more than 10 years in the Sangha.
Akāliko	Timeless, not dependent on time. It is a traditional epithet for the Dhamma.
Anāgāmī	Non-returner; a person who has abandoned the five lower fetters *(saṁyojana)* that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth, and who after death will appear in one of the worlds called the Pure Abodes (*suddhāvāsa*), there to attain *Nibbāna*, never again to return. It is the third of the four stages of the noble path culminating in *Arahantship*.
Ānāpānasati	Mindfulness of breathing in and out. It is one of the most common meditation practices recommended by the Buddha.

Anattā	Not-self; the truth that all phenomena are devoid of anything that can be identified as "self". It implies that the five *khandhas*, individually or collectively, are not-self, and that a self-entity cannot be found anywhere within the heart (*citta*). *Anattā* is one of the three universal characteristics of all phenomena, the others being *anicca* and *dukkha*.
Anguttara Nikāya	The book of Gradual Sayings in the *Pāli* Canon.
Anicca(ṁ)	Impermanence; the unstable, transient nature of all things in all realms of existence. *Anicca* is one of the three universal characteristics of existence, the others being *anattā* and *dukkha*.
Anupādisesa	Without remainder. It refers to the state of an *Arahant* after the death of the body.
Anupādisesa-Nibbāna	*Nibbāna* with no fuel remaining (analogous to an extinguished fire whose embers are cold); the *Nibbāna* of the *Arahant* after the death of the body.
Appaṇā	Fixed, directed. *Appanā* refers to the deep state of *samādhi*, also called one-pointedness.
Arahant	A liberated person; an "accomplished one"; a person who has abandoned all ten of the fetters (*saṁyojana*) that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth and who is thus not destined for future rebirth; one who is enlightened and has attained the final stage of the noble path.

Ārammaṇa	A foundation, a support or that on which something depends. In general, this "something" refers to the state of mind and what flows out of it. As a supporting condition for mental states, the *ārammaṇa* may be an externally sensed object or an internal condition arising from feeling, memory, thought or consciousness. Amongst those who practice the way of *kammaṭṭhāna*, the word *ārammaṇa* is often used to refer to an emotional mental state, either good or bad.
Ariya puggala	A noble one; a supreme person; one who has attained any of the four transcendent paths of *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmī*, *Anāgāmī* and *Arahant*.
Ariya-sacca	Noble truth; in this context, *ariya* means objective or universal truth. The four noble truths are *dukkha*; the origin of *dukkha*; the cessation of *dukkha*; and the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*.
Āsava	Commonly translated as effluents or outflows. *Āsavas* are those defilements that "flow out" from the heart (*citta*) into sense desires, into perpetuating existence, into views and opinions, and into fundamental ignorance (*avijjā*).
Asubha	That which is unpleasant, loathsome, contrary to what is usually desired. *Asubha* practice involves contemplation of the repugnance of the body.
Attā	Self; the opposite of *anattā*.

Avijjā	Will, intention; not knowing or understanding correctly, but wanting to know and understand; fundamental ignorance; delusion about the nature of the *citta*. *Avijjā* is the lack of any knowledge that is higher than the level of mere convention, or lack of insight. It is ignorance so profound that it is self-obscuring, turning everything upside down, making us believe that what is wrong is right, what is unimportant is important, and what is bad is good. Ignorance here does not indicate a lack of knowledge but rather a lack of knowing, or knowing wrongly. *Avijjā* is that which must be overcome and transcended to realise enlightenment.
Baan	(Thai) village.
Bhāvanā	The development of the *citta* by meditation.
Bhikkhu	Buddhist monk; a fully ordained member of the Sangha who has gone forth into homelessness and received the higher ordination.
Brahmacariyā	Celibacy and the general training of living the holy life.
Brahmās	A class of deities which inhabit the heavens of form or formlessness.
Brahmavihāras	The four meditative states of *mettā* (friendliness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (gladness at the wellbeing of others) and *upekkhā* (equanimity).

Buddha	Literally, an awakened or enlightened one. In the present day, the term refers to Siddharta Gautama, the teacher and founder of Buddhism, but it can also refer to others who have achieved Buddhahood in the past.
Buddho	A *parikamma* (preparatory) word used for the recollection of the Buddha during meditation practice.
Caṅkama	To walk back and forth during walking meditation.
Citta	The mind's essential knowing nature. When associated with a physical body, it is referred to as mind or heart. The pure *citta* is radiant and bright and is a state of knowingness, but the *citta* of a person who is not an *Arahant* is under the power of *avijjā*. As long as there is *avijjā*, there is intention. Intention creates *kamma* that attaches itself to the *citta*. Everything we know originates within the *citta*. The *citta* can be understood as the driver or programmer of the body, which is a complex biological robot. If the *citta* intends to think or walk, feel, memorise etc., it will do so using the functions of the body.
Dāna	Giving, making gifts, generosity.
Desanā	A talk on Dhamma; the exposition of the doctrine.
Deva	Literally, "shining one". A *deva* is an inhabitant of any of the heavens of sensual bliss which are immediately above the human realm.

Dhamma	The supreme truth; the way things are in and of themselves, and the basic principles which underlie their behaviour. Dhamma is also used also to refer to the teachings of the Buddha.
Dhammo	A *parikamma* (preparatory) word used for the recollection of the teaching (Dhamma) during meditation practice.
Dhutanga	The *dhutangas* are a set of thirteen specialised ascetic practices that Buddhist monks voluntarily undertake. See the Appendix.
Diṭṭhi	Views, opinions.
Dukkha(ṁ)	Disease, discomfort, discontent, suffering and pain. *Dukkha* refers to the unsatisfactory nature of all phenomena, and is one of the universal characteristics of existence, the other two being *anicca* and *anattā*. The existence of *dukkha* is the first of the four noble truths.
Evaṁ	Thus, in this way. This term is used in Thailand to formally close a Dhamma talk.
Jhāna	Various states of meditative absorption, including the four *rūpa* and the four *arūpa-jhānas*.
Kāma	Desire of the senses, especially sexual desire.
Kamma	The law of cause and effect; intentional acts of body, speech and mind which result in becoming and birth. Actions can be good, bad or neutral, and so have good, bad or neutral kammic results.

Kammaṭṭhāna	Literally, *kamma* (action) and *ṭhāna* (a region or place). The accepted meaning of *kammaṭṭhāna* in the Thai Forest Tradition is "the basis of work" for a practicing Buddhist monk, namely, the contemplation of certain meditation themes that are conducive to uprooting the defiling forces of greed, hatred and delusion from his *citta*.
Khandha(s)	Literally, heap, group or aggregate. The term *khandhas* usually refers to the five physical and mental components of personality, namely, *rūpa, vedanā, saññā, saṅkhāra* and *viññāṇa.*
Khaṇika	Momentary. The initial stage of *samadhi* in which the *citta* "converges" into a still calm state for only a moment before withdrawing on its own.
Kilesa(s)	Normally translated as defilements, *kilesas* are negative psychological and emotional forces existing within the hearts and minds of all beings. The usual list includes greed, aversion and delusion in their various forms: passion, hypocrisy, arrogance, envy, conceit, stinginess, worry, laziness, and all kinds of more subtle variations. All *kilesas*, however, are the fangs or soldiers of *avijjā*.
Lobha	Greed.

Magga	Path, usually referring to the eight-fold path leading to *Nibbāna*, namely, right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. When it is used in the phrase "*magga*, *phala* and *Nibbāna*", *magga* refers to the four paths leading to *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmī*, *Anāgāmī* and *Arahant*. The path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* is the last of the four noble truths.
Mahā	Great, superior. In Thailand, a person with a degree in *Pāli* studies is granted the title Mahā.
Majjhima	Middle, appropriate, just right.
Māna	Conceit.
Māra	Temptation; the evil one, the personification of evil or the devil.
Mettā	Friendliness, pure love, loving kindness.
Moha	Delusion.
Nāma	Mental phenomena; the mental components of personality (*nāma-khandhas*), which include feelings, memory, thought and consciousness.
Nibbāna	Literally, "extinguished"; liberation; the release of the mind from mental outflows (*āsava*) and the 10 fetters (*saṁyojana*) which bind it to the round of rebirth. As this term is also used to refer to the extinguishing of fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling and peace. *Nibbāna* is the ultimate goal of Buddhist training.

Nimitta	A sign; a mental image, usually visual, that arises in meditation practice.
Nirodhā	Cessation. The cessation of *dukkha* is the third of the four noble truths.
Pāli	The ancient language in which Theravada Buddhist texts (the *Pāli* canon) are written. Most of the terms italicised in this book are *Pāli* words.
Paññā	Wisdom, discernment, insight, common sense, ingenuity.
Pāramī	Perfection, perfect fulfilment.
Parikamma	A preparatory meditation object. The most common *parikammas* are the inflow and outflow of the breath at the nose, or the mental repetition of the word *buddho*.
Parinibbāna	Final (total) *Nibbāna* attained at the death of the Buddha or any of the *Arahants*.
Paṭiccasamuppāda	Dependent Origination. The *paṭiccasamuppāda* is a concise statement of how fundamental ignorance (*avijjā*) conditions the rise of the whole cycle of repeated existence.
Peta	The dead, departed; a hungry ghost. The *peta* realm is below the human realm in the thirty-one realms of existence.
Phala	Attainment, realisation, fruition, results. Specifically, *phala* refers to the fruition of any of the four paths leading to *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmī*, *Anāgāmī* and *Arahant* (see *magga*).
Piṇḍapāta	The daily alms round of *bhikkhus*.
Pīti	Enthusiasm, rapture, joy, delight.

Pūjā	Homage, devotion.
Pure Abodes	See *Suddhāvāsa*.
Rāga	Lust, attachment, desire.
Rukkhamūla	Dwelling at the foot of a tree.
Rūpa	Physical phenomena in general; bodily form; all material form both gross and subtle. In contrast with *nāma* (mental phenomena), *rūpa* is the strictly physical component of personality.
Rūpa-jhāna	Meditative absorption on a single mental form or image.
Sacca	Truth, true, real.
Saddhā	Faith, belief, conviction.
Sakadāgāmī	Once-returner: a person who has abandoned the first three of the fetters (*saṁyojana*) that bind the *citta* to the cycle of rebirth, and has weakened the fetters of sensual passion and malevolence, and who after death is destined to be reborn in this world only once more. It is the second of the four stages of the noble path culminating in *Arahantship*.
Sālā	A meeting hall.
Samādhi	Meditative calm; tranquillity; firmness and stability; an absorbed concentration which has many levels, from *khanikā* (momentary *samādhi*) through *upācāra* to *appanā* (the deepest state of *samādhi*).
Samaṇa	A contemplative who follows a life of spiritual striving. At the time of the Buddha, a *samaṇa* was considered to embody the ideal of the wandering ascetic.

Sāmaṇera	A novice.
Samatha	Calm, tranquillity.
Sammā	Right, correct.
Sammuti	convention, relative truth, supposition; anything conjured into being by the *citta*. Conventional reality.
Saṁsāra	The round of rebirth without beginning, in which all living beings revolve. The attainment of *Nibbāna* marks the complete transcendence of the world of *saṁsarā*.
Samudaya	Origin, arising. *Samudaya-sacca* is the truth of the cause of *dukkha,* the second of the four noble truths.
Saṁyojana	Fetter. There are ten fetters or factors that bind the *citta* to the cycle of rebirth: the belief in a self; doubt or uncertainty, especially about the teachings; wrong attitude toward precepts and vows; sensual desire; ill will; lust for material existence; lust for immaterial existence, for rebirth in a formless realm; conceit; restlessness; and ignorance.
Sandiṭṭhiko	Self-evident, immediately apparent, visible here and now. *Sandiṭṭhiko* is a traditional epithet for the Dhamma.
Sangha	The community of the Buddha's disciples. On the conventional level, Sangha refers to the Buddhist monastic order. On the ideal level, it refers to those of the Buddha's followers, whether lay or ordained, who have attained at least the first of the four noble paths culminating in *Arahantship*.

Sankhāra	Formation; condition. As a general term, *sankhāra* refers to all forces which form or condition things in nature and to the formed or conditioned things which result. Most often, *sankhāra* refers specifically to the fourth *khandha* – thought and imagination.
Saññā	Memory and association; recognition of physical and mental phenomena as they arise. The third of the five *khandhas*, *saññā* both recognises the known and gives the meaning and significance to all of our personal perceptions.
Sati	Awareness, mindfulness, truly objective seeing. A moment of *sati* is a moment without *kilesas*.
Satipaṭṭhāna	The practice and method of developing *sati.* It usually refers to the four foundations of mindfulness – body, feelings, mind, and phenomena, viewed in and of themselves as they occur.
Sāvaka	A hearer (of the teaching). A disciple of the Buddha, especially a noble disciple.
Sīla	Morality, moral behaviour, moral precepts.
Sotāpanna	Stream-enterer: a person who has abandoned the first three of the fetters (*saṁyojana*) that bind the *citta* to the cycle of rebirth and has thus "entered the stream" leading to *Nibbāna*. The *Sotāpanna* will be reborn seven more times at most, and only into human or higher realms. It is the first of the four stages of the noble path culminating in *Arahantship*.

Suddhāvāsa	The Pure Abodes of the *Anāgāmī*. After death, if the *Anāgāmī* has not yet cut any of the higher fetters, he will appear successively in each of the five Pure Abodes of the *deva* realms: the *aviha*, *atappa*, *sudassa*, *sudassī* and *akaniṭṭha* realms. On the journey he will overcome the higher fetters and attain *Arahantship*.
Sukha	The pleasant, happy, contented.
Sutta	A thread; a discourse of the Buddha in the *Pāli* canon.
Taṇhā	Craving. *Taṇhā* is the cause of *dukkha*, and it takes three forms: craving for sensuality, for becoming and for not becoming.
Tathāgata	Literally, "one thus gone"; one of the epithets a Buddha uses when referring to himself.
Than	(Thai) Venerable; normally used when addressing a monk.
Thera	An elder; a *bhikkhu* who has been in the Sangha for ten or more years.
Theravāda	Literally, "The ways of the Elders". The southern school of Buddhism as found in Thailand, Sri Lanka and Burma.
Thudong	(Thai) The practice of wandering in forests, usually alone, to cultivate meditation practice. It is one of the ascetic austerities practiced by Buddhist monks.
Ti—lakkhaṇa	The three characteristics of existence that are invariably found to be natural to all phenomena, namely, impermanence *(anicca)*, suffering *(dukkha)* and non-self *(anattā)*.

Ti–Piṭaka	The earliest Buddhist canonical texts consisting of three sections: the discourses of the Buddha (*suttas*); the disciplinary rules (*Vinaya*); and the higher Dhamma (*Abhidhamma*).
Upācāra	Approach, access. *Upācāra* refers to the second stage of *samādhi*.
Upekkhā	Neutrality, equanimity, indifference.
Vāsanā	Merit. *Vāsanā* is translated as inherent virtuous tendencies or resources of merit, and it refers to virtues developed in past lives which become part of an individual's ongoing spiritual legacy experienced in the present life.
Vedanā	Feeling; the sensation of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain.
Vijjā	Knowing, knowledge; *vijjā* contrasts with *avijjā* (ignorance).
Vimutti	Freedom, deliverance.
Vinaya	The code of conduct and discipline for Buddhist monks, and the scriptures relating to it.
Viññāṇa	Consciousness; cognisance; the act of taking note of sense data, external and internal, as they occur. *Viññāṇa* is the fifth of the five *khandhas*.
Vipāka	Result, fruition; the consequence of action (*kamma*).

Vipassanā	Insight, based on a clear and quiet mind and of such a type as is deep and effective in curing the defilements. It is clear intuitive insight into physical and mental phenomena as they arise and disappear, seeing them as they are in terms of the three universal characteristics and the four noble truths.
Vīriya	Energy. *Vīriya* is one of the seven factors of enlightenment.
Wat	(Thai) Monastery.

Saṁyojana

The *saṁyojana* are a list of ten factors or fetters that bind people to the endless round of birth and death. They are:

1. *Sakkāya-diṭṭhi*: the belief that there is an entity of self or individuality in the five *khandhas*.
2. *Vicikicchā*: doubt of a sceptical nature based on delusion.
3. *Sīlabbata-parāmāsa*: usually translated as "attachment to rules and rituals." But many who practice the way of Buddhism are not satisfied with this and feel that it concerns morality more than rules and rituals.
4. *Kāma-rāga*: sensuous craving. Although this is a correct translation, amongst those who practice the main emphasis is on sexual craving and all that proliferates from it.
5. *Vyāpāda*: ill-will, malevolence.
6. *Rūpa-rāga*: the desire for the exalted states of the *rūpa* realms.
7. *Arūpa-rāga*: the desire for the exalted states of the *arūpa* realms.
8. *Māna*: conceit.
9. *Uddhacca*: restlessness.
10. *Avijjā*: blind unknowing.

These ten factors are overcome progressively by the attainment of the four paths. Thus the *Sotāpanna* has overcome the first three; the *Sakadāgāmī* has also reduced the fourth and fifth; the *Anāgāmī* has overcome the first five; and the *Arahant* has overcome all ten factors.

The Five *Khandhas*

The five *khandhas* consist of the aggregates of body, feeling, memory and association, thought and imagination, and consciousness. It is difficult to appreciate the depth and subtlety of meaning within these five groups, so in order to give the reader some basis for contemplation, a list of similes is given. These similes were taught by the Buddha, and can be found in the section on the *khandhas* in the *Saṁyutta Nikāya*.

1. The body (*rūpa*) is likened to a lump of foam floating down the river Ganges.
2. Feeling (*vedanā*) is likened to rain falling into a puddle of water. As each raindrop falls, it causes a splash and a bubble which quickly bursts and disappears.
3. Memory (*saññā*) is likened to a mirage seen in the desert. It has no substance to it; it is merely appearance.
4. Thought and imaginative thinking (*sankhāra*) are likened to a plantain tree. When the outer layers of the trunk are peeled off, no substantial pith or hardwood is found inside.
5. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is likened to a magician who stands at the crossroads and displays all sorts of magical illusions, which are devoid of any real substance.

When talking about the *nāma khandhas* (mental groups), we tend to think of them as being separate things or entities but, in fact, they are all aspects of the *citta*. It is therefore more correct to think in terms of the *citta* performing the functions of feeling, memory, thought or consciousness, for all of them are thoroughly dynamic and so not static entities at all.

Memory *(saññā)*

In the past, it was popular to translate the *Pāli* word *saññā* as "perception", but this is a wrong translation. It seems likely that this misunderstanding stems from translations of parts of the *Ti–Piṭaka* carried out more than one hundred years ago by scholars who tried to fit Buddhist ideas into Western philosophical concepts. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines "perceive" as, "to apprehend with the mind, observe, understand; to apprehend through one of the senses." And "perception" is defined as, "act, faculty of perceiving; intuitive recognition; (philos.) action by which the mind refers its sensations to external object as cause." These definitions refer to complex processes that involve all of the mental *khandhas*, not just one. One function of the mental *khandhas* that has been ignored is "memory." If *saññā* is not translated as memory, then where is memory in the *khandhas*? Throughout Thailand, *saññā* is always translated by "*kwam chum*", which means memory. This is universally accepted by both scholars and those who practice meditation. Not enough thought has been given to the overwhelming importance of memory, as shown by the devastating effect of Alzheimer's disease in which the memory steadily diminishes until the victim has no reference left from past experience.

The Ascetic Practices *(Dhutangas)*

The *dhutangas* are ascetic practices that Buddhist monks (*bhikkhus*) voluntarily undertake. It must be understood that their purpose in every case is to counteract specific defilements (*kilesas*). So they are to be applied by each practitioner as and when he finds need for them.

1. Wearing robes that are patched and mended.
2. Wearing only the three principal robes and no others.
3. Getting ones food by going on the alms round.
4. Not omitting any house on the alms round.
5. Eating food only once a day, at one sitting.
6. Eating only out of the alms bowl.
7. Refusing to accept food offered after the alms round.
8. Living in the forest.
9. Living under a tree.
10. Living in the open; not at the foot of a tree, nor under a roof.
11. Living in a charnel ground.
12. Being satisfied with any available bed or resting place.
13. The sitter's practice; in other words, sitting, standing or walking, but never lying down.

The Thirty-One Planes of Existence

Most Buddhist schools agree that *saṁsāra* comprises thirty-one major planes or realms where beings can be reborn. Existence on each plane is temporary depending on *kamma*, and all beings have probably experienced birth in most of the planes during their interminable wanderings through *saṁsāra*. For convenience, the thirty-one planes are subdivided into the *kāma-loka*, the world of sensuality; the *rūpa-loka*, the world of form or the fine material world; and the *arūpa-loka*, the formless or immaterial world. The world of sensuality consists of eleven planes that contain beings who have the five physical senses and whose minds are occupied with sense objects to a greater or lesser degree. At the bottom are the four unhappy, *dukkha*-filled planes that contain the beings in hell, the animals, the hungry ghosts (*petas*) and the demons (*asuras*). Above these are the human realm — where we exist for the moment at least — and the six other planes of heavenly gods (*devas*). In the *Saṁyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha stresses that rebirth as a human being is extraordinarily rare and precious, as its unique mixture of pleasure and pain helps the development of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* necessary to escape the cycle of rebirth and attain *Nibbāna*. Above these planes of sensuality are the sixteen planes of the subtler fine material world. Beings there are said to be peaceful, living very pure lives free of all thoughts of sensual pleasures. The five highest of the fine material planes are known as the Pure Abodes; if an *Anāgāmī* has not yet cut any of the higher fetters, he will appear successively in each of these five planes, overcoming the remaining fetters on the journey. The formless or immaterial world consists of four planes, the most refined levels of *saṁsāra*; beings there have no material body and possess a pure and rarified consciousness.

Nibbāna is not included in the thirty-one planes of existence, of course, since these represent the conditioned world of space and time. *Nibbāna* is a state without conditioned aspects; it is the deathless, beyond space and time.