

## **McNibbāna or the real thing?**

**Dhamma talk on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 2009**

All of you seem to have a lot of distractions – looking at this, reading that. Maybe you think that all these distractions help to firm up your practice. Maybe you think that all these distractions help you to develop your concentration? Maybe you think that a couple of hours of practice a day is enough, that 10, 12, 15 or 18 hours of practice a day is clearly too much for you, and that you won't be able to concentrate that length of time – but this is what the *kilesas* tell us. 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 this and forced us to do that, and we certainly didn't like being told what to do. Now we act in line with our own wishes, our wanting and not-wanting, and that's why we think that having a lot of distractions actually helps our 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, you 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 are not helpful. They are, and the more they are about practice the more helpful they can be. Books like *Paṭipadā* which describe the practice of Than Acharn Mun or Than Acharn Mahā Bua can be really encouraging. They describe fighting tiredness by sitting on the top of a cliff where falling asleep means falling to one's death, or going into tiger-infested forests, practicing all night with the fear that the tiger might eat us and certainly this fear will keep us awake. Reading these stories we might think that these monks (*bhikkhus*) of the Forest Meditation Tradition were all crazy, but they used these methods to overcome *avijjā* and the obnoxious *kilesas* which have ruled all our hearts for billions of lifetimes. Do you think you can convince *avijjā* to go away just by asking it, "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 has a laugh behind our backs. When we start to read books on Buddhism or even the Buddhist texts themselves, we begin to think that we know the Dhamma and 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.

For the past two or three months, 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* (meeting hall) made for the monks. There was nothing there but the wind and the sun. There were no local laypeople coming 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 word *buddho* or with *paññā* (wisdom), 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 Forest Meditation 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 Acharn 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 Acharn Chob told it that it was time to go and find some food, it just growled at him (*Patipada, Venerable Acariya Mun's Path of Practice*; page 166). These fearful situations help us to get into *samādhi*, whether *upacāra* or *appanā samādhi*, 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 for the spiritual path – fighting against the tiger mother (*avijjā*) who keeps the tiger cub (our true form, *nibbāna*). Until we fight the tiger mother to her 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 US. 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. It's called McNibbāna rather than McDonald's. You want to order *nibbāna* without *dukkha* or without *asubha* practice or without doing the investigation of 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 almsround 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 mediation centre and do a 10-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 Sotāpanna (stream-enterer). 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 more ‘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 should not 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 TV, 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 just terrible, that your practice doesn’t develop because there is nothing but a constant fight against greed and anger, and that to satisfy your greed and let out your anger would be much more profitable for your practice. 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 18 years, that’s years, not months – 14 of them as a monk in a pretty harsh environment, not in a comfortable monastery. In the hot season, I was drenched in sweat after 15 minutes, in the cold season I was shivering – 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 this? 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 will 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 only in the months of December to 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 here in the midst of the Thai forest in the last hundred years. Of course, Thai people are used to the climate so they used 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 Acharn Mun which describes his experiences in the Sarika cave, which was possessed by a powerful non-human being. Some of the bhikkhus staying in the cave before had died of strange stomach problems because the cave owner did not want them staying there. Than Acharn 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 18 years – 18 years of continuous practice. I didn't practice for just a month and then for another month the following year. I did continuous practice 18 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 of his admonishment. 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 the monks that dare to 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 Acharn Mahā Bua if he could go home to visit his parents, he was told, “Yes, you can go, but don't bother to come back again”. Nowadays, monks go anywhere they like, to visit their parents, visit friends, or go to visit places like India. They are just tourist monks. There are hardly any practicing monks left, but Than Acharn 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, saying “What the hell are you doing? Or, “Where is your *sati*?” A teacher who is constantly in front of your *kuti*, looking at what you are doing, and if he catches you sleeping more than practicing, he kicks you out, because this monastery is not a place for indulging in sleep.

Maybe I am wrong, but my experience with Westerners over the last seven years is that they just don't take this kind of 'crap', 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 that you can take them off and throw them at your teacher. We all think we have 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 lurks within us, grateful that he puts his finger on these things, and having respect for him – that's the attitude that is needed. Otherwise, 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 "This I don't like, that I don't like, I only want this". It was this incident that gave me the idea of 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. Just telling people the way things really are can annoy them, and they let out 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 mud and excrement 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 and will 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 completely off the path.

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 this or accuse me of that. Recently, I went to Germany 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. In my 14 years as a monk, there were three occasions when I wondered why Than Acharn Mahā Bua scolded me. But when I wondered to 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 the students think I must be very grateful that they are my students, that without students I wouldn't be a teacher, so they are 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 seven 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 Acharn Mahā Bua teaches. 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 here I looked at Than Acharn Mahā Bua's practice and I thought “Oh, his practice is really something”, maybe I could do 10% or 15% 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* (loving kindness) 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 of 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 Saṅgha. 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 were putting food into my bowl. Then, when I got back to the monastery, I was amazed that far more people than normal came to the monastery 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 30 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 'field of merit'. I do wonder whether this kind of attitude will ever come to the West; respect, generosity and gratitude. 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 is still too exciting so he enters the third *jhāna* and enjoys the peacefulness, but after a few hours he finds this is 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 Thai forest monks 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 anybody 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, then, of course, I'm the one who is guilty of the anger; it's not the owner of the anger who is at fault. It's the one who points at the faults of the others, who shows them their anger, and Than Acharn Mahā Bua was constantly showing us our anger and pointing at our faults. One of his senior Western monks once said, when he was serving Than Acharn Mahā Bua as his attendant, that he always felt his anger boiling up while being afraid that it would leak out, for Than Acharn 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.

But 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 within that time, we get it free. First, second, third and fourth *jhāna*, reflection, and – snap – we are enlightened! Actually, I would like to meet someone who has attained enlightenment this way. Until today, 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 Acharn 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.