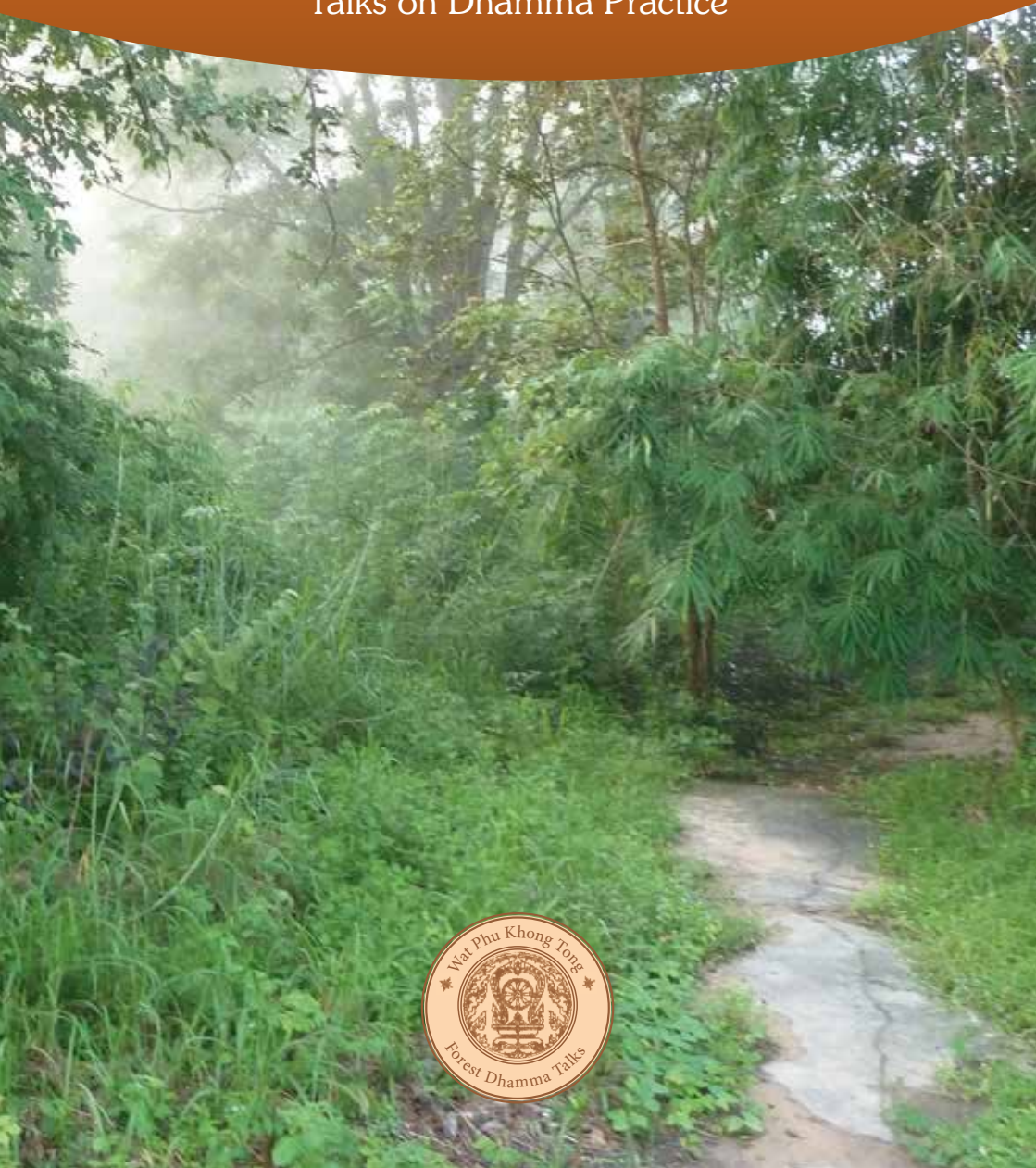
Ajahn Martin Piyadhammo

The Way to the Heart

Talks on Dhamma Practice



The Way to the Heart

Talks on Dhamma Practice

By Ajahn Martin Piyadhammo

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

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www.forestdhammatalks.org

Contents

Introduction

Ajahn Martin Piyadhammo is a Buddhist monk (*bhikkhu*) in the Thai Forest Tradition, which emphasises the practice of meditation to attain enlightenment in this life. The founder of the tradition was Than (Venerable) Ajahn Mun (1870–1949) who spent most of his life practising meditation in the extensive rainforests of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos. Many of his disciples also became accomplished meditation masters in their own right, and undoubtedly the most famous in Thailand was Than Ajahn Mahā Bua Ñāṇasampanno (1913–2011), affectionately known as Luangta Mahā Bua.

Ordained as a *bhikkhu* in 1934, Than Ajahn Mahā Bua attained enlightenment in 1950 and founded his famous forest 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 *bhikkhus* or laypeople at the start of their practice but rather for serious practitioners aiming to achieve a "doctoral degree" and rid themselves of fundamental ignorance (*avijjā*) 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 summarised 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 *bhikkhu*, 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 practise diligently and with perseverance for the rest of your life!"

Born in Stuttgart in 1957, Ajahn Martin Piyadhammo studied electrical and computer engineering in Germany and the USA. After discovering meditation, he lived in monasteries and meditation centres in Germany and England for four years, but came to feel that he would be unable to find the path to the extinction of greed, hate and delusion in Europe. Eventually, he came across *Straight from the heart* [1], a book of talks by Than Ajahn Mahā Bua, and decided to travel to Thailand. He arrived at Baan Taad Forest Monastery in 1995, and was ordained as a *bhikkhu* 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

1 *Straight from the heart* and other books and teachings by Than Ajahn Mahā Bua, can be found on the Luangta website (www.luangta.eu).

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 wandering on *tudong* 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 *bhikkhus*. However, as time went on, he preferred to be alone on *tudong*, 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 practise 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 *bhikkhu*, he came to the firm decision that he wanted to make sure that his present life was to be his last.

In 2002, Than Ajahn Mahā Bua gave him permission to teach, and from then on he was responsible for teaching *bhikkhus* and Western meditators visiting or staying at Baan Taad forest monastery. From 2006 onwards, following a request from a group of visitors, Ajahn Martin's Dhamma talks (*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*. In 2017, Ajahn Martin moved to the monastery of Wat Phu Khong Tong in the Nongbua Lamphu province of Thailand, where he is the acting Abbot and gives daily teachings to visitors and those staying at the monastery.

Like the first selection of Ajahn Martin's Dhamma *desanās*, published in 2019 under the title *Forest Leaves* [2], the talks in this book have been chosen to represent key aspects of his teachings over these years. Many words in the talks have been left in *Pāli* because there is often no adequate translation in English; it is

2 Than Ajahn Martin's book, *Forest Leaves*, is available on his website (www.forestdhammatalks.org)

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
March 2021

Get rid of your knowledge — just practise

21st May 2007

People who come to Baan Taad monastery knowing very little about Buddhism or meditation find it much easier to practise *samatha* (meditation that leads to a state of calm) or *vipassanā* (investigation that leads to insight) because they are not laden with views and opinions about the Lord Buddha's teachings, Buddhist scriptures or different schools of Buddhism. They know very little, so they are not perturbed by all their existing knowledge. If they simply follow what is taught here and take the path leading to calmness or *samādhi* (concentration), they will end up in *samādhi*. If I say that a certain practice will lead to *samādhi*, it will lead to *samādhi*. If I say that investigation will lead to wisdom (*paññā*), it will lead to wisdom. If I say that one practice or another will break the fetters binding us to rebirth, then it surely will. The trouble is that many people who arrive here have been in contact with other schools of Buddhism, have taken meditation courses with various different teachers or have read a lot about Buddhism. These people have a very difficult time because, as soon as they start meditating, thoughts come up about previous methods of practice, and they switch back and forth between different practices. They are so loaded with knowledge, concepts and views about how practice should be that they are not able to fall into the practice itself, and the results come only very slowly, or perhaps not at all.

I have been in the same situation. I practised meditation in Europe for six years before coming to Thailand, but when I arrived at Baan Taad forest monastery I had to retrain myself. I had to completely forget everything I had heard or learned previously to be able to follow the way taught by Than Ajahn Mahā Bua. I trusted him the moment I met him, and had confidence that he knew the path to deliverance from *dukkha*, the path to freedom. So I decided to forget whatever I knew, drop all the previous methods I'd learned, and undertake the practices

he recommended — concentration on the breath going in and out at the nose or on the mental repetition of the word *buddho*, and investigation of the body. Yet it took me two years to get rid of all the views and opinions about meditation practice that I'd gathered in the West, two years of "brainwashing". I had to wash away all the wrong ideas that I'd picked up, and it was very difficult indeed. My practice didn't go smoothly at first because of these memories, but finally I succeeded, and this proved to me that the teachings of Than Ajahn Mahā Bua really did lead to the results he described. But I had to trust him, and when I first came here I trusted him one hundred percent. Now, after many years, I trust him one thousand percent, if such a thing is possible. Over the years, my confidence in him increased and increased; it never decreased, because his teachings can be followed and the results experienced when they are put into practice. If, however, people cling on to their old practices and their views and opinions from the past, they won't be able to make progress and obtain the results that Than Ajahn Mahā Bua described.

Actually, we gather lots of views and opinions, even if we are unaware of it. Our experiences with different teachers stick in our minds, as do the things we've read in Buddhist books or the *suttas* themselves, and they are very difficult to get rid of. It's as if we are trying to climb a mountain with a heavy load, a backpack full of stones called views and opinions, and the greater the load the more difficult it is to take a step forward. The load pulls us down. Fortunately, I had a great teacher in Than Ajahn Mahā Bua, and when I had wrong views in the beginning, it was as if he could read my thoughts, for he would immediately mention the subject in one of his talks. For instance, I once thought, wrongly, that an *Arahant* ought always to have *sati* (awareness), but Than Ajahn Mahā Bua while talking to laypeople said, "Some people think that an *Arahant* has awareness all the time, but why should an *Arahant* have awareness all the time?" He explained that *sati* brings us to deliverance, but that once we are free the need for it is no longer there. There is no longer a need for *paññā* either, for

sati-paññā is just the tool that delivers us to freedom. Once we are free, there is no need for tools; we can then decide whether to use them or not. I had so many views and opinions like this — what *Arahants* should be like, what they should do, and so on — but whenever they crossed my mind the answer came straight from my teacher within a few days. Take the view that an *Arahant* should not have dreams. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua's answer was that an *Arahant* does indeed have dreams, because he still has five *khandhas*. Dreams come from one of them, memory and association (*saññā*), so the presence of dreams has nothing to do with whether a person is liberated or not. So, for your own sake, it's vital that you drop the load — get rid of your old views and opinions, and forget about the meditation techniques you've used previously.

If you want the results that both Than Ajahn Mahā Bua and I describe in our teachings, forget whatever you've known and practised previously. When you want to get calm, just concentrate on the repetition of the word *buddho* or on the breath around the tip of the nose, or on the combination of breath and *buddho*, and don't buy into any of the thoughts that come up. This is called *samatha* practice, which leads to *samādhi*. When we practise for *samādhi*, we do just that; we don't switch to investigation within the same session. Similarly, when we do the practice of investigation, we do just that; we don't switch to *samādhi* practice within the same session. A session can last for three hours or the whole night long, and can include alternate sitting and walking. The longer we remain concentrated on one object, the better results we obtain.

There is only one exception — during *samādhi* practice if the pain becomes too strong. Then we can switch to the investigation of pain to understand its nature and transcend it. In this case, we first turn our attention to the location of the pain and examine it. Is it at a point or an area? Is it in the muscles, the joints, the flesh or the bones? If the pain really was in the flesh or muscles, we would be in pain all the time, but it's only painful while sitting in

meditation. Think about it. We have to ask what pain really is, and get down to seeing and understanding it. Is it moving? Does it have the three universal characteristics of *anicca, anattā* and *dukkha*? Which of the four elements – air, fire, earth and water – does it consist of? If we just sit through pain and try to bear it, we'll get nowhere. Only by understanding the true nature of pain can we transcend it, but it's not easy. We need all the *sati* we can muster, and the stronger the pain gets the more *sati* we need. We can't allow the mind to go out, to leave the object of pain for even one mind-moment, for then we'll be defeated. "The pain is too strong, I don't like pain, I'm going to break my leg, I'm going to die" – thoughts like these will come up, but following them without having understood the nature of pain spells defeat. The arising of strong pain is the only exception to the rule not to switch to investigation during a session of *samādhi* practice.

When one session is finished, you can switch to the other practice, *samādhi* or investigation. The important thing is to decide on the practice before the meditation session begins and stick to it for however long the session lasts. You should never muddle up *samādhi* practice and investigation, for this is just allowing the mind to go wherever it wants to, and this will never lead to understanding. You have to forge the *citta*, to fashion it into a tool for your use. You have to force it either to investigate or to become peaceful, otherwise the practice will follow your likes and dislikes, and you've been doing this all your life. You've said, "Oh, I'm tired now so I'll do *samādhi* practice. Now I'm refreshed, so I'll do investigation. I'm interested in this now so I'll investigate it", and forth. This is not the way it should be done, and it will not lead to any results. Rather, you should decide what to do and stick with your choice. You could, for example, choose to do only investigation for the next week, apart from one or two hours a day of *samādhi*, or only *samādhi* for the next week with just one or two hours a day of investigation or reflection. But you must stick to your decision whatever happens. Don't muddle up the two practices. The mind is already muddled up enough, and you have to set it straight.

The practice of *samādhi* and the practice of investigation are two different things. For investigation, we should choose just one object to investigate, and focus on it for the whole session. It can be an internal or external part of the body, or a reflection about the body in general, or the act of disassembling the body into its components. Whatever the object, we should know what we intend to do before the session starts, and stay with this one object for the whole session. The longer the session, the more fruitful the practice will be. In investigation, we want to see things clearly. If investigating the liver, for instance, we focus on that organ, not the lungs or anything else, and investigate it until we clearly see its nature before our eyes. Investigation or reflection, when practised correctly, is the only way to develop wisdom. For example, we can reflect that whatever goes into the body is appealing but whatever comes out is disgusting. Why is this? Let's open the body up and see its true nature. Where does all the dirt come from? Where does the smell come from? Where does the excrement come from? Food just rots away in our stomach, doesn't it? We don't mind when it is in the body, but when we see rotting food outside, we find it unpleasant or even disgusting. Isn't that strange?

Alternatively, we can carry out a cost-benefit analysis on the body itself, reflecting on the amount of time we spend every day taking care of its health and its needs compared with what we gain from it. How much pleasure does the body really bring? Why spend so much time on it? If we reflect wisely, we'll see that it actually brings very little pleasure, and that we experience perhaps five minutes of pleasure in twenty-four hours. Most of the time we're hungry, thirsty, tired, and so on. So why are we so obsessed with maintaining the body? What does it really bring? We have to work to clothe and feed it, treat it with medicines, put it to sleep and find a lodging to keep it safe. We spend all our lives looking after a body which has to die in the end, rotting away and changing into energy in the same way that the rotting food in the stomach becomes transformed into energy to sustain the body itself.

Please get this straight. We usually eat because of the pleasure of taste, but the real purpose of eating is to give the body strength. We forget this: we eat because the eyes or tongue like the look or taste of food. Sometimes we get sick through over-eating and have to use medicines to counteract the discomfort or pain. Isn't it all a bit ridiculous? We need to reflect on this — but reflect in a clear, straight way in line with the Dhamma, not the crooked way in line with the world. Think about what the body needs — food to provide energy and nothing else. Who needs the taste, sweet or sour? Not the tongue: it doesn't care about the taste, for it just produces a sense impression. The *citta* is the thing that wants particular tastes or food nicely arranged, not all mixed together as in the alms bowl of a *bhikkhu*. The tongue tastes, the eye sees, but what is it that likes to taste or see? The *citta*. The whole purpose of the body is to house the six senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. They are the only reason we keep this monstrous body going.

In Baan Taad forest monastery, the food is pleasant but often quite simple, and in other monasteries it can be very basic, sometimes only white rice and water. It really doesn't matter though, because it does the job. It relieves hunger and gives the body energy, but people go for the taste, don't they? Observe yourself when you sit in front of food and notice the greed arising: "I want this, and I want that, This is healthy, but this is not", and on and on it goes. How do you know if the food is healthy or not once the body starts working on it? In fact, as soon as the food is in the stomach, you've lost any concern about it. You really only care if the food has caused problems like indigestion, when you run to the medicine cabinet to relieve the pain, forgetting about the food that caused it. These are the habitual ways we act, and we need to reflect on them. But don't think that this reflection can be completed in a week. I battled with the sense of taste and the craving for food for years on end. At times everything seemed fine, but then I caught myself grabbing at particular foods again. When that happened, I realised that I was not yet finished with

these reflections. Battling with the senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking is so important. These are the six senses that come with the body. They are the reason we keep it and take so much care of it. But think about this: if we give the body just a little care and attention, the senses still work, don't they?

So think about what you are doing very carefully. Just follow the instructions you are given. If I say that repeating the word *buddho* or being aware of the in-breath or out-breath will lead to calm, then it will lead to calm. If I say that investigation of the body or reflection on our lives, if done properly, will lead to wisdom, then it will lead to wisdom. Also, if I say that reflecting on pain and understanding its nature will allow you to transcend pain, then it will. If you do these things correctly, you will see the results, without a doubt. But if you don't believe that these methods will bring results, I can't help you. If I tell you that one practice or another will lead to the state of *Sotāpanna, Sakadāgāmī, Anāgāmī* or *Arahant*, then it will indeed lead to these four supreme attainments.[1]

As I often say, the first three of the ten fetters (*saṁyojana*)[2] must be cut for the attainment of *Sotāpanna*. Doubt (*vicikicchā*), the first fetter, is a particular problem for Westerners: doubt that heaven or hell exists; doubt that beings in heaven or hell exist; doubt that *kamma* exists and that we make it all the time through

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1 The four kinds of noble person are *Sotāpanna*, or stream-enterer, who has abandoned the first three fetters that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth; *Sakadāgāmī*, who has abandoned the first three and weakened the fetters of greed and hatred; *Anāgāmī*, who has abandoned the five lower fetters; and *Arahant*, who has abandoned all ten fetters and whose heart is free of mental effluents (*āsava*).

2 A list of the ten fetters (*saṁyojana*) is given in the Appendix. For additional information, see the talk, *The supreme attainments*, in Than Ajahn Mahā Bua's book, *A Life of Inner Quality*, available on the Luangta website (www.luangta.eu).

action, speech or thought; doubt that we experience the results of past *kamma* at every moment in our lives; and doubt that after death we will be reborn somewhere else. You have to remember that *kamma* is the law that governs the whole universe. Nearly all that you experience is the result of *kamma* from the past, from your previous actions, words or thoughts. The situation you find yourself in is no-one else's fault, for you have created it yourself. If you remember this, you will fare well. Just accept your *kamma* and try to find the cause within yourself, not in other people. Once you find the cause of unwholesome *kamma*, get rid of it, but if it is wholesome *kamma*, make more of it. To walk the path, you have to trust, to have confidence in the teachings of the Lord Buddha, and doubt is the fetter that hinders most people. It is doubt that prevents billions of people from even starting meditation practice.

Actually, the more you read about Buddhism, the more knowledge you acquire, the less able you are to practise properly. The Lord Buddha warned his *bhikkhus* that the Dhamma can be like a snake; grab it by the tail, and it can turn and bite, poisoning you for the rest of your life. This means that if you only study Dhamma from books, in the end you'll be poisoned by the belief that you know everything already and don't need to practise meditation. Knowledge passes away, however. When memory fades, knowledge is gone, but this is not true for the experience that comes from meditation. Once you've gained a certain insight or a particular result, it will remain with you for the rest of your life, because it is burned into the *citta*, not into the memory. This is the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom is burned into the *citta*; it removes a stain, and that stain is gone forever. If you just memorise something, however, it fades within a few years or when life ends. So if you become a *Sotāpanna* in this life, you might not remember it in the next, but the experience will have burned itself into the *citta*. There are certain things we know, but where they come from we cannot imagine. So someone born as a *Sotāpanna* in this life will

not break any of the five moral precepts (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*) because of the wisdom he acquired in a previous life, and will not have the slightest intention of doing so. A *Sotāpanna* is a person who keeps the five precepts perfectly, whether he remembers them or not, for he will know that there is something beyond. He will always seek Dhamma, and will have no doubt about Dhamma, because the first fetter of doubt has been erased.

The second fetter is being inconsistent in keeping the five precepts, sometimes keeping them and sometimes breaking them. While someone born as a *Sotāpanna* will keep the *sīla* perfectly, the rest of us should decide to keep the precepts and stick to that decision for the rest of our lives. There shouldn't be the slightest intention to break the precepts, and if we have enough *sati* it will be possible to keep them until we die. Keeping the precepts prevents us being reborn in the hell realms and is the passport to birth in the human or higher realms.

Identification with the body (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*) is the third fetter. We think that the *citta* and the body are one and the same, but we have to destroy this illusion. One exercise that can help with this task is to mentally disassemble the body, placing the parts in front of you one by one, until you see them all in a heap before your eyes. You have to do this time and time again until, when all the body parts are out in front, the knowledge arises that there is no body and no "I". You have to train yourself in this way until enough knowledge gathers in the heart, until the *citta* understands that it and the body are two different things.[3]

Once these three fetters have been reduced to a minimum, all we need is a quiet moment when everything can come together. This is then the end of our time as an ordinary person – a worldling – and the beginning of our time as noble being (*ariya puggala*), a *Sotāpanna*. We experience *Nibbāna* for the

3 See Ajahn Martin's talk, *How to practise body contemplation*, in his book, *Forest Leaves*, available on his website (www.forestdhammatalks.org).

first time in our lives. Even if just for one mind-moment — and it can be just a flash — the experience will have a life-changing effect. This moment of seeing *Nibbāna* is called the path (*magga*) moment, and afterwards a great deal of wisdom will arise. Just seeing *Nibbāna* for the first time, for a flash of time, makes us ponder. We don't understand what we have seen, but the deep insight changes our ways. We understand Dhamma in a completely different way. We start to know true Dhamma from false Dhamma, and to see what leads to Dhamma and what does not. Our understanding will not be very clear, but it will be much clearer than the understanding of the worldling who hasn't cut the first three fetters.

The next stage on the spiritual path is *Sakadāgāmī*, and little can be said about it. In the *suttas*, it's said that greed and hate have been reduced when this stage is attained. The practice involves investigating the body inside and out to understand its true nature, and learning to accept and understand pleasant and unpleasant feelings. This entails staying with unpleasant feelings to see them arising and ceasing. The aim is to bring unpleasant and pleasant feelings or images to a point of balance. We've been running after pleasant experiences all our lives, so just imagine how unbalanced our scale must be. Now we have to bring up all the unpleasant things we have routinely ignored or evaded, in order to bring the scale into balance. The technique used in this monastery is to bring only unpleasant things into the mind until we so unbalance the scale in the opposite direction that we see only unpleasant things for days or weeks on end. Then we investigate pleasant things, and we do this until the scale of pleasant and unpleasant is evenly balanced. Then we just walk through the middle of pleasant and unpleasant, and that is the end of greed and hate. They are gone, and they never come back.

At that point, we will attain the state of *Anāgāmī*, and will never be born again. If a person dies at this stage, he will reappear in one of the five heavenly realms, the Pure Abodes (*suddhāvāsa*), reserved only for the *Anāgāmī*. The particular

realm that an *Anāgāmī* appears in depends on which of the five remaining fetters he has cut. He goes up from one realm to another, and it takes fifty thousand years at most (ten thousand years for each fetter) to cross over into *Arahantship*. In this sense, he is the only type of person to "fall upwards". Becoming an *Anāgāmī* takes a lot of work, however, and it involves a lot of investigation. We don't like unpleasant things and that's why we have to investigate them first. If we want to bring the scale into balance, we have to do this work. If we can't bring pleasant and unpleasant things into balance, we'll never be able to walk through the middle. If we continually avoid unpleasant things, there is no way we can make it. This is why it is nearly impossible for laypeople to reach the stage of *Anāgāmī*: as long as they live in the world, they can do whatever they like, and this ability to choose the pleasant over the unpleasant prevents them reaching the goal.

The Lord Buddha said that it's nearly impossible for a person living an ordinary worldly life to become an *Arahant*. To reach that stage, it's necessary to live as an ascetic, such as a *samaṇa* or *bhikkhu*. A layperson can become a *Sotāpanna*, however, and some even became *Anāgāmīs* in the Lord Buddha's time. The attainment of *Sotāpanna* gives you the assurance that you can never fall down into hell, and this is one of the insights that arises. You won't know where this knowledge has come from, but you'll know that you are safe and will never fall back down into the lower planes of existence, whether the demon, animal, ghost or hell realms. You just know it, and you know that you are on the way out. This doesn't mean, however, that you can't have a family. It's still possible to have a partner and children, for you are still full of greed and hate. Greed and hate have not been reduced at all; they are still in full working order. But as a *Sotāpanna* you will always keep the five precepts, as they have nothing to do with greed and hate. You will keep them perfectly, without having to take them formally or even knowing what they are. A *Sotāpanna* can go to shows, travel anywhere he likes, and

be interested in science or art. Though he has not reduced greed and hate in any way, he has the security of knowing that he will not go down to the lower realms and that he is certain to attain *Arahantship* — complete liberation — within seven lifetimes. As pleasant as this sounds, please remember that a *Sotāpanna* still has a lot of *dukkha*, though probably a little less than an ordinary person. He is not free from *dukkha*, for the only person free from *dukkha* is the *Arahant*.

Now let's consider the difference between an *Anāgāmī* and a *Sotāpanna*. A *Sotāpanna* is still full of delusion and has greed and hate in full working order, while an *Anāgāmī* still lives in delusion but has removed the greed and hate that produce so much of the heavy *dukkha*. It's very difficult for an *Anāgāmī* to see *dukkha*; he still has some but it's slight — like a tap on the head compared with an elephant stamping on it — and compared with a *Sotāpanna* he has virtually none. Nevertheless, compared with an *Arahant*, an *Anāgāmī* is nothing; he's still a piece of trash, as Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used to say. The *Arahant* has no *dukkha* and no *kilesas*. No-one can trick him any more, but his five *khandhas* still exist. His *citta* is liberated because the *kilesas*, which usually take charge of the *khandhas*, are no longer there. So whatever he does, says or thinks doesn't produce any *kamma*. In our case, when we lack *sati* the *kilesas* take charge and we produce *kamma*, but when we have *sati* the *kilesas* cannot get a foothold. It is not like this for the *Arahant*; whether he has *sati* or not, nothing changes.

I want you to take this to heart. If you follow the mode of practice taught in this monastery, you will inevitably attain the results I've described. I've explained how to undermine the fetters, how to gain wisdom, and how to get into *samādhi*. Use these teachings wisely and skillfully to make your way along the path, to find the safest haven you ever dreamt of. The level you attain depends on you. Reaching *Sotāpanna* is more difficult for some people than for others, but it's not beyond your abilities — you can do it. You already know that if you really put your mind

to something, you can achieve it. After all, you've all learned, with great pain and difficulty, to walk, talk and think. Consider how long it has taken to train the mind. Well, now you have to un-train it and re-train it for a different purpose, not to gain knowledge but to gain insight. It's the opposite of what you've done in the past. Knowledge can never bring release; if knowledge led to freedom, what would be the use of sitting through all this pain? We would just have to read a few books to find deliverance. But the more we read, the more confused we become. The more we try different methods of meditation practice, or follow different schools of Buddhism, the more confused we get and the more difficult it is to end the confusion. Don't take confusion lightly. If you get rid of your knowledge and just do the practice, you'll get there in no time.

Self and not-self

6th November 2009

The Lord Buddha taught that the five *khandhas* — body, feeling, memory and association, thought and consciousness — are not self. They are not me and not mine. Take the body: we don't have the power to change its biological sex or race at will, or to alter its height or basic hair colour. The body is a very close entity, but it doesn't belong to us. Because we are born in a body, we think we are the body, just as a person who is born in a car and never gets outside thinks that he and the car are one and the same. The second of the five *khandhas*, feeling, can be physical or mental, and either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral in each case. We think that feelings are parts of ourselves, not realising that most of the time they arise and cease according to their own nature. They come and go, and we can't change them. We can't keep pleasant feelings for ever or get rid of unpleasant feelings at will, so they can't be ours. We should ask ourselves who knows about feelings. Does a feeling of sadness or happiness know that it's a feeling of sadness or happiness? Does a feeling even know that it's a feeling? No — so feelings cannot be self. They are just something happening, something that we experience.

Likewise, memory and association can't be self. Association involves labelling whatever comes in contact with the senses, putting a name to things (a cockerel, a house, a leaf, a bed, etc), while memory refers to memories of events and experiences. Memories and associations just arise and cease. We can bring up things we want to remember, but they don't stay long in the mind, while it can be difficult to make unwanted memories go away. How memories arise and cease and what their causes are, we'll understand only when meditation practice becomes really deep. With thought, the fourth *khandha*, it's a similar story. Most of our thoughts don't come up because we want to think them; they just arise by themselves. If we like a thought, we bring it up over and over again until we're tired of it, until it stops bringing

pleasure and becomes boring. So thought doesn't belong to us and can't be ours. Ask yourself who knows thought. Thought doesn't know it's a thought or that it's bad or good. The last *khandha*, consciousness, is difficult to get a handle on. It's simply knowing that there is a sense input but not yet knowing which kind of sense data has come in. As soon as a sense contact occurs, memory functions in order to give it a label. None of these five *khandhas* are under our control; they just happen to arise and cease of their own accord.

So what is self? Self is the thing that experiences the five *khandhas*, so you could call it the knowing nature of the *citta*, but it's not a self in the sense of a personality. The personality is made out of the five *khandhas*. The form of the body (its gender, skin colour, hairstyle, and so on) along with feelings, thoughts, memories and consciousness all amount to the personality we call self, and when we think about ourselves, it is a combination of these five *khandhas* that comes to mind. Whenever you think about yourself, have a look and see which *khandha* the thought concerns. It will always be one of the five, but most of the time it will be feeling, memory, or thought itself. We call these five *khandhas* self, but when the Lord Buddha said that they were not me or mine he was pointing out that there is something beyond them, something that knows that a body is a body, feeling is feeling, memory is memory, thought is thought and consciousness is consciousness. The practice of *samatha*, which leads to *samādhi*, is the path to the true nature of the *citta*.

The true nature of the *citta* can be called the observer or the knowingness, but this knowingness doesn't have a personality. It just knows. I often compare a person's life to a video game, because I find the metaphor so intriguing. Someone playing a video game can take on a virtual persona, develop it or sometimes even change it, but the person playing the game is not the same as the persona. Similarly, we take on a persona, which we call a personality, in our everyday lives. However, when everything is stripped down, there is no self as we usually think

of it, no personality. Personality is constructed from the five *khandhas*, and that's why people differ from each other; some are similar to others and some are complete opposites. Whatever we think of as me, mine or myself is made up of the five *khandhas*, but knowingness itself does not belong to the *khandhas*. It's the practice of *samatha* and the entering of *appanā samādhi* that brings us to the true nature of the *citta*, to the knowingness, to the one who knows that there is a body, feeling, memory, thought and consciousness. The body doesn't know that it's a body. You can open it up and take it apart, and it won't even know; all it can do is react according to its own conditions. The five *khandhas* don't know they exist; thoughts don't know if they are good or bad, and memories don't know if they are happy or sad. The only knowing thing is the knowingness of the *citta*. It's similar to sitting in a theatre watching a play, knowing that the actors on the stage are not oneself. You could call that knowingness the true self, but it is a self without a personality. This, of course, doesn't really make sense to most people, so let's just call it the *citta*.

We train ourselves to get into *samādhi* by observing the breath, knowing when it is coming in or going out, knowing that it is deep or shallow, or knowing whether the in-breath is longer or shorter than the out-breath. Alternatively, if practising using the internal repetition of the word *buddho*, we know if *buddho* is deep or shallow, fast or slow. These methods, when practised correctly, actually lead to the knowingness of the *citta*, to the *citta* itself, and that's why they work. They automatically take us to the knowingness of the *citta*, which is aware that the breath is short or long, or that the *buddho* is fast or slow. No-one has to tell the *citta* these things; it just knows them. Of course, there is a little voice repeating what the *citta* knows, but this voice is just the report of the knowingness, not the knowingness itself. For instance, we may think, "I'm now calm" or "I'm now close to the *citta*", but these reports are second-hand because the knowingness comes before thoughts like these. Practising for *samādhi*

leads to this knowingness, and in *appanā samādhi* we can experience knowingness without objects, a pure knowingness.

Usually there is an observer and an object observed, whether the *buddho*, the breath or the combination of both. However, once there is pure knowingness, everything else disappears. You will be amazed by the experience. Try it out – it's an amazing state of mind. In English, we say an amazing state of mind, but actually it's an amazing state of the *citta*. Once the *citta* gets really calm and no more thoughts are formed, there is still experience. In meditation practice using the word *buddho*, we focus on *buddho* until we can't think *buddho* any more; the *citta* is so concentrated that it can't even think a single thought. Then we go to the knowingness that is aware that it can't even think a single thought. Similarly, in practising awareness of breathing, there comes the moment when we perceive that the breath has stopped. Then we go to the thing that knows this. We just jump there – it's like jumping into a deep well. At first you still see the sky, but in the end you don't see anything any more.

Before entering *appanā samādhi*, the first thing that disappears from sense of awareness is the body. Then the senses disappear and then everything disappears, and the only thing left is knowingness. If you want to call this knowingness the true self, you can, but it's simpler just to call it the *citta*. The moment we come out of *appanā samādhi*, the *citta* becomes defiled by the *kilesas* once again, of course. The true *citta* is the same for everyone – for you, me and everyone – though it experiences different things at different times because the conditions are different. We can draw an analogy with the ocean. The ocean at California is subject to different conditions than the ocean at Brazil, but it's still the same body of water. The essence is the same, but the experience is different because the conditions are different. Sometimes there is rain on the surface of the water, sometimes there is sun, and sometimes the wind blows the water and sometimes it doesn't. When we become enlightened, we revert back to the true *citta*: all the conditioning is gone, and

we become just the ocean, not the ocean at California or the ocean at Brazil but just the ocean. Normally, we believe we are the surface of the ocean where conditions change. Ten miles below the surface, however, the ocean is unperturbed by surface conditions. What we perceive as self is just the surface of the ocean. If we truly understand this, we will remove some of the fetters binding us to the wheel of *saṁsāra*, the endless round of birth and death. If the wind comes up, the surface is no longer smooth; if rain comes, the surface is broken for a time; and if the sun comes out, some of the surface sparkles. It's the same when our body or feelings change — we experience different things, such as happiness or sadness.

We live in a world of contradiction: yesterday we were happy but today we're sad; yesterday we thought this but today we think that; yesterday we were communists but today we are capitalists, and so forth. We cannot be both, so what are we really? We have to see how thoughts, memories and feelings change throughout our lives. It's like being on a beach watching the waves coming in — they change constantly. We associate ourselves with the changing conditions, and wish them to be otherwise, but this is precisely what causes *dukkha*. If only we would stay calm and observe things appearing, arising and ceasing. If only we would remain equanimous and realise that whatever arises just arises and whatever ceases just ceases, that whatever is thrown into the air must come down again, and that everything born has to die. But we are attached to the changes at the surface of the water.

In meditation practice, we are going back to the origin where things don't change, and we experience this in *appanā samādhi*. This is also called deep *samādhi*, because we go deep down to where we don't see the surface any more; we don't see what is happening up there and aren't bothered by it. Even in *upācāra* (access) *samādhi*, which is less deep than *appanā samādhi*, we are aware of happenings on the surface, but we just don't care. We are equanimous, we just experience, because we don't have thoughts of like or dislike about anything. In *samādhi*, whether

upācāra or *appanā*, the *kilesas* — which are the fangs or soldiers of *avijjā* — have no power over us. You can call it a safe haven in a stormy sea. In *upācāra samādhi*, we can watch the storm going on outside but are not affected by it; no likes or dislikes about it come up any more. I also describe it as going into a glasshouse in the middle of a storm. Inside the glasshouse, we're not afraid of what is going on outside, though we still know what's happening. *Upācāra samādhi* is a state without worries and without fear, because thoughts have vanished for the time being. The first thought that comes up, however, takes us out of the glasshouse. If we think, "Oh, that was nice. I want to experience it again!", then we know we are out. Some people open the door of the glasshouse, sense the happy and peaceful air and close the door in front of them, doing this again and again. They never get in. A sign that this is happening is that they feel depleted of energy at the end of the meditation session. They assume that they've been into *samādhi* when, in fact, they've just opened and closed the door, and they wonder why they feel so drained afterwards. But when we open the door of the glasshouse and close it behind us — when we really enter *samādhi* — we feel rested when we eventually come out. Once inside, we can stay there for the time being; it might only be for five or ten minutes or it might be for one or two hours, depending on our experience. Whether it is *upācāra* or *appanā samādhi*, the more often we practise, the longer we can stay there.

If you really want to cut down on *dukkha*, you have to re-evaluate your notion of self, what you call me, mine or myself. Look very carefully at the things you call self and see if they belong in one of the five *khandhas*. Whatever you call me, mine or myself, it cannot be you if it belongs in one of these five groups. Remember that the one who knows there is a thought is the one we can call the true *citta*: this is what we want to revert to, where we want to arrive. The practice of *samādhi* will lead to this state of knowingness, and we use the faculty of knowing to get there, for example, knowing that the breath comes in and goes out. This

is why we have to be very careful with knowing, and not just go through the motions of practice. If we want to jump to the knowingness of the *citta*, then we need to know everything in detail, and the more we know the better. This doesn't mean that we have to repeat in the mind what we know. As I said above, the voice in our heads that reports what is happening is not helpful. We don't need a radio broadcast of what we are experiencing, though that is what most of us have all the time. I had a broadcast like that too, until I got fed up with it. So whenever you think of something as me, mine or myself, do this exercise and categorise it into one of the five *khandhas*; if it fits one, it can't be you. Take doubt: where does it come from? It's a thought. Take fear: if it comes as a feeling then it belongs in feeling, but most probably it comes as a thought that leads to a feeling, so it's a combination of thought and feeling, though it may also involve memory. Compound emotions like this can be a mix of the five *khandhas*, but they still belong firmly within these five groups.

Sati (awareness) is the quality that leads to knowingness. It shows us what is going on. It lets us see how an emotion, such as hate, arises. If we are really aware when we see a person, we can observe how the name and the label come up first, then a feeling, then a thought that increases the feeling, then a memory of previous situations involving the person, all of which cause the feeling to increase, and so it goes on. This all happens within a split second, and we find that the emotion of hate has come up. People might see someone and want to kick him, but they remain unaware of how this emotion has arisen. Most of the emotions we experience are a combination of three or more *khandhas*. Isn't that amazing? We can reduce the whole world to its basic building blocks. It's hard to believe, isn't it? The whole universe is just a combination of these five *khandhas*. Think what a cook can do with five ingredients, mixing them in a different way so that they have a different taste each time. Or think what a computer can do. It lets people play games, watch videos, listen to music, create documents or design structures, all from a clever

combination of two elements, 0 and 1. These two elements (*khandhas*, if you like) are the basis of all these activities, and some people get so addicted to computer games that they can't stop playing them. Now imagine what five elements combined together can do — it's beyond imagination, isn't it?

But with *sati*, we can bring the interplay of the *khandhas* down to its basic building blocks to see what is happening, see how they combine and how the avalanches of greed or hate are generated. They start with the first stone that starts to move, gathering snow as it rolls, and the more it rolls the bigger the snowball becomes. We all know this, and when we start practising meditation, we can catch the process and stop it. For instance, when meditating using *buddho*, if we see fear coming up we can stop it and go back to the *buddho* so that the fear vanishes. The mental repetition of *buddho*, *buddho*, *buddho* stops one of the important elements in the mental avalanche, namely, thought. And when the process is stopped, the feelings that come up in the process also stop. If we keep doing *buddho* practice for a long time, a feeling of calm will arise. If fear tries to come up again, it arises only for a short time if the *buddho* practice is kept going. What you have to understand is that these processes are not you. You are observing them, and you should try to take control of them.

This is what we must learn to do — take control. When we see an avalanche arising, no matter what kind, we stop it. Whether its origin is greed or hate, we just stop it. If we don't have enough *sati*, we might not be able to stop it as early as we would like, and if we like it, we won't want to stop it. This is why, when we start the practice of investigation, we focus first on unpleasant feelings not pleasant feelings. If we were to focus on pleasant feelings first, we'd never find the way out. It's much easier to get a handle on what is going on using unpleasant feelings, because we don't like them; they cause suffering, pain, discomfort, unease or restlessness. In this practice, if unpleasant feelings don't arise by themselves, we have to bring them up. We can use memories

of unpleasant things, but the easiest way to bring up unpleasant feelings is to dig into the reality of the body. For instance, we can visualise the food we ate most recently, that now rests in our stomach, bringing it to mind, seeing it in the hand and smelling it. Remember the last time you threw up? The food that the body has not yet processed is still good, so it's perfectly fine for the body, but it's disgusting because we like to eat fresh food. And even with delicious food, if we put it in our mouths and spit it out, we're very unlikely to want to eat it again, unless we're really hungry. Anything that comes in contact with the body becomes dirty, and that's why we use the body for contemplations like this, because unpleasant feelings come up. Actually, most of the actions of the body are unpleasant to think about, but we don't usually notice. Over time, the more we investigate, the more we notice.

Investigating the body in this way is not easy. The problem is *avijjā*, which doesn't want to see the body as it is and doesn't want to practise. Everyone has this difficulty, but once body investigation becomes established, everything is fine. The practice has a momentum of its own, but gathering this momentum takes time, and it can be a long while before results come. In my case, I had to do continuous practice for nine months before I got a feel for what it was about. I arrived at Baan Taad forest monastery from the West, not knowing anything about body investigation, and had to start it from scratch. It was nine months before I started to get an inkling of what it means to do body contemplation, to bring up unpleasant feelings, and to be able to stay with them to see how the five *khandhas* combine to create them. The important thing about investigation is to understand how the five *khandhas* become mixed together to produce what we think we are.

The first stage in investigation is to become objective, to be an observer of the process rather than the process itself. Thinking that you feel tired doesn't help. If you think you feel tired, all you can do is sleep, but if you think, "There is tiredness", you

can observe what tiredness actually is. And the same goes for feelings of restlessness or doubt. If you think that you are doubting, you have no handle on it, but if you separate it from yourself and say, "There is doubt and it's not me, not mine, and it does not belong to me", you can work with it. I did this a lot in the early stages of my practice with oppressive feelings or memories, as a way of seeing with objectivity whatever was oppressing, suppressing or depressing my heart. With tiredness, I'd ask what it was, and then see it, feel it, experience it, and notice whether it arises and ceases. It doesn't matter what feeling or emotion you have at the moment, whether tiredness or pain or something else. Its nature is to arise and cease, so you don't even have to bother about it. Most of the time, we don't care about the clouds passing by in the sky; they can be large or small, dark or light, but it doesn't matter as they don't usually affect us. Some people, however, are bothered, because they want the sun that the clouds are blocking. It's through attachment, our likes and dislikes, that we are affected by everything, and we have to get a grip on this.

We have to understand what the *citta*, the knowingness, is. And we do this by using the knowingness of the meditation object to revert to the knowingness of the *citta*. This means doing meditation practice using the breath or the *buddho*, which automatically lead to the knowingness. You will be amazed when you find it; you will never have experienced it before, because it's not something you can experience in this world. All you can experience in the world are the conditions on the surface of the water, but you need to go deep down, to the knowingness. Know the *buddho* and the next *buddho* and the next, or the breath and the next breath and the next. Know whether the *buddho* is fast or slow, deep or shallow. In other words, watch and see the quality of the object. Once you have installed *buddho* in the memory so that it comes automatically, observe the quality of the *buddho*; once you are settled on the breath, observe its quality. But don't get worried about the quality, fast or slow or shallow or

deep. You just want to know, and this leads automatically to the knowingness. There is no other way! You cannot go wrong if you do this practice correctly.

I've explained these things because understanding them might be helpful in your practice. When you investigate to understand what we call self, you have to place things right in front of you, right in front of your eyes: "There is sadness. There is depression. There is a feeling. There is love. There is greed. There is hate", and so on. Whatever you think you feel at that moment, just say, "There is", or label it as not me, not mine, not myself, not belonging to me. You need to do this until there is a distance between yourself and whatever is coming up, and then you can observe it as not-self. If a huge snowball were pressing against your chest, you'd feel crushed and unable to do anything, but if you kept pushing it back and back you you'd be able to observe it. You have to do this with emotions like fear, doubt, hate and greed when they bubble up. The moment you feel them lying heavily on your chest and think you can't do anything but give in, you have to push them away, creating a distance so that the knowingness can observe and understand them. Then you will know that they are not you, not yours and not yourself; they are just passing by. It's when you think me, mine or myself that emotions hit you. Normally, we are all like masochists who like being hit by the avalanche, but if we take a step to one side, it will just pass us by.

Once again: in meditation practice, you need to use whatever techniques help you understand what is going on. Take the example that I often use — a computer and the different documents, music and movies it can create. If somebody turned your computer display into its basic building blocks — 0 and 1 — you would soon lose interest and turn it off. If a movie was playing, you would watch it, but if the display was showing what the output really consisted of — millions of combinations of 0 and 1 — you'd get bored pretty quickly, wouldn't you? Yet

the moment you see images and hear sounds, you're fascinated, you're hooked. So examine everything that you call yourself, and see which one of the five *khandhas* it fits into and how the *khandhas* intertwine and interact. The process is like the bearings in Newton's pendulum; the first one hits and all the other bearings are affected by it. With the *khandhas*, feeling hits memory, or thought, or the body, or perhaps body hits feeling. They all intermingle. It's fascinating. You can watch it for hours. And what comes out is the universe that we see and experience.

I hope this answers the question of what is self.

Open your eyes and see for yourself

2nd December 2009

Difficulties arise in meditation practice, but they don't arise because of it. It's important to get this clear. The moment we start practising is the moment we open our eyes. It's like going into a dark attic or cellar and switching on a torch. We begin to see things that we've never noticed before, things that have always been there. Meditation makes us aware of whatever is happening inside ourselves, but it's not the cause of what's happening. It's similar to watching a boring or horrifying television program. We can switch off or switch to another channel if we don't want to see it, but the program is still being shown somewhere, isn't it? We've been doing this all our lives. Whenever an unpleasant situation has arisen, we've run away, and we've had so many interesting things to run after that we haven't even realized that we're running, or why. Thoughts like, "I should do this. I need to do that. I don't need to hear this", have come up, and we've run away. We've been running away all our lives.

Meditation practice, however, means looking at whatever is there. What comes up is nothing new; it's just that we've opened our eyes and started to notice everything that's been hidden in the attic or the cellar. Actually, whatever is hidden there determines the awful smell in our hearts. If there is a lot of rotten food hidden in a deep, dark cellar, we won't know where the stench is coming from until we take a look; remove the rotten food and the smell goes away. Instead of investigating the source of the stink, however, people tend to close and bar the door to the cellar. Why? Either because they don't know any better, or because they can't bear the smell. They don't even want to address the issue. In the same way, we avoid dog mess in the street; we don't walk straight through it, do we? We wouldn't pick it up and smell it even if it was our own.

It's strange really that we care so much about our bodies and like to look at ourselves in the mirror, but don't want to go near our own bodily excretions such as blood, pus or faeces because we find them disgusting. Isn't that interesting? Take sweat: we don't like it and regularly change clothes, bedding and everything that comes in contact with the body. Hair and skin has to be washed, not because of dirt from outside but because of dirt from inside. If you hang your shirt outside for three days it won't smell, but if you wear it for the same length of time it stinks. No-one ever thinks about this because everyone does the same thing, and it seems normal. There's nothing wrong with sweat, blood and excrement coming from the body. It's natural, but we learn from parents and society that these excretions are foul, so we cover them up using deodorants or avoid them by flushing the toilet without looking in the bowl. We look at our own excrement only if the doctor tells us to take a sample for testing. And even then we don't call it shit; we give it a neutral name, such as excrement or faeces. Doesn't this show that all our lives we've been running away from unpleasant situations or unpleasantness generally? We've run away from all the distasteful, unattractive sights, sounds, tastes, smells or touches. But meditation practice means coming face to face with reality, living with it and getting in touch with it. We are opening the cellar to see all the rotten material hidden inside; then we can get rid of it and clean out the cellar. Once it's been removed and the space cleaned out, the stink will disappear. And what's in the cellar? The *kilesas* and the things they have collected and love so much, things that just sit there and rot away.

This really is something we need to reflect on more often. People begin practising meditation to get rid of the dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) in their hearts and the unpleasant feelings that arise, but instead they find that *dukkha* comes up and hits them in the face. When this happens, they don't want to carry on meditating, thinking that it's not the right thing for them. But meditation is just a method of putting yourself in touch with everything that

you've hated looking at in the past. And remember — if you want to overcome hell, you have to go through the fires of hell; if you want to overcome *dukkha*, you have to go through the fires of *dukkha*. This is the only way to overcome *dukkha* permanently. You need to face up to *dukkha* and understand what it actually is. There are many different words to describe *dukkha*: dissatisfaction, pain, unease, restlessness, boredom, and so on. But these all refer to the same fact — that people are not contented, not at ease, and don't feel comfortable. You need to investigate what dissatisfaction, pain, unease, restlessness and boredom really are. What is not-being-comfortable? What is restlessness? What is pain? Restlessness, for instance, seems to have an enormous power over the heart; we can't sit still, and start shaking until we go and do something. Then the restlessness seems to have gone, but it comes up again whenever we sit down.

The wrong conclusion that we draw is that these feelings will go away if we follow them. We assume that restlessness goes away if we keep on doing things, or that anger goes away if we vent it on an external object, or that greed goes away if we indulge in it. This is the way we've been educated or trained, but we're wrong. We have to investigate to see that when we follow restlessness, greed or anger by giving into them, they don't go away. For instance, when we buy something we want, five minutes later we want something else. When we vent anger at someone, a few minutes later it flares up at someone or something else, or at the government, or at the hailstorm destroying the crops or damaging the car. We didn't actually get rid of the anger, did we? Greed and hate are the two greatest armies we face, and they've led us into all the troubles we've ever had. It's not easy to counteract them, but there are certain skills we can use.

The first skill is clear awareness (*sati*) to recognise what is happening. As soon as something unpleasant comes up, you have to realise it's there and stay with it. Stay put — don't try to run away. Stop the usual program from running, and look at the

situation instead. Later, you'll discover that it is changing, arising and ceasing like everything else in the universe. We ourselves are impermanent, the world is impermanent, and everything constantly changes. Of course, some things seem more permanent than others; a mountain that exists when we are born will still be there when we die, yet it changes over time like everything else. Mountains come and go, and rivers vanish or change course. The animals we have around us come and go, and we can have five or six cats or dogs in a lifetime because their life-spans are shorter. Parents die, and family and friends also die. The body, feelings, memory and association, thoughts and consciousness — these five *khandhas* that we think of as ourselves — also change. The body changes; it was once young and now it is getting old, and we can't stop it getting sick and dying. Feelings also change; sometimes we are elated and at other times depressed. When we have an unpleasant feeling, we imagine it will stay forever and try to get rid of it, not realising that if we wait long enough it will go away on its own.

We don't actually have to do anything for unpleasant feelings to go away, for they go by themselves because they are impermanent. We think we can create a happy feeling by doing something, or get rid of unpleasant feelings by doing something else, but we have to re-evaluate such views. Feelings are not you or yours; they don't belong to you because if they did you could change them anytime you wanted. The body doesn't belong to you; if it's sick, you can't just make it healthy. Memory and association doesn't belong to you; most of the memories people have are those they don't particularly want, while they sometimes lose the memories they want to keep. So it is with thoughts; we invite only a few thoughts into our minds, and most of them come up by themselves. The five *khandhas* are certainly not under our control, and they follow their own laws which we have to understand. None of this is explained in any textbook, so we have to investigate the *khandhas* for ourselves to observe the kinds of laws they follow.

To do this, we have to have *sati* and be aware of whatever is happening inside the *citta*. This means knowing an unpleasant feeling the moment it arises. It will disappear quickly if we don't attach to it. If we cling on to it, however, it can remain a long time and get deeper and deeper. And why does it get deeper? Because we don't want it! And because we don't want an unpleasant feeling, the negativity that we already have towards it becomes more intense, and the negativity becomes even greater as we get more and more annoyed. Memory can also become involved, such as remembering the last time the feeling happened, allowing negativity to further increase until it becomes an emotion or a mood. Most of the emotions we have to cope with are produced from a very simple first step, as a feeling, memory or thought comes into contact with the *citta*. When we think about a memory, for instance, the feeling associated with it increases or deepens. We can blame someone else for the emotion or mood that arises, but we've actually created it for ourselves. If we had stopped at the first step, there would just have been an unpleasant feeling and nothing else.

This is why I advise everyone to keep everything that happens in life within a simple framework, for this will help them understand. If you open an old-fashioned pocket watch, you can see the wheels going round and understand how it works; if you don't open it, you'll never know. As human beings, we have five "wheels", i.e. *khandhas*, revolving all the time. Feelings can trigger thoughts or memories, which also have feelings associated with them that add to and deepen the feeling. Within a few seconds, we can find ourselves dealing with a full blown emotion that scorches the heart. We can see a person and immediately feel hate towards them, not realising that a whole train of feelings and memories created the feeling or emotion of hate. And where does hate come from anyway? Hate is not within the five *khandhas*. There are many thousands of mind-moments in one second, so a lot can happen in the mind in the blink of an eye. We can feel hate, love, attachment or desire, without knowing

how the process started. The two weapons we need to help us see what is going on are *sati* and investigation that develops wisdom (*paññā*).

In the end we want to become free, so we have to become freedom fighters. They have to undergo a lot of suffering to gain their freedom, don't they? They don't care if their legs are amputated or their lives lost; all they want is freedom. This is why people have stood up to injustice or fought against tyrants throughout the ages. They had to go through pain to be free, and in meditation practice we also have to go through pain. To draw an analogy with boxing, when we first start meditating, we find ourselves in the ring with a champion boxer and get knocked out over and over again. In time, we start to see how he boxes and what his moves are, and become able to duck out of the way now and again, which increases our confidence. The more we are aware of the moves of the champion, the more we can understand them, dodge his blows and, sometimes, hit back. In spiritual practice the champion is *avijjā* (and its soldiers the *kilesas*), and the first time we knock him down is the first time we have a taste of freedom. But this can't happen without sore muscles and bones or black eyes. It definitely won't happen if we never get into the ring in the first place. As I said before, if you want to overcome hell you have to go through the fires of hell. There is no other way, I'm sorry to say. Meditation practice is the way we can gain liberation, the way we can un-condition ourselves. To become liberated, we have to un-condition the conditioning in every aspect of our lives, and conditioning is none other than a series of if-then-else steps, as in a computer. The programming is really very simple, and once the logic is understood we can see what is going on and change it for our benefit. To find satisfaction in our lives, all we need do is throw out a line of the program.

I'm explaining these things so that you won't get discouraged. Meditation brings up a lot of painful feelings and emotions, but they arise because we are starting to open our eyes, not because

of the practice itself. Meditation brings into consciousness things which normally lie at the subconscious level. When we start opening our eyes, the first level of the subconscious opens up. Once this happens, we can bring up the next level, which lies a little deeper. We can keep opening up these levels until nothing is left in the dark any more. We see everything. This is the way of practice, but it won't happen in a few days; it can take a long time. And, of course, we have to accept whatever comes up. If we can't accept the contents of the subconscious, we will never be able to get rid of them. Nothing about meditation practice is difficult to understand. We just have to get down to it — just do it — but this is where all the difficulties arise. We are so unaccustomed to living with unpleasant feelings. Whether they are mental or physical, we just don't want them and don't want to feel them. For that very reason, the first step is to dive straight into them.

Some people don't like diving into cold water. What kind of person are you? Are you someone who takes time to dip his toe in the water first, then half a foot and then an ankle, or are you brave-hearted enough to jump right in and get on with it? Most of us are the first kind, dipping a little toe in the water and pulling it out again, moaning and groaning. We moan that we took up meditation to have some fun or get some calm, not to have pain and suffering. Well, you will get calm and have fun, but you also have to fight for your freedom, and freedom fighters don't care about discomfort. As a practitioner, as a meditator, you are looking for a special kind of freedom, but when the practice gets difficult you forget about freedom and run back into slavery under the master — *avijjā*.

When we meditate, we start to see exactly what is happening, which is that the five *khandhas* are working very fast and in unison. But *sati* has to be up to speed if we are to catch everything that is going on. If you stand beside a railway track, all you see is a blur of colour as a fast train shoots past. But if you run at the same speed as the train, you can see every detail — the people

inside, what they are doing, the contents of the carriage, and so forth. Similarly, we need to get *sati* up to speed to see the workings of the *khandhas*. Once we can observe them, we can understand them, and once we understand them, we can break free. I'm using the word understand in the sense of having insight, and insights can come through observation. For example, a physicist observing an experiment can gain insight into a particular scientific problem, and we have to do the same – observe what the *citta* is doing in combination with the five *khandhas* in order to gain insight into the process. It's often necessary to ask some questions to help us understand. We can ask what the body is, what seeing is, what hearing is, and so on. Do we actually hear a peacock or do we just hear a sound? It's quite logical when we first hear a sound to assume it's a peacock. If we assume it's a snake we might be afraid, but if we think it's a dog we can rest easy. Our assumptions build the reality we experience, so the first steps in practice are to investigate assumptions by asking whether they are true or not. Actually, we need to observe the process of how we make assumptions. That's not easy, of course, because *sati* has to be really up to the mark, but it's not beyond our capabilities.

Most of the time, our minds are somewhere else or there is thinking going on in the background whether we realise it or not. Nevertheless, if we keep our attention on the mental repetition of the word *buddho* or on the breath at the tip of the nose, we come to realise that things are going on in the background, things of which we were previously unaware. Then, if we concentrate even more on the meditation object, the background thinking stops. The beauty of our composition as human beings is that we are single processing machines. We cannot do things simultaneously. As our minds can only do one thing at a time, if we are fully focused on our meditation object – *buddho* or the breath – nothing else can come in. This is a great advantage as far as Dhamma practice is concerned. Our processor is a single central processing unit (CPU), albeit a pretty fast one, and

it is because it processes one instruction at a time that we can come to understand by focusing on one point. We observe one instruction, then the next, and the more awareness we have, the more we can catch all these instructions and correct the program, i.e. correct our behaviour. If a particular condition happens, we don't have to act on it any more. This is how we can become unconditioned, how we can become free.

In meditation practice, the important tools we have to hand are *sati* and *paññā*. I describe *sati* as awareness rather than mindfulness, the popular term in the West today. To me, mindfulness suggests that the "mind" is "full", i.e. concentrated on one thing at a time, and that while concentrated it is unaware of what is taking place in the heart. *Sati*, by contrast, is more like an awareness: though it is concentrated on one thing, it is also aware of whatever is happening in the heart. *Sati* is simply aware of whatever is going on. When it is aware that a sense impression, like a feeling or a smell, has come in contact with the mind, it hasn't yet concluded anything about the contact, whether pleasant or unpleasant. That's why it is objective: it just sees. Then it notes the next thing happening and is aware of the mind looking into memory to try to identify the contact, and is aware of the feelings, pleasant or unpleasant, that come up with the memory, triggering another thought or feeling, and so on. Memory is not objective, but awareness is objective.

The interactions of the five *khandhas* happen like an avalanche, which can start with a small stone rolling down a mountain gathering snow. Normally, we accuse other people of starting the avalanche, but if we are aware we can see that the responsibility lies within ourselves. We have created these processes and allow them to happen, but it's also within our power to stop them. As soon as we are aware, we can stop the avalanche. The earlier it is stopped the less harmful it is, and the later it is stopped the more harm it does, but once stopped it doesn't go any further. The effects of avalanches can be disastrous, but they can start with a simple stone falling into snow and

rolling down forming a snowball. It's easy to destroy a snowball, but to destroy an avalanche that has the power to wreck a whole village is very hard indeed. So the sooner we can get up to speed with the processes involved in the interactions of the five *khandhas*, the sooner we can stop them and the less harmful they will be. However, we only get the power to do this by practising in a certain way, by being aware of what is going on and stopping the process.

In the beginning, we train ourselves by replacing every thought with *buddho* or the awareness of the breath. The more we can replace thoughts, the less harmful the contents of our minds will be. The longer we can remain at one point of concentration, the more content and happy we'll become. Sooner or later, we'll realise that most of the unpleasant experiences in our lives have been created by our own thoughts and memories. Without such thoughts and memories, there are no unpleasant encounters but only things happening in a very objective way. We just observe what is going on. As practice progresses, we discover through investigation how everything works together, and how we can break the cycle and stop the wheel turning. This is the path of practice, but we have to be able to stay with unpleasant feelings. I know it is not easy in the beginning to stay with all the unpleasant feelings that we have avoided in the past, perhaps for the last fifty years, but we must. We have to see the *anicca* of them; unpleasant feelings arise so they must cease, just as a ball thrown in the air has to come down. They can't stay on forever.

In outer space, movement is slowed down because the pull of gravity is less strong than on Earth. Gravity doesn't affect the speed of thought, but when meditative concentration is fixed on one point the movements of the mind become much slower and more observable. Our thoughts slow down. At the beginning of practice, there can be a train of twenty or thirty thoughts before we become aware of them, but after focusing on one thing for a while, we become aware that we are thinking after only a

few thoughts have occurred. As practice progresses, awareness becomes sharper and sharper until we can catch one thought, or even half a thought, which we are able to stop in the middle. If we catch the beginning of a thought and realise that we don't want to think it, we can stop it. We can even be aware of the earliest notion of a thought – a pre-thought (the intention to think). We can know that a thought is about to arise and go in a certain direction. We don't exactly know the thought because it hasn't yet been formed, but we can decide that we don't want to think it. Then we stop thinking for a while, and when we stop thinking we start experiencing.

Without thinking there is no judgment, no fear, no worry. Whatever happens is just what happens. This is called reality, and we just experience it. This is the state of *upācāra samādhi*. As our practice goes on, as we concentrate even more, the world of phenomena ceases to exist. We have become completely one-pointed, for in one-pointedness no other points can exist; the universe completely collapses into one point. There's a theory in science that the universe exploded from one point and will ultimately collapse back to one point. Well, the same thing can happen with the mind; the moment the universe becomes one point there is no universe. In practice, when we observe a meditation object, whether the *buddho* or the breath, there comes a point where it ceases to exist. Then the body ceases to exist and the whole universe ceases to exist, and all that remains is clear knowingness.

It is not beyond your ability to reach that stage, though it takes determination and effort. If you don't exert yourselves, you'll never get there. The problem is that we all want to take a pill that saves us from doing the work, but there is no magic pill. Determination and effort need to be built up. In fact, we need to develop the quality called *forschergeist* in German, the spirit to undertake an enterprise or the thirst to understand. If we have it, along with determination and effort, we can do it. We can even do it today, right now. The problem is that when pain, boredom

or unpleasant feelings come along, we become dispirited. The *kilesas* have a full arsenal of weapons they can use. They can make us feel sick, tired, hungry, thirsty, or feel the need to go to the toilet – anything to break up the meditation. Over time we can recognise the weapons in their arsenal, but we'll learn only if we have *sati* and are aware of what is happening. For instance, if we fall for the same trick three times, we can recognise it next time and refuse to play along.

Take tiredness: if we push through and continue to practise, we can find ourselves in an amazing state of clear awareness. At times it's so difficult to keep concentrating on *buddho* that we feel like giving up, but if we push through and keep concentrating we find ourselves clearly awake all of a sudden, so amazingly awake that we don't even know what has happened. This means that the *kilesas* have retracted; we've given the champion boxer a punch back. Once we know that we have to go through these unpleasant feelings and not react to them, the *kilesas* will retract. And remember – the *kilesas* only employ the weapons that are useful, like a child going shopping with its mother, seeing this and wanting that, crying and wailing. If the mother doesn't give in, it will eventually stop its nonsense. If we don't follow the *kilesas* and just let them wail and cry, sooner or later they'll give us some peace. Then we'll feel relieved, at peace and at ease. But we all know that the shrill sound of a little child is very hard to bear, and it's the same with pain, tiredness and all the other troubles that occur. It's hard to bear with them, but if we can, we get peace. If we understand this, there will be no obstacles on the path to one-pointedness or deep *samādhi*.

Get into that state and see what is left over. Whatever dies, let it die and see what remains. Who is it that knows something is dying? All of us think that "we" die, but who knows this? It's the *citta*, and it has gone through so many deaths in the past that it knows the experience. It's even possible to bring up these experiences of death: they are not pretty, but sooner or later they will come up in meditation practice. I had to tackle this in my

first year of practice, for four weeks, each night another death. After the first few days, when I sat down I was wondering which kind of death I was going to experience this time. Of course, the body doesn't die, but you experience a death. In one death I was pulled apart by four horses and for two hours after this experience my whole body was still in pain. I asked myself if I wanted to stop meditation and the answer came immediately — no! But after four weeks it all stopped. Once I accepted each death, it never came again.

Such things can come up from the deeper levels of consciousness, and meditators just have to deal with them. As long as they are hidden they rule us, but the moment they come up we can throw them out. Take thoughts: when a thought comes into consciousness we can think it or not think it, and choose whether to follow it or not. Most of us have had the same thought thousands of times, but has it ever brought anything worthwhile? The same trains of thought have come up over and over again throughout our lives — aren't we bored with them? Nothing new ever comes from them, they don't bring any fresh insights, and we don't even know what makes us think them again and again. So stop it. Chuck out all the unnecessary thoughts and trains of thought, and get some peace and happiness.

The path of practice is the path of practice, not the path of theory. We can read books about all the experiences other people have had, but our own experiences will come only through practising meditation. Knowing in theory is one sort of experience, but practice is quite another. In meditation, we have to clear out the large obstacles before we can clean up the small debris. It's like cleaning the attic. While there are large items of furniture lying around, we don't see the spots on the floor. It's only when we've removed the big things, picked up the dirt with a vacuum cleaner and wiped the floor with a wet cloth that we can see the ingrained stains. They've always been there, but we've never seen them before. Removing stains is difficult, however; each stain — say, blood, ink or oil — is different from the

others and needs a different technique to remove it, so cleverness is required. In Dhamma practice, after you've removed one stain, you have to find another tactic to remove the next stain, and so on. This is why we have to be very alert to what is going on.

Alert awareness is the key, and we need it from the beginning of our practice to the end, just as we need to undertake investigation from beginning to end. The longer we practise, the deeper the practice becomes and the more stains it can remove. From start to finish, we do the same thing, getting more skilled as we go along. A skilled craftsman has first to learn how to hold his tools and use them properly. It takes a long time to become skilled. In meditation practice, it takes a long time to really clear out the thoughts, but the important thing is not to give up and not to let go of the training. Train yourself today and train yourself tomorrow, for if you train yourself day by day the practice will bear fruit. It's just like any skill in the world. If we ride a bicycle only once a year, we become rusty, don't get very far, and might even have forgotten how to do it by the time of death. Meditation practice takes continuous effort, and continuity of practice is very important. Please don't forget this.

Fighting for freedom — fighting self

4th November 2009

There have always been freedom fighters in the world, people fighting to be free of oppression. Seen in the proper way, meditation practice is a fight for inner freedom from *avijjā* (fundamental ignorance), which is the cause of all the *dukkha* we experience. *Avijjā* means wanting to see, know and understand without ever being able to, and it's what we have to gain freedom from. The trouble is that when people are asked to fight for their inner freedom, they become frightened all of a sudden, afraid of a little pain, afraid of cold, afraid of rain and afraid of discomfort of various kinds. Freedom from *avijjā* is something that most people don't seem to want, because it means facing up to all the things they dislike and usually avoid. What they don't realise is that wanting to avoid unpleasant experiences is also *avijjā*.

We need *sati* (awareness) at all times if we are to understand what's going on inside ourselves. Part of the training in forest monasteries involves seeing what we don't like doing and deliberately doing it as a practice. Alternatively, we can see what we like doing and deliberately stop doing it. Take food: we can intentionally avoid the foods we like to eat and eat those we dislike instead. These are ways of fooling the *kilesas* so they become confused and leave us in peace for a while. But the *kilesas* are clever and are intent on maintaining their rule. Normally, when the eye sees something it dislikes, it looks away, and this happens so fast that we usually can't catch it. But if we have *sati*, we can catch it and ask why we turn our eyes away not wanting to see, or why we don't want to eat a particular food. When we are completely aware, we can notice these tendencies and counteract them, and this is one way to break the powerful grip of the *kilesas*. If we don't practise like this, we'll never be free of the *kilesas*. Just as people have to fight to be free from oppression in the world, possibly losing their legs, arms or possessions in the process, so we have to fight the *kilesas* if we want to be free, and

this means losing some parts of ourselves. In the end, we lose everything we think of as "self".

The trouble is that while everyone wants to get rid of discontent, no-one wants to get rid of self. This self, however, is the very thing that creates the *dukkha* we experience. We can think of it as sitting in a cinema attaching to what's going on in the movie, thinking, "This is me. This is mine. This I like. This I dislike", and so on. Where is the self in the movie? There is no self in a movie, is there? There are just things happening out in front, but because our eyes are fixed on the screen, we think we are involved and believe, for a time, that the events are part of us. In everyday life, when feelings come up we think that they must belong to us because they seem so close. There is a spittoon close to me as I am talking, but it's not me, though I can lift it up, handle it or throw it on the floor. But when it comes to the body, I think it's myself, even though I can lift it up, handle it or throw it on the floor just like a spittoon. What's the difference? Just because we've always had a body within reach, we call it me and mine. This is my body, these are my teeth, these are my feelings — this is where the delusion starts. We see these things, we experience them, but they are not ours.

The Lord Buddha taught that there are three characteristics of the universe: *dukkha*, *anicca* and *anattā* (not self). *Anicca* means that everything is impermanent and constantly changing, that things arise, stay for a while and vanish. We think we know that everything is impermanent, but we don't really listen to this teaching or understand the insight behind it. We try to make everything permanent by constantly repairing the things around us; we take the body to the doctor and repair our houses or cars, building an illusion of permanence. But small changes are also happening all the time, though we are not conscious of them. For instance, it's only when we discover a photo of ourselves twenty years ago that we notice that the body has been changing day by day. We need to face up to reality, face the truth.

If you want inner freedom, you have to face all the difficulties that come up in meditation practice. In other words, you have to go through the fires of hell to overcome hell. This means not stopping when things get difficult. Many people stop when they singe their little finger in the fire, but we have to dive into the fire of *dukkha* with our whole being if we want to overcome *dukkha*. There is no other way. For some people, progress takes only half an hour, but for others it can take ten lifetimes because of their fear of discomfort. Think of how people go into swimming pools. Some gingerly dip their toe in the water and take hours to get immersed, while others just plunge in. The coldness is the same either way, though it's more intense over a shorter period for the person who just dives in. You can decide for yourself, of course, but I recommend that you just make the jump. I'm sorry to say it, but to overcome *dukkha* you have to understand *dukkha*, and to understand *dukkha* you have to experience *dukkha*.

This is what I mean by going through the fires of hell. We really have to experience *dukkha* and understand what it is. Then we see it, and when we've seen it, we can let go of it. But as long as we don't understand *dukkha*, we can't let go of it. The feeling that we don't like *dukkha* or that it is too bothersome is the very thing that keeps it going. Turn off the switch and there's no *dukkha*. Believing that things are me and mine, that they belong to me, is a source of *dukkha*. In fact, they are not you or yours, and they do not belong to you. This is the teaching of *anattā*, and it holds true for all five *khandhas*. Even though I can experience the body, feelings, memories, thoughts and consciousness, they are not mine. They are no more mine than a movie running on a screen in the cinema. The person sitting on the seat in the theatre is the *citta*. We see images on the screen and instantly associate with them, and that's how we get drawn into the film, laughing or crying. With the *khandhas* it's the same, except that the movie is happening in front of our eyes, an inner movie made out of feelings, memories and thoughts.

The Lord Buddha taught these three characteristics of the universe to help us see through this illusion. The *khandhas* are *anicca*, changing constantly; unpleasant feelings change to pleasant feelings, the body ages and dies, and another body is born, and so on. And because we attach to these things, we experience *dukkha*. Actually, applying the three characteristics, particularly *anattā*, is very useful in meditation practice. For instance, if a feeling arises and seems to be overpowering, we can just think, "This is not me, not mine and does not belong to me", until there is a space where we can stand back and observe the feeling objectively. This is why the Lord Buddha taught us to stand back and say, "There is" rather than "I am". Instead of personalising the process, we can note that there is the body, there is a feeling or there is a sense contact. Instead of attaching to a feeling, we can reflect that we are experiencing a feeling normally associated with sadness or joy but that it doesn't belong to us.

In this way, we can deal more easily with the feelings that arise. If we see things from a distance, we can deal with them more easily, recognising that thoughts, feelings and memories are not me or mine. If they were, we would be able to think, feel and remember anything we liked. They would be under our control, wouldn't they? But they arise whether we like them or not. They can't be me or mine, yet we think they are, and follow them. This is why we experience *dukkha*. If we saw thoughts, feelings and memories as just phenomena passing by like strangers in the street, and said, "Hello there – bye bye", there wouldn't be any problem. Try this the next time a memory comes to mind; just say, "Hello there – bye bye", and you'll find it's gone. You'll also notice that there is no connection between that memory and the next one to come up. With the next memory, just say, "Hello there – bye bye", and with the next feeling, "Hello there – bye bye". See these things as people passing through, people you don't think of as yourself. After all, if a friend comes to visit, you don't think he is you. He comes, stays for a while and leaves,

and you know he's not yourself. You have to do the same with anything that comes into consciousness.

Once we have faith in the Lord Buddha and start to practise meditation, there's not a lot we have to understand. There are the five *khandhas*; the three characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*; the four elements (earth, fire, air and water); and the four noble truths. That's it. Everything else is just another burden, useful only for mental masturbation. But we love to think, don't we? We think about this, think about that, and believe we get some satisfaction or even joy from doing it. That's why I use the term mental masturbation. We don't usually think in order to make ourselves sad or distraught, do we? Even someone with a lot of hate, who brings up hateful thoughts about someone, thinks he derives some satisfaction from thinking like this, even though his heart is filling with hate. If he thought about love, it would fill his heart with love. We have the ability to think about a specific thing if we put our minds to it, but most of the time we are not in control of whatever arises or ceases in our hearts, are we? Memories come up without being asked, and trains of thought come up again and again unbidden, so they certainly cannot be me or mine. Who is presenting these things over and over again? It's *avijjā*. It is in control, and you have to understand that the thing you call yourself is also *avijjā*.

When we practise meditation, we can make the five *khandhas* our tools rather than leaving them to the power of *avijjā*. In his talks, Than Ajahn Mahā Bua often said that there are two powers inside us: the power of light (Dhamma) and the power of darkness (*avijjā*). Only one can sit on the throne at any one time, and whichever sits on the throne has the authority to tell the *khandhas* what to do. Most of the time in our lives, *avijjā* has power over the five *khandhas*. It can bring up thoughts, memories and feelings, and we just have to experience them. But the moment the Dhamma gets the power, we can force the body to do skilful things, like walking or sitting meditation to get the mind quiet. We can even get into *upacāra samādhi*, where we

are beyond the power of the *kilesas* for a while and can find some peace. It's not difficult to do this; if we centre our minds on one object, we can get beyond the power of the *kilesas* very quickly. But the *kilesas* come up and lure us away from the practice. We think that a particular thought is so important, or that we have to bring up a certain memory, or that there's an issue we have to think about, or that we have to plan the future, and off we go. But the future is no different from yesterday or today – it's breathing in and breathing out, and experiencing what is really going on. In my life as a *bhikkhu*, all I've been doing is breathing in and breathing out. In the morning, I went on alms round for food, and then did sitting and walking practice throughout the day, and went on alms round the next day, and so on. I've always done the same thing. For a spiritual practitioner, the work is *bhāvanā*, whether sitting meditation or walking meditation, and the two methods we have available are *samādhi* practice and investigation.

I invite you to reflect on your own life. When you think about a particular situation, what comes up? It's a feeling. It always boils down to a feeling. You are feeling at this moment, feeling whatever comes in through the senses and all the other feelings that arise. You had these feelings yesterday, you have them today, and you'll have them tomorrow. We fool ourselves that there is a future, particularly in our youth when we believe that a rosy future awaits. In old age, we think about the past, and try to create the conditions for the next life. All the little memories we have about this, that or the next thing form the threads we knit together to take us into the next life, but we don't even realise this is happening because we're not aware of what's going on. We're more concerned with what is happening outside of ourselves. We are aware when a person walks by, we are aware when a flower opens up, but we are not aware of the changes occurring within the *citta*.

The *citta* is the most important thing. It is the primary mover, so if we are aware of the *citta*, we are aware of what is going on.

If we are not aware of what's happening in the *citta*, we cannot get a handle on *avijjā*. This means we have to experience all the things that *avijjā* presents us; sometimes they are pleasant, but most of the time they are unpleasant. *Avijjā* lays out a table of goodies that look great but are awful and taste like crap. It is a magician that can, with its magic power, turn anything into something we desire. But as soon as we do whatever *avijjā* tells us to do, we feel disappointment. It doesn't lead to happiness (*sukha*), even though *avijjā* has promised that it will, either today, tomorrow or in ten years time. *Avijjā* is always promising things. It can promise, for instance, that we will become a millionaire if we work hard, but this might never happen, and it won't bring happiness even if it does. The promises of *avijjā* even infect meditation practice. We think that this method will get us faster into *samādhi* or that another method will work better, but *avijjā* is behind these thoughts. Instead, we should keep our attention on the task, which is to stay focused on one object.

If *avijjā* creeps into our meditation suggesting that we must be doing something wrong because the results are not coming, this is just another example of the *kilesas* looking for results without wanting to do the work. But we don't see this, and that's why we get frustrated and stop practising. *Avijjā* can creep in to conjure up many things, such as a pain in the leg to make us stop sitting. When *avijjā* wins, it has a good laugh behind our backs. This is why we have to fight it. Whatever goodies it lays out on the table, we have to ignore. We have to investigate to see *avijjā* for what it is. Take pain, for example. Pain is something we experience constantly, and it is nothing more than change taking place in the body or in the mind. Thoughts and memories are changing all the time and are associated with feelings which also change; these changes in feeling we call pain or, if we like them, lust. It's simply the naming convention that fools us.

We have to get beyond our assumptions over naming, and we do this by focusing our attention onto one object. Most people find this very difficult to do, however. Even in the realms of

meditation practice, we think, "This must be *samādhi*. That was a deep insight. I must have become a *Sotāpanna*", and so on, but these are just words, just playing around. We don't realise that when we play around with words like this we are just creating a false kind of happiness — until someone tells us we are not a *Sotāpanna* after all. Then we feel crushed, as though someone had pulled the rug from under our feet. Of course, believing false things makes us happy, doesn't it? People who believe in God are happy for a while. Belief is so strong, and whatever we believe is true for us. So, in practice, we have to undermine the things we believe, to question what they are, what they mean and why we think them. Terms like *Sotāpanna* and *samādhi* are just concepts when we think about them, so we have to investigate what they really mean. We should ask what our beliefs boil down to in terms of the five *khandhas*: if memory, it's just a memory; if thought, it's just a thought; and if feeling, it's just a feeling.

People who have been practising meditation for twenty years tend to believe they are better than newcomers to the practice, even though the latter may have made more progress in a very short time. In fact, from the beginning of practice until the vanquishing of *avijjā*, we all do the same work, *samādhi* and investigation. So we shouldn't think we are more advanced than anyone else on the path and feel the need to teach them. *Avijjā* is a master of trickery — don't ever underestimate it. It tricks us constantly, and most of the time it tricks us with memory and thought. The three armies of *avijjā* are greed, hatred and delusion, and memory and thought are just the province of the army of delusion. Before we can deal with delusion, however, we have to eliminate the armies of greed and hate which stand at the very front of the enemy forces. If we don't destroy greed and hate, we'll never be able to destroy the delusion that manipulates them. Once greed and hate are destroyed, delusion can be overcome, and then we come face to face with the master, *avijjā*, who organises and arranges all three armies.

To destroy greed and hate, we must investigate the body, as the body is the pot in which the plant of greed and hate is rooted. If we destroy the pot, the plant with its roots will wither and die. Destroying the pot doesn't mean killing the body; that is not helpful. Rather, it means destroying our illusions about the body — that it is plain or handsome, young or old, and so forth. If you take off the skin, qualities like handsomeness, plainness, youth or age no longer have any meaning. Even distinctions like female or male don't make sense because all the external features distinguishing the sexes have been removed; what's left is just flesh and blood, the true nature of the body. The skin, as thin as it might be, is a deceiver, along with the nails, teeth and hair. In the world, we place such importance on these external parts. Look at the effort people put into fingernails, toenails, hairstyles, skin conditioners, and so on. The skin itself is the greatest deceiver, for when we rip the skin off and see what is underneath, we don't like what we see.

Newly ordained *bhikkhus* are given five reflections for body contemplation — hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin — since these are the five externals that deceive us most. It's essential for a *bhikkhu* to get a handle on body contemplation as a tool for the time when sexual desire comes up, to stop himself falling into its trap. At that instant, he has to rip off the skin and see the object of desire as a heap of blood, flesh and bone. Using this method, desire goes for a time, but it reappears as soon as the skin is replaced, and that's why this particular practice has to be repeated over and over again. He can also reflect on teeth and how they rot, or hair as it goes grey and falls out over time, or nails as they become brittle with age. All these reflections, however, point to the repulsiveness of the body itself, which is really just a mass of blood, pus, muscles and flesh.

Think about your body with the skin ripped off. Is this what you like and want to call your self? Think about your skin torn off and filled with air like a balloon. Is this what you like and want to call your self? Think about the contents of your stomach; take

them out with your hands and look at them. Is this what you like and want to call your self? If you are really determined to make an end of *dukkha* and to fight for your inner freedom, this is the kind of practice you have to take up. Inner freedom means that you are free of all emotions and free of *dukkha*, though not free of the body and the other four *khandhas* which will exist until the moment of death. Unpleasant bodily feelings will still arise, of course, but *dukkha* will not. Memories and thoughts will come up as long as you live, but there will be no-one behind them any more. *Avijjā* cannot use them as a tool to deceive you any more.

This is liberation of the mind; it's just equanimity. Whatever arises, you'll know that it arises, and whatever ceases, you'll know that it ceases, but you will not be attached to these things. There will be no more liking or disliking of conditions that arise and cease. It's like sitting on the beach watching the waves coming in or going out, and observing whatever is washed in or out on them. We are not fooled into believing anything about them or that they are ourselves. We see things as they are, and don't have any burdens, particularly greed and hate. Greed and hate are two hammers battering at us or, if you like, two elephants trampling on our heads over and over again. Once they are gone — and this happens at the stage of *Anāgāmī*, when greed and hate have been overcome — there will be still *dukkha*, but it will be more like the stings of a mosquito than assaults by elephants. And once *avijjā* has gone — at the stage of *Arahantship* — nothing can disturb the heart any more. This doesn't mean that an *Arahant* is in a so-called vegetative state. Look at the life of Than Ajahn Mahā Bua, who was an *Arahant* for more than sixty years. Did he look or sound like he was in a vegetative state?

What you need to know to walk the path

26th September 2006 & 20th August 2007

There are many Buddhist scriptures (*suttas*), and if you study them you'll know with the mind, the intellect. But in the Thai Forest Tradition the scriptures have only one purpose — to encourage you to know with the heart, the *citta*. In the Lord Buddha's time, there were no written texts, so his emphasis was all on the actual practice of his teachings. This forest monastery is a place of practice in the same way. This doesn't mean that the Buddhist scriptures have no value. They are useful, but only to persuade us that the Dhamma taught by the Lord Buddha is correct and to encourage our efforts to practise. Once we are convinced of the path, the best thing is to follow it, not with the intellect but with the heart. Most of the time when I teach, I'm encouraging people to practise, to get down to the knowingness of the heart. The Lord Buddha said that the Dhamma was like a snake: grab it by the tail — study it without practising meditation — and it can turn around to bite or poison you. If you actually practise Dhamma instead of just thinking about or studying it, you are grabbing the snake in the right way — by its head.

Meditation involves putting the mind on one object, just one object and letting it stay there without allowing it to drift off. Once the mind is willing to stay on one object, it will automatically become contented and calm, and if it is very calm it will enter *samādhi*. All the activities that we do in the world lead to restlessness, and the more we follow them the more restless we are. The simple activity of putting the mind on just one point reduces restlessness and leads to calm. There are two basic methods that I teach. The first is *ānāpānasati* or awareness of breathing, fixing the attention on the breath around the tip of the nose and knowing it as it comes in and goes out. The second method — for people who think a lot — is the mental repetition of a word, usually *buddho* but *dhammo* or *sangho* can also be used. If people find either method difficult on its own, they can

combine them by thinking "bud" on the in-breath and "dho" on the out-breath while keeping their attention on the quality of the breath. To develop *sati* (awareness), it's essential that you have a point of reference – *buddho* or the breath – so that you know when the mind is wandering off. If you don't use a reference point, if you try to look at the mind itself for example, you'll just drift around in thought. As soon as you notice the mind going off the object of meditation, you should pull it back. Don't ask yourself why the mind is going out, for that is its nature. Just keep pulling it back, no matter how important the thought seems to be. The aim is to maintain *sati* on the object, whether the breath, the *buddho* or the object of investigation.

The practice can be done sitting or walking, but it's sometimes easier to concentrate the mind while walking rather than sitting because part of the mind is involved in controlling walking, whereas sitting meditation requires all our focus to be on the object. For walking meditation, find a path about fifteen to twenty metres long and walk up and down at a normal pace, although if the mind is restless you can walk fast. The faster you walk, the less effort is needed to concentrate, but don't run, just do fast walking. When the mind gets concentrated, your pace will slow down, but don't get too slow because then you will become dreamy and your focus will drift off. Just keep your attention on the breath or *buddho* while walking, and fix your eyes about one metre ahead of you without looking left or right. When you turn, reflect on how long you've been aware of the *buddho* or the breath, and then determine to be with the *buddho* or the breath for the next one path length. Then when you next turn, reflect again (without condemning yourself if your awareness had drifted off) and repeat the process. While being with the *buddho* or the breath, you can also be aware of the movements of the body, but that only comes when a certain level of concentration has been reached. Using these techniques, it's very easy to get the mind calm. Think about what the other people in the world are doing to find contentment. They work

and work like mad, but they never find contentment, or find it only in snatches. However, putting your focus on one object of attention is a simple way of reducing the restlessness that makes the monkey mind run here and there.

Actually, once you know how to practise like this and start doing it, there's not a lot else you need to know. You don't have to read lots of books about the Lord Buddha or his teachings. But there are some fundamentals that are very useful to understand, chiefly the four noble truths; the three characteristics of the universe (*anicca*, *anattā* and *dukkha*); *kamma*; and the noble eight-fold path, which are all core teachings of the Lord Buddha. The existence of *dukkha* is the first noble truth. *Dukkha* refers to every kind of restlessness, discontent or dissatisfaction of the mind and body. We all have *dukkha*, and the reason why most of us have come to this monastery is that we want to stop having it. The second noble truth is that *dukkha* has a cause, namely, craving, wanting and attaching. The third noble truth is that *dukkha* can come to an end, while the fourth is that there is a path — the noble eight-fold path — that leads to *Nibbāna*, the end of *dukkha*.

The noble eight-fold path consists of right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right *sati* and right *sāmadhi*. However, in the Thai Forest Tradition, it is usually described as three columns that make up and support it: morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). Maintaining *sīla* means observing the five moral precepts and keeping them at all times, for they protect us from being reborn in the animal, ghost, demon or hell realms. The second column, *samādhi*, consists of *sati* and the ability 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. This ability to concentrate, to develop *samādhi*, is also the tool that sharpens the mind for the practice of investigation that leads to *paññā*, the third column. Ajahn Mahā Bua used to compare *paññā* to a knife and *samādhi* to the sharpening of the blade. The sharper the

knife, the easier it is to cut through and the easier any investigation will be. With an extremely sharp knife, a tomato can be cut cleanly into pieces with just a little pressure, and its inner structure clearly seen. In the same way, the sharper our *samādhi*, the easier it will be for *paññā* to cut through during investigation to see clearly. With a less sharp knife, cutting into the tomato is more difficult and its internal structure harder to recognise. With a completely blunt knife, cutting open the tomato needs lots of effort, and it risks squashing the tomato and obliterating its inner structure.

Whatever exists in the universe, within conventional reality, has three fundamental characteristics, as I said above. *Anicca* is impermanence, the continual arising and ceasing of everything we can observe. Whatever we attach to in a positive sense we like, and whatever we attach to in a negative sense we dislike. This attachment leads to *dukkha*, or discontent, in our hearts because nothing ever stays the same. *Anattā* refers to not-self, the truth that everything we experience is not me, not myself and does not belong to me. Let's think about this very carefully. Over millions or billions of past lives, we've gathered up lots of characteristics that determine what we call our personality, and we are not willing to give them up. We think of the body and feelings as self; for instance, we say, "I have a body" or "I feel sad". We don't say, "There is a body" or "There is sadness", do we? But what is this "I" that we assume exists? The Lord Buddha taught that it is not me, not myself and does not belong to me, and he identified five "heaps" or *khandhas* that make up what we think of as ourselves: the body, feelings (bodily or mental), memory and association, thoughts including views and opinions, and consciousness.

When he said that the beginning of the world and the end of the world could be found within this six-foot long body, he was referring to the five *khandhas* which make up the whole world as we know it. We identify with the *khandhas* because they seem so close, but really they are all *anattā*, not ours at all. Since our

experience consists of various combinations of the five *khandhas*, if we understand them, we understand everything. There's no need to look outside of ourselves at, say, our country, town, neighbours or family. The inner world is what we are experiencing right at this moment, so we should focus inwards through meditation practice. The five *khandhas* are where our entire world is created through the power of greed, hate and delusion, but really they are *anattā*, not me, not myself and do not belong to me. We spend our lives identifying with the *khandhas* without considering the one pre-eminent thing — the *citta* — which drives them. If the *citta* moves, the *khandhas* move; if the *citta* is quiet, the *khandhas* are quiet. You could say that the five *khandhas* are a biological robot, and that the *citta* is the programmer. When the programmer orders the robot to do something, it moves, and when the programmer sleeps, it just stands still. Meditation practice is all about getting in touch with the *citta*, the one that is responsible for all our thoughts, memories and actions. We can only experience the *citta* directly, however, when we enter *appaṇā samādhi*, the deepest state of *samādhi*, or after the attainment of *Arahantship*.

One of the core teachings you should just accept in the beginning, even though you might not have experienced it for yourself, is *kamma*, the law of cause and effect. All the actions by body, speech or mind that you have sown in the past, you will reap in the present or future. People today are keen on demanding their rights, but really the only right they have is the right to experience the consequences of their past actions. Farmers know that if they sow wheat or apples, they'll harvest wheat or apples, not barley or peaches, so why don't we know this too? Every action has a reaction, and this applies to spiritual as well as material things. The body, feelings, memories and thoughts we have in the present are the result of *kamma*, so we should accept them, not fight against them. Much of what happens to us in the world is the fruit of actions we have sown in the past. As the German expression says, the oppressors of today will be

the oppressed of tomorrow. The law of *kamma* also implies that we should do unto others what we want them to do unto us, as the Bible says. But it also implies that we ought to accept or be grateful for things we receive, because they are the result of our own past actions. What is done to us is what we have done to others in the past – it's a twist on the famous Bible verse. So we shouldn't just assume that we deserve things by right – that's the wrong attitude.

Also, we have to realise that there is a power, *avijjā*, that keeps us in the realms of rebirth. *Avijjā* is attached to the *citta*; we can say that the *citta* of the ordinary person is cloaked with *avijjā* and loaded with *kamma* that drives it from life to life. *Avijjā* can be translated as not knowing or not knowing correctly, wanting to know but not being able to know, wanting to understand but not understanding correctly. The three branches that spring from *avijjā* are greed, hatred and delusion, and they govern us. They make us believe that we want this or don't want that, that we like this or don't like that, that we are this and not that. The *kilesas* of greed, hate and delusion that spring from *avijjā* use the five *khandhas* for their own purposes. *Avijjā* is like a magician sitting behind the ear whispering that it likes this but not that, that it wants this but not that, that this should happen but not that, and so on. This whispering goes on for twenty-four hours a day, and we have to try to stop falling for its tricks. If we can reduce its power, we'll be able to find some time for ourselves in the calm of *samādhi*, whether *appaṇā* or *upācāra*, where the magician has no influence. Each state of *samādhi* is a safe haven where we can get away from the influence of this trickster. It's very difficult for ordinary people to understand *avijjā*, so we just have to accept for the moment that it is the mastermind behind greed, hatred and delusion.

We should also accept that that there are other realms of existence and that there are beings in these heavenly, ghost and hell realms. Some people, a few, can see ghosts – the Thais tend to be quite good at this, though they are exceptionally

afraid of them — and some people, particularly in childhood, can see heavenly beings (*devas*). In Buddhism, there are thirty-one realms of existence,[1] and the upper realms consist of a great variety of *devas*. The five highest of the fine material levels, however, are reserved for *Anāgāmīs*, the non-returners who never come back to this world. We would all like to be reborn in the heavenly realms enjoying bliss, but we forget that *devas* ultimately fall back to the lower realms once their merit is exhausted. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used to say that the movement of his *citta* through its various rebirths was like a roller-coaster ride at a fairground. In the human realm, we can perform enough good *kamma* in a few hours to send us to the heavenly realm for thousands of years. But in an equally short time, we can perform evil deeds that send us to the lowest, darkest hell for thousands of years. For instance, any one of the five gravest deeds — killing one's father, killing one's mother, splitting the community of *bhikkhus* (the Sangha), killing an *Arahant* or drawing the blood of a Buddha — will take a person to the deepest hell for a hundred and fifty thousand years. Imagine that: we know something about the history of human civilisation over the past nine or ten thousand years, but a hundred and fifty thousand years is far longer.

If we are not aware enough to see its effects, bad *kamma* is easily made through greed, hatred or delusion. In the *suttas*, there is the story of Queen Mallikā, who had to endure seven days in hell for telling a lie. It's also possible to go straight from heaven to hell if a particular unwholesome action demands it. Remember this well: you have to do everything necessary to stay within the bounds of the five moral precepts to avoid drifting down to the lower realms. Everyone has free will, of course, but remember that every thought, word and action makes *kamma* that you'll have to experience in the future. If you sow love, you'll reap love and not hate; sow hate and you'll reap hate and not

1 The thirty-one planes or realms of existence are described in the Appendix.

love; sow envy and you'll reap envy and not goodwill. So be very careful. In the West, we have developed speech to a high level, and can do great harm to others through the power of speech, creating bad *kamma*. The *kamma* of thought alone is not very heavy, but the *kamma* of words or actions can be very weighty. So we need to be aware of what we are doing and why, and consider what the results of our actions might be. If we find that an action has wholesome results, we should repeat it again and again. But if we know we have performed unwholesome actions, we should let them go, resolve not to do them again, and replace them with wholesome ones.

I also need to mention that there are three qualities that help us on the path of practice: generosity, gratitude and respect.[2] If we find it hard to be generous with material things, how much harder will it be to let go of the things that we call ourselves, such as feelings, thoughts and ideas? The path of practice is actually letting go of such attachments, views and opinions. If we have practised generosity in our previous lives, it will be easier to let go of the seemingly personal things created by the mind, allowing progress on the spiritual path to go more smoothly. Gratitude means being grateful for everything we have received, rather than thinking we have a right to things and demanding our rights. In particular, we should be grateful to the Lord Buddha for uncovering the path, as well as the Dhamma and the experience of it within our hearts. Respect is also an important quality to have on the spiritual path, whether respect for parents or for worldly and spiritual teachers. Remember — your parents put their own interests aside to bring you up for sixteen years or more. They did everything to help you grow to be decent adults, to fit into society and to be independent, and they did it all with the best of intentions. They had their faults like everyone else, but that's just the normal way of things. Usually, when we find a

2 See Ajahn Martin's talk, *Generosity, respect and gratitude*, in his book, *Forest Leaves*, available on his website (www.forestdhammatalks.org).

fault in other people we react with anger or disgust. Actually, that very reaction should point us to a similar fault inside ourselves that we can correct. Don't blame other people, blame yourself. If we don't accept and respect other people, we won't accept and respect ourselves, for we'll never recognise, consciously or unconsciously, the unwholesome things within our own hearts.

The more we understand these fundamentals, the easier it will be to live in the world and practise. We can use our knowledge of these aspects of Dhamma to help resolve difficulties in meditation and the hindrances that arise. For instance, when a problem arises, we can reflect that it is *anattā*, that it is not me, not myself and does not belong to me. We can also reflect that it is *anicca*, that it has arisen and so will cease. And we can recognise the *dukkha* inherent in clinging to things, positively or negatively, that arise and cease.

There's nothing else you have to know to start walking the path; everything else is just excess baggage on the road to *Nibbāna*. Everything you know about the scriptures and Buddhism is just baggage weighing you down. If you opened your backpack and found it full of heavy stones, you would drop them, wouldn't you? Unnecessary knowledge can lead you in the wrong direction, and so can your views and opinions from the past. They can be heavy, heavy burdens that bring up doubt, hinder progress and even make you take a wrong turn in practice. So empty your backpack and make the journey lighter.

In meditation, it's vital that we accept ourselves, the good and the bad. We have to be honest and recognise that some of our characteristic tendencies are not wholesome. Correcting them is difficult, of course, and we are often too lazy to do it. We would rather not look at our unwholesome tendencies, not see them as part of ourselves, and hide them somewhere deep down in the cellar. We would rather avert our eyes, as we do when passing dog mess in the street, or lock the cellar door and try to pretend that its contents don't belong to us. If we see lots of things lying

around untidily at home, our first inclination is to look away, but this gives rise to an unpleasant feeling and creates a little fire that burns the heart. If we don't put out such fires, they will burn us constantly – so put them out. As a first step, we should accept the bad things inside ourselves; after all, we wouldn't have been born as human beings if we didn't have greed, hatred and delusion. Then we have to remove the unpleasant things, get rid of the negative tendencies and develop qualities that lead to a cool heart, for an angry heart is a heart on fire.

If we investigate in line with the truth, we'll find that anger really isn't exciting or pleasant. And neither is greed; it burns the heart, and even if we satisfy it, the fire only ceases temporarily until the next fire arises. There is no end of wanting or not wanting. The fire of the stove in our hearts is burning fiercely, but once we experience the calm of the heart in *samādhi*, we'll realise that we ourselves have been responsible for feeding the stove with coal. People feel discontent and blame the world for making them suffer. But if they begin to see things in line with the truth, the realisation will dawn that they've created the *dukkha* themselves. The starting point of practice is to bring the mind to calm. Once you know how to make the mind calm, you can curb the *dukkha* that is usually present. The longer the mind is calm, the longer you stay in *samādhi*, the greater the contrast will be when you come out again. If you've been in *samādhi* for only a few minutes, the difference will not be so apparent. But if you've been in *samādhi* for a few days, it will seem as though a world war of the senses is blazing around you when you come out.

I hope you are starting to see that the path of practice is not about grasping ideas about what is going on, but about actually seeing, actually experiencing what is happening. The two things are very different. If you see someone running in the street, you conclude something about what you're seeing, and when you read a book, you infer something about what you're reading. But these are examples of incorrect knowing that leads to incorrect conclusions. The path of practice doesn't involve knowing,

understanding or inferring with the intellect. Rather, the wisdom that we develop comes through experience, from seeing things as they really are. If we experience something once, ten times or a hundred times, the mind immediately arrives at a conclusion about what has happened, but this conclusion is still incorrect. It has nothing to do with reality, however close it comes to it. The experience itself is just the experience; we don't have to put any labels or words on it. When we experience something pleasant or unpleasant, we just know it for what it is. Whatever words we use, whatever label we put on it, it remains pleasant or unpleasant, and we experience the pleasantness or unpleasantness. This is the kind of direct experience we need for the development of wisdom. How much we read and how much knowledge we have is irrelevant to practice, because this kind of knowledge has nothing to do with the truth. Please remember this; experience takes place in the heart, in the *citta*, and the *citta* knows everything about it. On the path of practice, we have to train the *citta* to experience to the fullest extent, over and over again, until the *citta* itself understands. If the *citta* understands that fire is hot because the body was burned, it will not go near the fire again, but as long as it assumes that the fire is cold, it will continue to play with fire.

In everyday life, we know when things happen, but we still don't get the full picture because our *sati* has not been acute enough to see the process as a whole, step by step, moment by moment. Our *sati* constantly lapses, and we draw conclusions from the momentary fragments when *sati* is present. When a physicist undertakes an experiment, he needs absolute attention; if he loses one moment of *sati*, the actual events that are crucial for him to understand might already have taken place. So he needs to repeat his experiment over and over again until he sees every step happening. So it is with our speech and actions; we don't get the full picture, for *sati* lapses too often or is missing completely.

As long as we don't know what we are doing, and don't see the causes of our actions and their effects on our own *citta*, we'll be fated to repeat them over and over again. But when we investigate the results of our actions by body, speech or mind, we'll be careful about everything we do. The results always take place in the heart, in the *citta*. That's why we have to focus our attention on the *citta* at all times to see what is actually going on. We need to stop throwing our attention out into the world, into the senses, and rest completely within the *citta* instead. When we do that, we will really understand the effects of our own physical, verbal or mental actions, effects which take place immediately within the *citta*. If a thought of fear comes up, the effect on the heart is immediate. Everything takes place in the *citta*, so that's where we have to stay. This is why *sati* is so important, and why the Lord Buddha said that someone who has *sati* for seven days and seven nights, without lapse, can attain enlightenment. *Sati* at this level can catch each mind-moment as it takes place; it is aware of every mind-moment within the *citta*.

If we really understand what is going on inside ourselves, we cannot be fooled any more. Once the *citta* really understands, it lets go by itself. By contrast, the understanding that takes place only with the intellect – that an action is wholesome or unwholesome, for instance – doesn't stop us from repeating the action, though we may be able to abstain for a while. Once the *citta* understands that it is burning itself by acting in a certain way, it will let go and lose interest in doing it. The understanding that we develop in the heart through meditation practice is wisdom, experiencing and seeing things in line with the truth. This wisdom will relieve *dukkha* and lead to freedom – freedom from fear, freedom from worries and freedom from loneliness.

Please take this to heart. We have to understand within the *citta*, the heart; it's not so important to understand with the intellect. However, because we have been trained to use our brains for understanding, we have to un-train ourselves and develop the training of the heart. We have to train the heart

to experience. What does it feel like to experience all kinds of pleasantness and unpleasantness without giving them a label, to understand how they come about, and how all kinds of phenomena contact our senses? These processes are usually so fast that we normally don't catch all the steps involved. But if we develop *sati* to its utmost, we can catch them, and the heart will understand. It doesn't matter if the intellect understands them first, but remember that intellectual understanding alone will not help us to break free. Only the understanding that takes place within the *citta* will do that.

Digging for spiritual gold

2nd January 2009

I often speak about generosity, gratitude and respect, three virtues that are prerequisites for success on the spiritual path. They are much more prevalent and far more valued in Thai society than in the West, where people put limits on their generosity and tend to be ungrateful and disrespectful, except to themselves. In the West, we need a cause to be generous towards, or a reminder to be generous, such as a leaflet asking for donations. We need a good reason to give, but that's not generosity; generosity doesn't need a reason. The act of generosity is born in the heart, and we don't need a reason for it. Generosity has three fruits: when we think about giving, we feel happy; at the moment of giving, we feel happy; and when the act of generosity comes back as the result of *kamma*, we feel happy. Nothing has more value in the world than being generous, but when there's a beggar in the street, we tend to think that he doesn't deserve our help and that he should support himself like everyone else. That's not generosity. In Thailand, however, people have a great deal of generosity, especially for *bhikkhus*. They often ask them if they need any requisites, such as medicines or alms food. They even give money to the royal family when they come on a royal visit, simply because they want to give.

It's a similar story with respect. In Western countries, people have far less respect for their parents and teachers than people in the East, and this also applies to their spiritual teachers. They learn from them for a while, and then move on, because they think themselves cleverer. Take our parents: they bring us up for sixteen years or more, and do everything to help us become a human being able to live independently in society. They work hard on our behalf, but we have scant respect for them and show very little gratitude. We use them as cash cows, and get angry if they refuse to give in to our demands, thinking that we have a right to a hand-out or an inheritance. This is the kind of

respect we have for our parents — demanding things and holding grudges. Really, we should remember every mouthful of food or every glass of water that they gave us, respect them for it and be grateful. They weren't perfect, of course, and they had *kilesas* like everyone else, but who are we to judge? They did everything with the best of intentions because they wanted to make their children's lives better than their own. Disrespect, ingratitude and stinginess do not work in the spiritual life. In fact, they are more like hindrances to the practice of morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). After all, if we can't be generous with material things, how will we ever let go of the views and opinions that we cling to far more strongly? How much more difficult will it be to let go of everything we believe to be ourselves?

The Lord Buddha taught that all the things we encounter are *anattā* — not me, not mine and not myself. So, let's get rid of them. The five *khandhas* — the body, feelings, memory and association, thought and consciousness — are *anattā*, not me, not myself and do not belong to me. Yet there is something that observes them. What is it? What is it that knows when a thought comes into the mind? What is it that can differentiate between a thought and a memory? Can these things know themselves and differentiate between each other? No, of course not. So, there must be something, some kind of entity behind these processes watching this internal movie. When you go to a cinema, are you the images on the screen? Next time you go, have a look and see. Are the colours displayed on the screen you or yours? Just because the projections form a person, male or female, villain or hero, does that mean they are you or yours? Just because you identify with the characters on the screen, hating one or liking another, does that mean they are you or yours? No, and it's the same with the five *khandhas*; they are not you, not yours and they do not belong to you. They really are *anattā*.

The five *khandhas* are also *anicca*, impermanent. Ask yourself if feelings are constant. Have you had one constant feeling from the time you were born to the present day? Feelings often

change within five minutes, now happiness and now sadness, and we see this for ourselves. Everything is always changing. Do thoughts change? Have you ever had the same thought for weeks on end? It's very easy to observe that all things are *anicca*, that they arise and cease. Consciousness itself also arises and ceases, and the first time we experience it ceasing is when we enter *appaṇā samādhi*, the deep state of *samādhi*. When subject and object become one, the universe completely collapses into one point. Consciousness, the subject, is conscious of an object; if they collapse into one, neither consciousness nor object remain, so the universe ceases to exist. All five *khandhas* cease in *appaṇā samādhi*. So, what's left? Well, go in and see for yourselves. Something is left, so why worry about all the feelings and thoughts that routinely come into the mind? After all, they are going to disappear anyway, so why attach to them so much? Why attach to the body, feelings, memory and association, thought and consciousness? They all pass away, as if they were sailing on a boat out into the open sea never to be seen again. Once they are gone, we can be happy.

The trouble is that we cherish the five *khandhas* and long for them. When we see the body starting to decline, we long for the next one, and that's why we are reborn time and time again, birth and death, birth and death, birth and death. And when we're reborn there is *dukkha*, more in the lower realms and less in the higher realms but always *dukkha* nevertheless. The *Pāli* word *dukkha* is usually translated as suffering but this is not accurate, for *dukkha* includes all kinds of dissatisfaction, uncomfortable feelings, pain, and so on. The three characteristics of the universe — dissatisfaction (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*) and not-self (*anattā*) — apply to everything we experience. Everything around us is arising and ceasing so why do we attach to all these things? This is the same as asking why we attach to music or to the events on-screen in a cinema or a computer. Even though we know they are external, we still like them. In fact, everything is happening on our inner screen whether our eyes are open or closed.

When Westerners come to this monastery they receive everything free — food, accommodation and teachings — and because it's free, they think it has no value. If they had paid a lot of money, they would put in the effort to get their money's worth! Don't think that because everything is free it's all worthless and that you don't have to put effort into your practice. My reward — my "pay" if you like — is to see you put effort into attaining *upācāra* or *appaṇā samādhi*, and into gaining wisdom. I expect you to put every fibre of your being into practising with determination while you are living here. I don't want to sit here and talk into thin air, teaching Dhamma that you don't value. I don't want to waste my energy like that. I don't get a reward from seeing you daydreaming or sleeping for eight or nine hours a night. Actually, I sometimes feel like giving up. When people ask about the cost of meditation instruction, I say that the fee is all your effort and all your determination. There are no worldly costs in the usual sense, but I expect effort; I don't want to see laypeople just hanging around, reading, listening to music or going into town to buy things. People wouldn't do that if they had to pay six hundred dollars for a meditation course, would they? Of course not. Think about this very carefully. I put my energy into trying to show you the path of practice, and I expect you to reward me with effort and determination. Don't just kill your time. That's what people mostly do — kill time on the Internet or in an amusement arcade or the cinema. Why do we kill time? Do we think it's so worthless that we have to kill it? We get rid of the time we have, and kill it again the next day, and kill it again the day after until we die. And when it's time to die we wonder why we killed all the time we had, and why we hadn't used it better.

So, give me my reward — my "pay" — for teaching you all. Put determined effort into attaining *upācāra samādhi* at least, if not *appaṇā samādhi* where the five *khandhas* cease and where we realise that they are all *anattā*. We believe every thought, every opinion, every feeling to be me and mine. We attach to these things instead of just observing that there is a feeling, a thought,

an opinion or a memory. In the cinema, we look at the screen and see the gangster or the good guy, but we don't believe them to be ourselves, and we need to do the same with everything we experience. It is all *anattā*, it does not belong to me, and it is not myself. I also want you to reward me by investigating with wisdom. Investigate the nature of the body to the fullest extent and get some real insights. See the body floating in front of you as a corpse, burning on a funeral pyre or dying, and understand the process that is going on. Understand that the body is made of earth, water, air and fire. Understand that we are running around all day with a bag full of excrement covered in skin. Imagine a zip down your front and unzip it to see the blood, pus and faeces inside. But no, we don't want to see that, do we? We don't want to be disillusioned.

Some years ago, there was a meditation master in the Thai Forest Tradition who went to live for a time in the USA. While there, he was invited to give a short course at a meditation centre, and the organisers – who were laypeople – told him that he could teach everything except *asubha* practice, the loathsomeness of the body. What they didn't know was that this Thai meditation master was an *Arahant*, so he decided to make the body, including *asubha*, a core part of his teaching during the course. He wanted to teach what he thought was most needed, and what Western teachers avoid teaching. He wanted to make clear just how vital body contemplation and *asubha* practice is for progress on the path. As far as I know, he was never asked to come back.

We spend our whole lives running towards beautiful things and pleasant sensations, but we're unwilling to put up with the ugly and the unpleasant. Sometimes I think that people in the West are saying, "Give me enlightenment but don't disillusion me", but that is a contradiction. Actually, under the influence of *avijjā* we live in an illusion, so we have to become dis-illusioned. If we want to be free from *avijjā*, it's impossible not to be disillusioned or disappointed. So we have to be ready to be

disappointed or disillusioned by the things we encounter in meditation practice. To draw an analogy, when listening to music or watching a film on a computer, we could, with some tinkering, switch to observing the background processing, which involves millions of 0 and 1 states representing on and off. How long would you watch or listen to those 0 and 1 combinations? You'd turn the computer off pretty quickly, wouldn't you, because there would be no meaning behind what you were seeing. And if this happened all the time, you wouldn't switch on the computer, because you wouldn't be interested in the output.

The same thing happens when we investigate the five *khandhas*. Whatever we experience, whatever is happening in our lives or the universe, is nothing but a combination of the five *khandhas*. This is why we have to comprehend them completely, understand them completely, know each *khandha* completely in itself. If we don't, we'll continue to live inside the illusion and stay there for the rest of our lives. Put it like this: the understanding of the five *khandhas* is essential for enlightenment. We have to break down our attachment to the *khandhas*. Most people, however, want only pleasant thoughts, feelings and memories and not the unpleasant ones, but they come hand in hand. You can't have one without the other. They are like heads and tails on a coin; you might want only the heads side but that's not possible. People want to go to heaven, but if there's heaven there must be its opposite, hell. This is the principle of duality. If you want one side of the coin, you have to take the other side too; one side comes with the other. You have to understand this principle.

It's the same for a computer. If we look inside the hardware, we can see a highway of electricity controlled by gates that can be open or closed, with a decoder at the end that gives meaning to the various flows of electricity. Now, in our case, where is the decoder that gives meaning to the information we receive? We get a feeling which gives rise to a thought that combines with it, and suddenly a happy or unhappy mood comes up. This is our own decoder, and it combines a feeling and a thought to create

a particular symbol or word, such as "I'm depressed" or "I'm in love". We live on words, and people have learned to manipulate them. The first human beings had few words but now they have many, and the number is increasing all the time. Actually, we live in a world of symbols, not reality. We live in our imaginations. But I want you to get down from your ivory towers, get to ground level, and see what is really happening, see the workings of the five *khandhas*. There's a bodily feeling, there's a mental feeling, there's a thought, there's a memory, and so on. This is all that's happening, and it's extremely boring to watch. We all want to derive meaning from these internal events using our decoder – if this is depression or that is love, then my actions should be like this or like that – and deriving meaning involves going up from one meta-level to a higher one. However, in terms of practice, we need to go down, not up.

We need to ask what depression really means, what love really means, what pain really means, and so forth. That is our investigation. We have to get to the bottom of what these things really are: what percentage of feeling, thought or memory is there in each word or symbol? If your mind is very still, you can observe these things, for there is peace and calm around them when there is no decoder to give them meaning. In fact, the third *khandha*, *saññā* (memory and association), is involved most of the time; you hear a squawking sound and immediately the idea of a chicken pops into the mind. If you only get the output of the decoder without seeing the input, you believe the output. So we need to observe the inputs. We need *sati* to be aware of what is happening, aware of the thought that comes in, the memory that comes in, and the feelings that are associated with them. We need to be aware of the process, aware of the blender that mixes all the five *khandhas* together. The metaphor of the blender is a good one: different fruits or vegetables go in and are blended into one colour and one taste. *Saññā khandha*, in combination with *sankhāra khandha* (thought), functions as a blender, and it's all so fast that it's difficult to catch. It's like standing at a station

watching a train moving at hundreds of kilometres an hour; all we see is a blur passing by. We need to get up to the speed of the train to see what is really happening, but this needs a lot of *sati*. It needs *sati*, *sati* and more *sati*.

We were born in the body and will die in it, so we believe that the *citta* and the body are one and the same. They're not, so we need to see the body as it really is. When you come out of *upācāra samādhi* after having been in for a while, start doing investigation of the body. You can begin with the outer parts of the body and then unzip the skin to see what's inside. You can also chop the body into bits and pieces. After mentally chopping the body up, place all the parts in a heap in front of you — there are the toes, there are the legs, there are the innards, there is the head, and so on. When all the bits are out in front, you will realise they are not in the place where you are sitting. You will recognise that there is a difference, and start to understand what the concept of the body really means. This is something you have to understand: the body and the *citta* are not the same, just as a car and its driver are not the same. Everyone understands the difference between a car and its driver, but imagine someone who has been born in a car, has always lived in the car and will die in the car. He believes he is the car because he has never known anything else. This is the situation we are in, so we have to see that the body and the *citta* are two different things.

Use whatever means are necessary. Take a saw and mentally cut the body into little bits and pieces, or take an axe and chop it up. People who are less sensitive to bodily feelings can use a raw saw. They will get a shiver running down their spines when they imagine a raw saw touching their body, and this reaction shows that they are practising correctly; if people are just playing around, there is no feeling of unease. Then put all the parts of the body out in front of you, so that nothing is left on the meditation seat, and there will come a moment when the *citta* and the body separate for a second or a millisecond. At this point, when there are only body parts to be seen, the *citta* cannot

associate with the body. This kind of insight, which comes after we've practised hard, practised until it really sticks, is needed to become a *Sotāpanna* and enter the stream. This is the separation of the *citta* from the body, and it represents the breaking of the third fetter, the belief that the *citta* and the body are the same.[1] Two other fetters have to be broken for the attainment of *Sotāpanna*. The first is doubt, and overcoming it is not easy. People have doubts about the existence of heaven and hell, *Nibbāna*, or *kamma* and its results. If we doubt *kamma*, for example, it's easy to blame others. We might blame our teachers and think that they are wrong, just because we are not able to put their teachings into practice. The second fetter is being inconsistent in keeping the moral precepts (*sīla*). Some people find it difficult to live a moral life, and they observe the five precepts irregularly, taking them today but not tomorrow, remembering them one day but forgetting them the next. The *kilesas* say that breaking the precepts really doesn't matter, but the Dhamma says that breaking them really matters, even if they're only broken once.

Breaking these three lower fetters — doubt, playing around with the moral precepts, and the identification of the *citta* with the body — means that we can enter the stream. Then we are on the way out, out of the cycle of *saṁsarā* instead of being stuck there forever. The stream will take us out, and that's why it's called entering the stream. As a *Sotāpanna*, we will attain *Nibbāna* within seven lives at most, and will never be reborn into the lower realms of the animals, ghosts, demons or in hell. But it's difficult to break these three fetters, and there's a lot of work to do. We have to pay a lot of attention to what's happening in our daily lives. But don't think that you can't make it, that the attainment of *Sotāpanna* is beyond you, for that is the voice of the

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1 The ten fetters of becoming (*saṁyojana*) are listed in the Appendix. Ajahn Martin describes the first three fetters in a sequence different from traditional Buddhist texts. He lists them according to the hurdle each presents for the Western mind, with doubt as the first.

kilesas whispering into your ears. Some people insist that they don't have the merit (*vāsanā*) to attain it, but if you think that, get out of this monastery – it's a waste of time being here. If you can train the *citta*, you can enter the stream. The *citta* can do whatever it wants to do. Our lives in the world prove this, for the *citta* can become whatever it wants, such as a soldier or an engineer. If we put all our effort and determination into something, the *citta* can achieve the goal. We think that we'll never break through because meditation practice is so difficult, but the real reason is laziness. We want to turn over and go back to sleep – that's why we can't break the first three fetters, not because the *citta* is unable to. The *citta* can travel to outer space and into all the different levels of existence if it wants to.

Of course, meditation practice is not easy, and it can take twenty years or more of intense training to enter the stream. Most people are not willing to put up with staying in this monastery for two or three months to get into *samādhi*, so how are they going to endure twenty years of intense practice? But remember this: gold diggers in the nineteenth century were willing to bear the most extreme conditions to get the gold they craved. As soon as they woke up, they wanted gold, and they got on with the job until their bodies collapsed with tiredness. They didn't care about food as long as they had something in their stomachs. Yet when you are staying in this monastery, you worry about everything – not enough sleep, not enough food, not enough of this, not enough of that. We too are gold diggers, but we are digging for spiritual gold, not worldly gold. This gold is buried under piles of excrement (the *kilesas*), but even if the pile is a thousand metres deep, you'll reach the gold in the end if you start digging now. And the more you dig, the faster you'll reach the gold. So what's the problem? Just go ahead and dig.

If you always dig at the same place, you'll get a hole – you all know that. Dig into the three fetters and eliminate them. Dig into doubt and don't even let it come up. Don't break the five precepts and don't even let the thought of breaking them come

up. Banish these thoughts from your mind. And do the exercise of disassembling the body into its parts to realise that the *citta* and the body really are distinct entities. In the *suttas*, the Lord Buddha uses the metaphor of the cart which can be dismantled into its component parts, such as an axle, wheel, plank or nuts and bolts. Once dismantled, where is the cart? I'm encouraging you to do the same with the body; once dismantled, where is the body? When you do that exercise realistically, the *citta* will understand that it is different from the heap of flesh, bones, blood and pus that makes up the body.

Once you've become a *Sotāpanna*, you can take a break from practice, but beforehand there is no time for a break. Or would you rather go to hell? It's your life and you can do whatever you want, but if you want to make sure of breaking free, get to work now. After all, you don't know how long you have to live. Don't think that you'll live for another fifty years. Your life could end in five years and then you won't have had enough time. Don't think that you have time – your life might just end. Bop, gone. Don't think that you can practise later and have some fun in the meantime. Do the work first and then have fun. That's the attitude to have, and the goal is stream entry, which is the first stage out of *saṁsāra*, even though it's still only the lowest of the four stages of enlightenment. A stream enterer still experiences a lot of *dukkha*, still has all his greed and hate, and still experiences all the sense pleasures. Hence, a stream enterer can get married and have a family, and he will be a good parent because he understands the principles of *anicca* and *anattā*. He understands them because he sees them: at the moment he enters the stream, he sees *Nibbāna*. Even if someone experiences *Nibbāna* for just a split second, it changes his life, and that's why it's called stream entry. Afterwards he can take a rest, but he can't take a rest beforehand.

So, be aware of what is going on – don't daydream. Sleeping for long hours doesn't help with meditation practice, but if you sleep for only three hours, you'll start to "wake up" after a

while. Of course, it's much more comfortable to sleep, waking up just to put your head on the other side of the pillow and going back to sleep, doing this again and again. Sleep is so pleasant, but I'm asking you to wake up, to see the alertness of the mind that has enormous power. If you are completely awake even for a moment, you'll never forget it, and you'll understand the meaning of waking up. But you spend your lives eating, drinking and sleeping, and it's all so comfortable. Even in this monastery, which has some quite harsh and basic living conditions, it's possible to make things comfortable after a while. For instance, we do have coffee and sweets in the afternoon, and can feel quite comfortable at these moments. But it's your choice, and you can either sleep or wake up. If you want to sleep, just sleep, but please don't waste your time here – there are better places to sleep, places with more comfortable beds!

Don't waste my time. I want my "pay". I want to see you put effort and determination into your meditation practice. Don't think that because everything is free in the Thai Forest Tradition that the teachings are worthless. The truth is that we don't charge because the Dhamma has the highest value. It is priceless, and no-one could afford to pay for it. Not even the richest person in the world could afford to pay for one day's stay in this monastery.

Connecting to the heart

14th July 2018

An introduction to a two-day meditation retreat in Singapore

There are a lot of people here, and it looks like you come from all walks of life. What brings you here? What was your motive for signing up for this course? Perhaps you don't know. Maybe you don't even know what you're doing or why you're doing it. How many of you have ever meditated before? If you have, you were probably doing what they call *vipassanā* or "insight" meditation, though actually it was probably a mixture of *vipassanā* and techniques to obtain calmness (*samatha*).

I teach two methods of *samatha*, and both can lead to *samādhi*. The first is called *ānāpānasati*, awareness of the breath around the tip of the nose as it comes in and goes out again. We observe the breath but don't follow it in or out. We notice whether it's fast or slow, course or subtle, long or short. As the breath comes in, we know it; in the beginning we feel it, but after a while we know it, and the knowing is much stronger than the feeling. The second method is the mental repetition of *buddho*, *dhammo* or *sangho*, where we simply replace every thought that comes into the mind with one of these words. That's all. It's similar to *ānāpānasati* where we replace every thought with awareness of the breath. But please remember: when you are doing *samatha* practice, you should do only that and nothing else — don't mix *samatha* up with *vipassanā* or investigation during a single meditation session.

How successful have any of you been with meditation in the past? Not very, I expect. Anyone in the audience who has had success can tell me what happens in the mind when there are no thoughts and no memories — what kind of state is that? Does anyone know? I see someone over there looking at his

watch. Are you in a hurry? Why are you looking at your watch? This is an example of people not really knowing what they are doing. We do things all the time – scratch ourselves, look at the watch, check the smartphone – in a completely distracted way. But meditation to attain the state of *samādhi* is all about concentrating the mind onto one object. People today, particularly the younger generation, seem to find this very difficult. They have a concentration span of only a few seconds, constantly distracted by all these new "advanced" technologies. To my mind, most of these technological developments are not advances at all. They're examples of de-civilisation that make people more and more like robots. You're not aware of yourselves. You don't really know what you are doing because you are driven by your desires, acting this way or that, going shopping, eating, sleeping and talking, talking, talking. And you don't even know why you do all these things because you've lost the connection to the heart. Have any of you ever realised that you have a heart? I'm not talking about feelings, for everyone knows about them; they come up now and again in the body and mind. I'm talking about the *citta* that controls everything. *Citta* is a *Pāli* word and it refers to both the heart (in the emotional sense) and the mind.

Before a thought arises, the *citta* has the intention to think. Are you aware of that? Meditation practice is all about getting in touch with this *citta*, the one that is responsible for all your thoughts, memories and actions. But the first step is to realise that you actually have a *citta* that puts things into motion. When the *citta* is still, nothing happens: the body doesn't move and the mind doesn't move. The *citta* becomes still when you enter *samādhi*, and that is the aim of *samatha* meditation. Of course, you are unlikely to achieve this during the two days of this short course, but at least I can teach you the basic methods of how to get into *samādhi*. In fact, it can take weeks or months of relentless effort to get the mind calm. When you start to meditate you will see how difficult it is. Five minutes can seem like five hours because the mind goes out, away from the object of meditation.

It jumps here and there, and within the space of a minute you've gone round the whole world, thinking about something or other, oblivious of what's happening inside yourselves. We just act blindly on our desires, on our likes and dislikes, like a conditioned machine — a robot, if you like. A robot acts on its inputs, and we are the same; if we like something we grab at it, and if we dislike something we try to avoid it. Don't you behave like this? Do you really walk forward to shake the hand of someone you dislike? Of course not; you try to avoid him. And if you see something you like, you run after it, not knowing what you are doing or why you are running. This is the definition of a robot. You can use the term zombie if you like, since zombies are also driven by their desires.

Look at your own life. You're running after things you want. If you catch what you want, you're happy for a moment until it disappears. That is the nature of life; everything that arises ceases, everything that appears disappears, including the body. You can see this with your parents or grandparents, for they will all die, and we are all going to die sooner or later. We are born to die, but what are we doing with the time we have — running after our desires, running towards our likes and avoiding our dislikes? Is that the meaning of our lives? Getting up in the morning, eating something, doing something, eating something again and sleeping, from the day we are born until the day we die. We give different names to each of our activities — work, exercise, play, and so on — but these are all varieties of the same thing, moving the body. Whether we are washing the dishes, cleaning clothes, preparing food or eating, it's still just the body moving. We move the arms, we move the legs, we move the head, and because we use different words for these activities we think we are doing something worthwhile, whether pursuing happiness or avoiding unpleasantness. So, what are we really doing all our lives? Looking after the body until it dies — that's all. Most of the time we're taking care of the body, clothing it, feeding it and putting it to sleep. But when it dies, what is the outcome? We find that all our

efforts have gone into something that has disappeared. We find that our work has been in vain because we never cared about the one pre-eminent thing that inhabits and drives the body — the *citta*.

We're looking after the car without ever thinking about the driver. If there is no driver inside a car, the car doesn't move; it doesn't move on its own, go left or right, forwards or backwards. It's the same with the body; if the *citta* is asleep in the body, the body doesn't move. We need intention to move the body, and that's what we learn as soon as we are born. On emerging from the womb, we lie on our backs and start moving our fingers and feet. Do you remember? We program this body; we train it to move, digest, walk, and so forth. How long did it take you to learn to walk? Getting up, falling over, getting up, falling over, hurting yourself, crying a little bit then getting up again, because you wanted to learn to walk. Learning to meditate is the same as learning to walk. You get up and fall over, get up and fall over, again and again, until you can do it. After learning to walk, you learned to talk, and by the age of five or six you could do both. However, you were still unable to think like an adult, so you had to spend many years in school and college. Remember that? Learning this, learning that — it wasn't much fun, was it? Were the first sixteen years of your life a lot of fun? Most of us had only one wish — to be grown up and independent.

From the age of sixteen or so, we can finally use the body for our own purposes. But, as older people know, we only have about thirty more years before it starts to decay, slowly at first but more rapidly towards the end. This part doesn't work, that part doesn't work, organs start to fail, teeth start to rot, hearing becomes a problem, and so on. Then we're just waiting for death, hoping for a new body. And what do we do with the new body? Another sixteen years of training or programming, so that we can use it for thirty years and then wait for its decay and death — and this goes on for life after life after life. Isn't that the long and short of it? It's kind of dreary, isn't it? When you think

about it like this, it is. But, of course, as soon as you leave this temple and go home, you won't think in this way, because all the usual distractions will be to hand. You'll look at your smartphone to see what your friends are up to, you'll tell your friends how fantastic or dreadful the meditation course was, you'll switch on the television, and you'll already be in another world.

But we're here learning to meditate, and the first thing people are aware of when they start to meditate is the body, for they suddenly make contact with it. Well, welcome to the world of the body! You have a body: it hurts and it feels. You've only to sit in meditation for twenty minutes to be assailed by the body and bodily feelings. The only time you've really felt the body in the last twenty years was when it became ill, but now, on this meditation course, this part hurts and that part hurts. We find that we can't even sit for five minutes before needing to move, scratch or whatever. Actually, we could call our first experience of meditation, "Welcome to the world of the body". This is the body that's with us all the time, but we never notice it because we use it just like a car, going from here to there and doing something or other. So when you start to meditate be prepared to experience the body.

On a short course like this, all you can realistically do in the time is use *samatha* meditation to get calm. While doing this practice, you will feel the body, but it's important that you don't worry about the bodily feelings that arise – just go back to the breath or the mental repetition of *buddho*. Just know that there are bodily feelings and sensations constantly arising, and go back to your object of meditation. I want you to think about this: what are you doing with your life? At the moment of death, all the work that you've put into the body will have been to no avail. No matter how well you take care of the body, it will die, for no-one lives forever. That doesn't mean you don't have to take care of the body which, of course, needs food, water, clothing, medicine and rest. But when you look at Buddhist monks (*bhikkhus*), they spend only about two hours every day taking care

of their bodies, which leaves twenty-two hours to take care of the *citta*, the essential thing that goes from one body to the next, from one life to the next, from one realm of existence to the next.

For most human beings, the next birth is not in the human or the heavenly realms. Ask yourself where your next rebirth will be. It might be the ghost or the hell realms. We have all been in hell before, every one of us. We have both good and evil in our hearts, and the good can raise us up to the heavens while the bad can drag us down to hell. This is reality. It's not just something this Luangphor[1] says — it's the teaching of the Lord Buddha himself. In the Lord Buddha's time, many people didn't believe that there were beings in hell or heaven, so he performed a miracle on the last day of May, in which he opened up the worlds so people could see, for the first time, the beings in these realms. People at that time were just like people today. Some of you believe that heaven and hell are only states of mind, but that's not true. That belief is just a delusion of the mind, and you are deluding yourselves, just as people who play a video game delude themselves that it is real, becoming agitated or afraid by the events inside the game. Look at what you're doing — playing a video game called human life. In the next birth, you might find yourself as a heavenly being (*deva*), an animal, a ghost or in hell depending on the merit you have made in the past.

So, it's up to you to decide your own destiny. No God chooses our destiny, as many Christians believe; rather, it's in our own hands. Farmers who want to eat rice have to sow rice first; they can't eat the rice and sow it afterwards. In the same way, if we want something to happen, we have to make it happen, we have to sow the seeds. People who want to become rich in their next life have to be generous in this one. Most people want it the other way around, to become rich without being generous, but

1 Here the speaker is referring to himself. Luangphor is a term of respect used for older monks and Ajahns in Thailand, but it can also be used to refer to one's own grandfather.

that's not possible. They want to become beautiful or handsome without laying the groundwork for that to happen in future, but nothing comes free in the three-fold universe.[2] Most people know that if they want something, they have to earn it; if you want to eat, you have to earn a living. If you are happy to live in a shack, you probably won't have to work too hard, but if you want a lovely house, you'll have to work harder. But you have to work; nothing is free, and whatever you do in this life, you'll meet in the next. A farmer knows that he may have to wait for six months or more to reap what he has sown today. We, however, have to wait much longer to experience the consequences of our actions (*kamma*), as it takes time for the results of past actions to come to fruition. What we do today may not come back to us for sixty years, but we tend to forget this. Some people start to be kind and then after one or two months complain that other people are not being kind to them, but that's because the fruits of their actions have not yet ripened.

You can think of your actions of body, speech or mind as long-term investments. Almost everyone in this room will have a next life, so start preparing now. There's an old biblical saying most of you will have heard: don't do unto others what you don't want others to do unto you. Well, it's a principle that you should live by. Before you do or say anything, ask whether you want the same thing to happen to yourself. If you don't want others to criticise you, don't criticise others. And remember, most of what happens to you in this life is the result of what you have done to others in previous lives. It's not the fault of the government or your parents, your children or your teachers — it's your fault! You are responsible for whatever happens to you. If you could remember your previous lives, you would see that what happens to you is a consequence of what you have done to others,

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

and you would understand *kamma*, the law of cause and effect. *Kamma* is the most important law. It's the one law that governs all the universe; you reap what you sow, and if you don't sow you can't reap. Please get this clear.

So take look at your life, and use it for something that is important. Don't dilly-dally, wasting time, waiting for death to come, because what then? You need enough "savings" or merit (*vāsanā*) to get a good rebirth, and this means keeping the five moral precepts. If you haven't kept them, you'll go down to the lower realms, but keeping them gives you a chance to return to human birth. There are laws in every country and punishments for not abiding by them. Similarly, the five precepts are the laws that govern the whole universe. Whether beings are in the heavenly, ghost, demon or human realms, if they break the precepts, they will be punished in just the same way. Even if you don't believe this, trust the Lord Buddha who saw it all very clearly. If you want to come back as a human being, keep these five precepts. The first two are refraining from harming any living being, and from taking anything that has not been given. The third is to avoid sexual misconduct, which means being faithful in your marriage or partnership, and not having relationships with dependent people — such as teachers with their students, or bosses with their secretaries — or with people who are in another relationship. The world is full of sexual misconduct, so don't get involved in it. If you are faithful to your partner, you can create a really happy life for yourself.

The fourth precept is not to lie or use harsh speech. We like to put other people down and feel good about doing so, but we don't like it when other people do the same to us, so watch your speech. People like to talk behind the backs of others, but other people are none of our concern. Instead, we should focus on our own conduct, on why we are acting the way we do and what kind of results it will have. The fifth precept is not to consume alcohol, drugs or any kind of substance that makes us unaware. Of course, people like to be unaware; why else do they look for

entertainment and distraction? They like these things because they don't want to be aware of the body and how much discontent (*dukkha*) it brings. Chit-chatting, watching movies, watching television — all these distractions make them forget, but they are just wasting their lives and waiting to die. People sometimes use the expression killing time. When I was young, we used to wonder how we could kill time on a Sunday afternoon, which was boring because all the shops were closed. People kill time, as if they had enough time to kill. Think about that. Make something useful out of your life instead of wasting your time.

When we meditate, we are learning how to get back to the heart, the *citta*. We've lost the connection to the heart and that's why we feel lonely or afraid. In itself, the heart doesn't feel afraid, the heart doesn't worry, the heart isn't concerned with the future or the past. The heart is worry-less. The heart is happy, completely happy, but we have lost the connection to it. In *samatha* meditation, we are trying to reconnect to the heart, but we shouldn't be surprised when we come across all the garbage that we've dumped there in the past. Think of the attic or cellar in your house where you put all the things you don't want any more, the place where you stuff in more and more unwanted things. In the same way, you've pushed into the heart all the things you didn't want to see. As soon as you open the heart, all these things come out, just as things come tumbling out the door of an overflowing attic or cellar. This will happen when you start practising meditation, but for now just focus on getting the mind calm and concentrated.

So, sit comfortably, crossed-legged, either in the half or full lotus position, whichever you find most comfortable. Place your left hand on your lap with the right hand on top of it; in this way, the centre of gravity of the body will be close to the position of the *citta*, close to the physical heart, making it easier to concentrate. I know some people put their hands upwards on their knees to "receive energies", but that's not what we are after here, for the aim is to connect to the heart. Just sit upright in a

comfortable position and relax. Don't put too much strain on the body, thinking that you have to sit in a certain way, because then you'll become tense, and tension is not what we want. Next, close your eyes and start to observe the breath at the tip of the nose. Observe it coming in and going out, knowing whether it is deep or shallow, rough or smooth, long or short. But don't follow the breath as it comes in and goes out, and don't try to observe the rising and falling of the abdomen, a technique which some people teach. Just observe the breath, and whenever the mind goes off onto something else, bring it back to the breath. The mind will go off every one or two seconds, but just keep pulling it back to the breath. This is where you have to apply effort. You don't need to force the breath, for it is automatic; it has been with you since birth and it will be there until you die. So all you need do is observe, and this means knowing the quality of the breath.

In meditation, we need a point of reference, and the breath serves this purpose. The mental repetition of the word *buddho*, *dhammo* or *sangho* is also a point of reference, and this method can be particularly useful in the beginning for people who think a lot. If you find either method difficult on its own, you can combine them by thinking "bud" on the in-breath and "dho" on the out-breath while observing the movement of the breath at the nose. Whenever the mind goes out, pull it back and pull it back. We need to be very patient, and patience tends to be lacking in people nowadays. Patience has to be learned, and in meditation we need patience and endurance to keep bringing the mind back to the object. So, when the mind goes out, just keep bringing it back, bringing it back, bringing it back to the breath or the *buddho*. Whenever you see the mind going out, just pull it back. This is what we call practising meditation, and the effort we put into practice is the persistence to keep pulling the mind back. There is nothing to worry about in meditation practice, for once the mind gets calm there are no worries! Worries only arise with thinking, so when you stop thinking you are worry-less; there's no future and no past.

Of course, we can't sit all the time, so we need to learn how to meditate while walking. For this, find a path fifteen to twenty metres long and stand at one end looking at the other end. Make a determination that for this one length of the path you will keep your mind solely on the breath or the *buddho*. Then fix your line of sight one metre in front of you and, without looking left or right, walk at your normal pace with your hands placed together in front of your body. When you come to the end of the path, turn around and stop. Reflect on whether you have managed to keep your attention solely on the breath or the *buddho*, but don't condemn yourself if you find that your awareness has drifted off. Then repeat the determination to remain focused on your meditation object for the next one path length. Make the same reflection and renew your determination at the end of each length. By reflecting each time you turn around, you will ensure that the mind cannot drift off its meditation object for too long.

This is all easy to say but difficult to do. It takes time, but you didn't learn to walk or talk in one day. Try to remember how difficult it was for you to learn those skills. Meditation practice is the same kind of skill, and it's actually a very mechanical process. We don't have to use our memories or thoughts in meditation because we are leaving them all behind. And we don't have to figure anything out because all we're doing is bringing the mind back to one point. But having this single point of reference is very important. If you are floating in the ocean without an anchor, you don't know in which direction you are going; you just drift around aimlessly in any direction. Most people just float around in their own mental space whilst they meditate. They may find the experience pleasant, but they won't have achieved any kind of concentration, and so their *sati* (awareness) won't have increased as it should have. Please remember that when I say *sati* I'm not talking about mindfulness. The translation of the *Pāli* word *sati* is not mindfulness (which implies that the "mind" is "full" of one thing); *sati* is better described as mind-emptiness, the opposite of mind-full-ness. In practising for *samādhi*, we are trying to make the mind empty.

In the world, when we don't have any work to do, we feel free and relaxed; similarly, when the mind is empty, it has no work to do and it feels peaceful or happy. So make the mind empty of all things, and then there will be no future and no past. There will just be life, without anyone taking hold of the happenings of life, without a commentator saying what's nice and what's not. These comments are your inner voice, which you can also call the *kilesas*, the fangs or soldiers of *avijjā* (fundamental ignorance). The *kilesas* are the voices that whisper behind your ears persuading you to do one thing or another. Get rid of them and you'll feel happy. As long as they remain, they'll complain that this hurts or that is boring, and whisper that they need or want something or other, on and on endlessly. If you get rid of this voice, you'll feel free; all you need to do is practise meditation by always coming back to the same one point. This is why it's so important to have a point of reference like the breath or the word *buddho*. If you don't have a point of reference, if you try to look at the mind itself for instance, you'll just drift around in thought.

Birth, ageing, sickness and death are all part of living, but these things don't have to concern the heart, the *citta*, at all. By meditating on the breath or the *buddho*, we are making contact with the heart. It's the prime mover; if the heart doesn't move, nothing happens, and it's the heart we have to connect with. If you take your meditation further, you can even make the connection to the deathless, *Nibbāna*, where there is no birth and no death. But that will involve a long journey, so start with the short journey: get the mind calm, and stop all the thoughts and memories coming in. Then you'll feel happy. This happiness is our natural essence, but we've forgotten it. We've replaced it with the short-term happiness of drinking coffee, eating food or buying new clothes. Such happiness doesn't last long, and it costs us a lot of money into the bargain. The happiness that arises in the heart is pure, really pure. The first time that people experience it for a long time, they find tears welling up inside, tears of gratitude that this could happen to them.

I'll now leave you to do walking and sitting meditation. At the beginning, at least try to walk or sit for forty-five minutes. It won't be easy, but look on it as fighting your master, the slave driver *avijjā*. He won't let you be free even for a second. You have to fight for every second that you stay on your meditation object, the breath or the *buddho*. That's all you have to do, so give it a go.

The *kilesas* are sugar-coated poison

27th September 2009

When undertaking the ascetic practices (*dhutangas*)[1], we can see the *kilesas*. That's why this form of training is so important. Without these ascetic practices, we'll never see the *kilesas* in the raw, for they won't come up as long as we have everything we need. People living a worldly life have everything to hand; they can go to the supermarket or have groceries delivered direct to the door. They can get anything they want, and as long as that situation continues the *kilesas* are satisfied. But here in this environment, in a forest monastery, we can't get what we want, and this goes against the *kilesas*. For example, in this tradition we follow the ascetic practice of eating only once a day, so the *kilesas* bring up hunger, and they even create the desire to eat things we wouldn't normally be interested in. When I was a young *bhikkhu*, I found myself repeatedly putting a cake that I knew to taste awful into my alms bowl; I never ate it, but I always put it in. I must have been seduced by the *kilesas* into liking the form or colour of the cake, even though, after reflecting on why it was in my bowl, I never actually ate it. I would never have touched such a thing before ordaining, but living in a monastery had brought the *kilesas* to the fore. They draw us to nice looking, sweet tasting things which we find ourselves grabbing at during the meal if *sati* (awareness) is not sharp enough. We are drawn to them because we are not in control of ourselves. The *kilesas* are in control, and sugar is one of the foods that the *kilesas* adore.

The *kilesas* are very obnoxious, and we should never underestimate their power. They also include habits, and another ascetic practice – eating only from an alms bowl – reveals our habitual eating patterns very clearly. A *bhikkhu* has only one opportunity to choose which food to put in his bowl, so before

1 The thirteen *dhutanga* practices that Buddhist monks voluntarily undertake are listed in the Appendix.

eating he can reflect on the kinds of foods chosen and why, and what their effects are. This is a chance to develop *sati*, but that can take a long time, so you shouldn't get angry if you fail at first. When you see yourself grabbing for particular foods, all you need do is stop yourself. I often tell my *bhikkhus* that the best training around food is to eat the things you don't like and avoid those you do. This is tough, of course, but we can get used to it over time.

This way of training can also be used for other activities throughout the day. For instance, *bhikkhus* sweep the leaves in the monastery every day to keep it clean and tidy. I remember that the leaves sometimes wouldn't move, but I would still keep trying to sweep away at them. Then I reflected that I was just too lazy to pick them up, so from then on, if the leaves wouldn't move, I bent down and picked them up. Actually, we can practise like this throughout the whole day – deliberately doing things we don't want to do and not doing those we like doing – and it can help greatly to reduce the strength and impact of the *kilesas*. It reduces them by an incredible amount, and after a while we don't even care; we just do this practice, going against the *kilesas* all the time. With eating, if we practise wisely, we stop caring about the particular foods we consume. After a while, we realise that some foods have a positive impact on the body and mind while others don't, and then we judge food in a very different way, not on its tastiness but on the effect it has on our meditation. Normally, we judge food on its taste, but we all know that things which taste good are not necessarily good for the stomach and can cause indigestion. In the world, people go for the taste, get sick and run to the medicine cabinet. They also eat too much, so that in Germany people need to drink a schnaps to help the food go down. The power of the *kilesas* is amazing. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used to describe them as sugar-coated poison; we see the sugar but not the poison. When men look at women, and women at men, they see something charming and sweet, but they don't see the poison. If we don't develop *sati*, we won't recognise this, and won't see the truth.

The *kilesas* are so powerful, and we all want the sweetness they promise. After all, children don't run towards bitter-tasting foods, do they? Medicine is always bitter, which is why we don't like it. In all cultures, sweet is something positive and bitter something negative; we say that someone was sweet or that we had a bitter experience. But we should think of the *kilesas* as sugar-coated poison pills, and reflect on this. We see only the sugar and swallow one pill after the other, but the poison doesn't dissolve with the sugar; it remains there in the heart (*citta*). The more we ingest the *kilesas*, the more we follow them, the more poison accumulates in the heart. You can think of them as addictive drugs; you swallow them once, and a second time, and then have to keep taking them for the rest of your life. The poison that collects in the heart makes you want more, and we know how difficult it is to get rid of an addiction. What a tough life addicts have: they go through hard times, and only those with enough willpower make it through to recovery. Getting rid of the *kilesas* is the same, and you have to go through hard times. The *kilesas* won't make it easy for you, and they'll try to fool you, especially if you are living out in the world. They make you think that your meditation goes much better at home because you eat far less sugar than in the monastery and don't experience the same cravings. This is how they blind you. At home you have everything you need, but in the monastery everything that the *kilesas* need is reduced.

When starting the *dhutanga* practice of eating food only once a day, people tend to overeat at the one meal, but they can train themselves to reduce the amount consumed until they start to feel hungry in the evenings. They can then learn to deal with the uncomfortable feeling of hunger, to see that it is just a feeling and that it arises and ceases. But the *kilesas* make a big deal out of hunger, so when people feel hungry in the evening, they overeat the next day. We think that we need a lot of food, but actually we don't. In my experience, hunger is linked to excess acid in the stomach, but if we carry on eating little, the body adapts and produces less acid. Eventually the feelings of hunger reduce until we don't notice them any more.

If you want to speed up your meditation practice, you need to develop *sati*. It's possible to attain enlightenment after seven days and seven nights of continuous *sati* — that's what the Lord Buddha said — so make a start right now. Don't let the mind go astray, and always keep it on the object of concentration, whether the breath at the tip of the nose, the mental repetition of the word *buddho*, or the object of investigation. You must keep your attention on one object. When living in a monastery, this is the only work, yet people always seem to find something else that is more important to do. And once that task is finished, they find something else that appears to be important. There seems to be no end of important things to do, but when it's time to die we'll discover that we had forgotten to do the one important thing we had set the heart on — staying with the object of meditation. And who tells us all these other things are important? It's the *kilesas*. If we really have to do these other things, it's better to do them with *sati* than without, but we don't have to do most of the things that the *kilesas* suggest are important.

We have to put the brakes on, to stop the engine running. After all, if a car engine is running, it takes the car in whatever direction it is travelling, and if the *kilesa* engine is running, it just takes us wherever the *kilesas* want to go. We have to slam the brakes on, and that's much easier to do in a monastery, because we know from our teachers and the monastic rules what kind of work it is proper to do and what really needs to be done. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua realised that there were tasks involved in taking care of a monastery, but he insisted that they be done quickly, with *sati* and without talking. He always pointed out, however, that the true work of a *samaṇa* was sitting in *samādhi* and doing walking meditation. Please be clear about this; having *sati* when performing everyday tasks is alright, but it doesn't get rid of the *kilesas*. The only way to destroy them is to keep your attention on the meditation object while sitting or walking when practising for *samādhi*, or on the subject of investigation when developing *paññā*. This should be your work. Everything else is not the work of a *samaṇa*.

Practices like the *dhutangas* are vital if we want to see how the *kilesas* drive our lives. The *kilesas* want to do things and are happy as long as they are active. When they are not in action, they are full of discontent, and that's why they think up things for us to do. Their suggestions have a certain logic to them, but logic and rationality is a department of the *kilesas*. Everything is a department of the *kilesas*, and that's why we need the teachings of the Lord Buddha to hold on to. We can remind ourselves of his teachings, and how he wanted us to behave as we go through daily life. Without these teachings, we would have only our own thoughts, views and opinions, and would be trapped in the logic of the *kilesas*. They are the masters of rationality and smartness, magicians who have tricked us all our lives into believing something or other. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua's point about sugar-coated poison is that people don't see the danger in the coating and don't even recognise that there is poison inside. They are drawn to the sweetness, the attraction of the sugar coating. He wasn't talking about sweetness in a literal sense, of course; there are many other attractions that the *kilesas* can dangle before us. For instance, *bhikkhus* might be attracted to the idea of building another temple or constructing a better *kuti*. It's all the same kind of thing; we just can't see through the sweet coating. As soon as the *kilesas* are gone, we see the poison immediately, but normally we can't see it because the *kilesas* rule the heart.

So how can we get rid of the *kilesas*? We have to stop them somehow, and we do that by adopting a lifestyle that goes completely against them, by meditating from the moment we open our eyes in the morning to the moment we close them again at night. Other kinds of work should only be done if it is absolutely necessary. There can be time for eating, washing clothes, bathing, and so forth, but otherwise we should be practising meditation. I sometimes stress to my students that even if they want to go to toilet, they should think twice and not just go straight away. When you want to take a shower, ask yourself if it's the right time. When you are living in this monastery, you can take a

shower after sweeping time, but if you start wanting to shower at midday, you know something's wrong. If you had a good meditation but feel the need to go and do something or other immediately afterwards, you know that it wasn't a good meditation for you. Rather, it was a good meditation for the *kilesas*, because they could think up things for you to go and do. We can easily spend our whole life following the suggestions of the *kilesas*, only to realise at the end, when we close our eyes for the last time, that we hadn't done the work we were really supposed to do. Instead, we'd spent all our time running after the *kilesas*, trying to get whatever they thought we needed.

I warn you: most of the things we think are necessary are really just a product of the *kilesas*. Most of what we consider logical, rational or reasonable is the way of the *kilesas*. That's why we come to live in a monastery with a great Ajahn — to follow his example. Did you ever see Than Ajahn Mahā Bua carrying out unnecessary building work or running around doing unimportant things? No. When he came back to the monastery from visits to teach and help people, he went straight back to his walking (*caṅkama*) path. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used to stress that doing building work would make the monks rotten. It's not that building something is wrong in itself; it's a question of what is being built, the amount of effort that has to go into it, and whether you can stop afterwards. If you can't stop, then you know that *kilesas* are involved. Similarly, if laypeople living in a monastery want to perform a service for the monastic community, that's fine, but if they endlessly want to do more and more and more — cooking, shopping, driving, and so on — it's a sign of the *kilesas*. We have to put an end to these endless things.

The *kilesas* are not all bad or negative, however, for there are "good" *kilesas*. For instance, the desire to attain *Nibbāna* is necessary, otherwise we would never even begin practising to get there. The wish to attain *Nibbāna* is a positive thing, and we can put the *kilesas* to work to help us get there. Also, if we recognise that we are stingy, we can use the *kilesas* to do good

and be more open-handed until we enjoy being generous. But we have to use wanting in a skillful way; there's no use wanting to attain *samādhi* but deciding not to act on it and reading a book instead. There's nothing wrong with wanting if it's directed towards a proper path. If we want to attain *Nibbāna* or want to have *sati* continuously for seven days and nights, that's fine. The desire to end *dukkha* is fine. In the end, all desire and wanting will be destroyed at the moment *avijjā* is destroyed.

The five *khandhas* don't belong to you

22nd March 2009

When we come to this isolated area, the deep forest, to practise meditation and become free from *dukkha*, we should reflect on the four noble truths taught by the Lord Buddha. The first is the truth that *dukkha* exists, and *dukkha* includes everything from restlessness, irritation, unpleasantness, discomfort, unease or painful feelings, through to outright suffering. Looking at our own lives, we can see that *dukkha* is like a shadow following wherever we go. The second noble truth gives the reason for *dukkha*, namely, wanting or desire (*taṇhā*), the desire to be or not to be, to become or not to become, to want this or not want that. Wanting never stops, and it is always followed by *dukkha*. The same holds true for its opposite, not wanting: we didn't want something to happen, but it happened and *dukkha* was the result. *Dukkha* follows in the footsteps of wanting. We want this and we want that, and have our lives all planned out, but the world doesn't work in line with our wanting, and this leads to *dukkha*. So we have to investigate to see things as they really are and how the world really works. The third noble truth gives the good news that *dukkha* can be ended, and the fourth noble truth declares that there is a path leading to the end of *dukkha*. It's this path that we've come into the forest to follow, and it comprises *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. *Sīla* is the foundation for meditation practice, and it consists of keeping the five moral precepts: not harming any living being; not stealing or taking anything that has not been given; not indulging in sexual misconduct, such as using your power over dependent people for sexual pleasure; not lying or using harsh speech; and not consuming alcohol or drugs that reduce awareness (*sati*).

These four noble truths were proclaimed by the Lord Buddha after his enlightenment, just as they had been by all the Buddhas before him, but is merely knowing about them enough? Does it give us the ability to practise meditation successfully on our

own? Reading lots of books about meditation practice or reading Buddhist scriptures — is this enough? For instance, several scriptures (*suttas*) in the Majjima Nikāya mention that a meditator enters the first *jhāna* and experiences bliss. After a while, he finds that there is still a lot of restlessness, so he enters the second *jhāna* and experiences joy, but finds restlessness there too. Then he enters the third *jhāna* and experiences peacefulness but with some residual restlessness, and so he goes on to the fourth *jhāna* where there is complete stillness. Then he investigates his previous lives, sees what has led him from one life to another, and becomes enlightened, finishing his work. People reading this assume that the way of *jhāna* or *samādhi* alone is the way to enlightenment, but that's not the case. In fact, a meditator would already have to be quite free of the ten fetters[1] before this method was successful, but people today are unaware of this.

When we read the *suttas*, we come across many teachings that sound unfamiliar. We might even wonder why the Lord Buddha gave the teachings he did. The trouble is that we tend to flick through volumes of the *suttas* and choose the teachings we like, taking only these to be the truth. We don't take into account the *suttas* where the Lord Buddha exhorts his followers to meditate on the repugnance of the body (*asubha*), or the famous parable of the saw, in which the Lord Buddha declared that a follower of his should not have a single thought of ill-will towards forest bandits chopping him to pieces with a two-handed saw. Teachings like these should make us think. In another *sutta*, the Lord Buddha compared the training of a Dhamma practitioner to the training of a king's war elephant. The elephant would first be calmed down, then its skin would be pierced with arrows and spears so that it learned to remain stable in all situations, to have a stable mind and not react. It would be a useless war elephant if it became agitated or fled the battlefield after being pierced with an arrow or spear, particularly if the king was on its back.

1 A list of the ten fetters (*saṁyojana*) is given in the Appendix.

Similarly, people practising the Dhamma should understand and accept that the training will be painful: there is no way that pain can be avoided. As practitioners, we cannot evade painful feelings.

Another teaching of the Lord Buddha concerns the five *khandhas* – the body, feelings, memory and association, thought and consciousness – which make up what we consider to be ourselves. The practice is to examine each group in turn to see whether it really is me, mine or belongs to me. The body without the four other *khandhas* – is it you? Feelings alone – are they you? Memory and association is where you live most of the time, but if you consider it separately from the other four *khandhas* – is it you? Again, you live a lot in thought, in the future, in your views and opinions – but is thought really you? And consciousness, which simply knows that something has come into sense contact – is that really you? This way of dissecting the idea of self into its component parts is similar to the practice of *asubha* in which we mentally chop the physical body up into bits and pieces to try to understand and undermine the concept we have of the body.[2] We have to carefully investigate the notions we have of self. What is it that seems so stable that we can use the words me or mine to describe it?

With careful reflection, we can see that at one moment we identify with the bodily *khandha* (*rūpa-khandha*) and take it to be me and mine, but at the next moment we identify with a feeling, memory or thought, believing it to be me and mine. What we think of as me or mine is constantly changing, and each of the *khandhas* is also changing. Feeling, for instance, changes from pleasant to unpleasant or neutral and back again. Are these things me or mine? We are so used to assuming that they are, that we never take a closer look. If what we call me and mine is really something of substance, how can it change?

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2 See Ajahn Martin's talk, *How to practise body contemplation*, in his book, *Forest Leaves*, available on his website (www.forestdhammatalks.org).

How can a physical body that constantly changes through birth, old age, sickness and death be me and mine? Feelings change, and moods created by feelings and thoughts also change – now good, now bad, now neutral – so how can they be me or mine? What is it that we constantly call I, me or mine; what is it that we are defending all the time? Whenever someone says something about us that conflicts with our own view of ourselves, we have to defend ourselves. At times we think we are the body ("I'm male, female, handsome, healthy, sick, tall, small, fat, thin"), at other times feelings ("I feel this"), at other times memory ("I remember this") and at other times thoughts ("This is my opinion" or " I'm like this!"). As regards the fifth *khandha*, it's rather difficult to distinguish consciousness from the other *khandhas*, but we still say, "I'm aware of this sound" or "I'm aware of this sight", don't we? This, however, is not pure consciousness, for we have already associated (memory) the sense impression (consciousness) to one of the senses.

The Lord Buddha identified the five *khandhas* for our reflection; they are distinct groups, but they constantly interact with each other. So we need to investigate each group separately, starting with the physical body. Investigation of the body has to include bodily feelings, of course, since we experience the body only through feeling when our eyes are closed in meditation. The body is the pot in which the plant of greed and hate grows, so thorough investigation of the body and bodily feelings is necessary if the pot is to be destroyed. When this is achieved, there will be no more interest in the body, and we can begin to investigate the mental (*nāma*) *khandhas* to cut the five higher fetters. This is the work of the *Anāgāmī*.

The *nāma-khandhas*, in particular thoughts, memories and feelings, interact with each other to create moods and build views and opinions, so we need to observe how they work together. Practice at this level is like opening a mechanical pocket watch and observing how its mechanism works. It's fascinating to see how the hands of the watch turn around and around and

around while always telling the time, but how does it actually work? Well, we can open the watch and see how one wheel catches onto another, which catches onto another and another, with the result that the hands move and time is displayed. So it is with the five *khandhas*; they act in a mechanical fashion – if this condition is met then that will happen, and if that condition is met then this will happen. Is this what you call me and mine? Is this what you have to protect? Think about how much effort you have to put into looking after and protecting the *khandhas*. Are you protecting feelings that constantly change? Are you protecting the body you had as a baby or as a teenager or in middle age or in old age? If it's the body at this moment, it's not the same body as it was an hour ago, or will be in an hour's time. And it's the same with feeling, memory and thought.

The truth is that we don't have control over the *khandhas*. We can't stop the body from ageing, can we? If these things really were me and mine, we'd be able to do whatever we wanted with them, but we can't, because they're not! They don't belong to us. We've just grabbed them through desire, forgetting that it's not within our power to change their nature. If we are wise, however, we can investigate them thoroughly to understand their true nature, seeing them working together to form the concept of self that we believe in so solidly and defend so heavily. Whichever *khandha* we take as our object, we need to examine every aspect of it and ask what it really is. With the body, for example, we can mentally take it apart, disassemble it into its components and ask which part of the body is the body. Is it the foot or the leg or the head or the nose, and so on? What is the body? Investigate it thoroughly until you understand. Such investigation will bear fruit, if not tomorrow then in two weeks, two months, two years or two decades.

Remember this well: the only thing we can do is keep on with the work, whether calming the mind to attain *samādhi* or investigating to develop wisdom (*paññā*) in order to see in line with the truth. *Sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* are the three columns

of the noble eight-fold path,[3] and it is these we have to work on. To get the mind calm, we fix it firmly on the mental repetition of the word *buddho* or on the breath coming in and out at the tip of the nose, noticing when it comes in, when it changes from the in-breath to the out-breath, and when it goes out. This is the practice for *samādhi*, and there's nothing else to it. Of course, if the results don't come quickly, our desires come up, and we wonder why meditation isn't working: "Why am I not dropping into *upācāra* or *appaṇā samādhi*? Why am I not feeling happy and content?" But these are the voices of the *kilesas* trying to make us believe that such work is futile. For instance, if we've worked hard and put a lot of effort into meditation practice, we may have built up a lot of energy over two or three hours. Then if something or someone causes a disturbance, the *kilesas* can take all the accumulated energy and let it out in a blast of anger. It's just like having a motorbike with an empty petrol tank, getting it to the garage and filling it up with petrol, only to have the *kilesas* say thank you and riding off to have some fun. Once the tank is empty again, they just throw the bike down, and the tank has to be filled up again. Are you willing to go through this time after time? Are you really willing to give the *kilesas* the power to do whatever they want?

Of course, the *kilesas* can always find a good reason to justify wasting the energy we have built up. But if this kind of thing happens, you really must look closely at your meditation practice to see what is wrong. Can your meditation have been so good, can you really have been so close to *samādhi* that a little disturbance could dissipate all the built-up energy in a blast of anger? You should reflect on how this happened rather than blaming other people for disturbing your meditation. When something like this

3 The noble eight-fold path (*ariyo aṭṭhangiko maggo*) leading to *Nibbāna* comprises right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right *sati* and right *sāmadhi*. Each of these steps has many facets, and has a subtle, intricate relationship to the others.

happens, a real practitioner takes it as an indication of something wrong with his practice. Perhaps, for example, you pushed too hard by not allowing anything to come into the mind, instead of just observing the breath coming in and going out, using a soft touch. If you practise like that, nothing can disturb you, not even sounds, because you are simply doing the work. But if you start to have expectations — thinking that the meditation is going well, that you are close to *samādhi*, and so on — something disturbing will certainly happen. If you had *sati*, however, rather than becoming angry at the disturbance, you would be grateful to have noticed that something was wrong with your meditation, that you were not really doing the work.

Please remember: the *kilesas* use us. We fill up the petrol tank hoping to use the motorcycle ourselves, only to find it usurped by the *kilesas*. Whoosh, off they go, leaving us sitting there having gained nothing from all the work. We worked hard to get the bike to the next garage and fill the tank with petrol, and it was all for nothing. This happens in our meditation practice all the time — whoosh, gone. And the *kilesas* say thank you and zoom off to have a fun time. Then we start the work all over again, developing *samādhi* and honing *sati*, and the same thing happens again, largely because we weren't aware that expectations had crept in. It's similar to digging a hole but continually wondering when the damn thing will be finished instead of just digging, one shovelful at a time, or observing one breath or one mental repetition of *buddho* at a time. Just one more breath; just one more *buddho*. We shouldn't be thinking about when the session is going to end or when the *dukkha* is going to stop.

Take pain; when it comes up in sitting meditation, we notice it only when it's too much to bear. We weren't aware of the process, we didn't see how it slowly crept in, because *sati* wasn't acute enough. Instead of developing and fostering *sati*, we were pushing ourselves to get fast results. Our conditioning, particularly as Westerners, is to get results fast, so we do a lot of heavy work and then wonder why the results don't come. But they

don't come because the *kilesas* intervene. Actually, the arising of pain is quite a slow process, and we'll see it developing if and only if we have *sati*. At first there is a fleeting thought of discomfort, and after a few minutes another thought arises that there is an unpleasant feeling. Then thoughts of painful feelings increase until we notice that pain is happening. Seconds later, we find it very painful, then unbearable, and we stop meditating and get up. And that's the end of our practice; the *kilesas* have grabbed the motorbike and are off on their joy ride.

So develop *sati*; get it up to speed to see what is happening and how things occur in the mind. If you become aware of irritation, just know it; if you feel that something is annoying you, just know the annoyance; if you see anger coming up, don't let it out. If we see irritation, annoyance or anger coming up, we can use it against the *kilesas* which produced these emotions, not against the other people. In fact, anger is created within the heart, within our own *citta*, so when we feel anger inside the *citta*, we should direct it back at the *kilesas*, not towards other people or situations. Use the power you have built up wisely; the *kilesas* have pinched your motorbike and you have to grab it back. Get smart. When anger flares up, turning it back onto the *kilesas* that have caused it is a very wholesome way of dealing with the situation. Anger is a particular problem for Westerners, including Western *bhikkhus*; they seem to get annoyed, irritated, upset and angry very easily. In your meditation practice, if you can recognise what is happening and turn the situation around it can bring great benefits. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used to say that if people who are easily roused to anger can turn that energy towards fighting the *kilesas*, they will travel fast along the road to *magga*, *phala* and *Nibbāna*, albeit that there will be lots of pain and suffering along the way. This is the way to use anger wisely and wholesomely.

I invite you to investigate the five *khandhas*. See each one as separate from the others and ask whether it really is yourself and whether it belongs to you. What are these five groups

that you spend your life guarding and defending? Why keep protecting them if they keep changing according to their nature and if you've no control over how and when they change? What are you actually protecting? Can you protect a thought that has just arisen and will cease, and which you've forgotten about two minutes later? Is that a sensible thing to do? Is it sensible to protect your memories that bring *dukkha* in their wake? Is it sensible to see these *khandhas*, which change according to their nature, as you and yours and to have to protect them? Really? If not, then develop your *sati* and use it. If something irritates or angers you, tell yourself that something must be wrong with your meditation practice, and think back to see what was wrong. You don't always need a teacher to point out what is wrong with your meditation – take the initiative and find it out for yourself. Ask yourself what was wrong with your meditation that you became so easily annoyed, and you'll find the answer. I'm sure you'll find it because this is how I practised myself; I always found the reason, and it was always within my own *citta*.

So now that you are here in an isolated area with few people, use this time to the utmost to develop your meditation practice. Meditation is much more difficult in the outside world where you are surrounded by people and have far more distractions, but here in the deep forest it is much easier to see, observe and uproot the *kilesas*. These isolated areas are the places that the Lord Buddha advised people to practise meditation – in the open, in the forest, on a mountain or in a cave. Use this opportunity wisely. Use it to get rid of greed, hate and delusion, and to overcome and transcend *avijjā*.

When subject and object become one

21st October 2019

Why do we meditate? Why do we practise? To calm the mind, but when we stop practising, the calmness vanishes. Then we practise again until the mind gets calm, and stop practising until the mind gets agitated again. That's not the way. There are two ways of calming the mind to get rid of the agitation we feel all the time: awareness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*), and the mental repetition of the word *buddho*. With either technique, the idea is to develop knowingness, to learn to know, not just to calm the mind down. When observing the breath at the nose, we have to know that it's going out or in, that it's long or short, and that it's rough or subtle. We have to know about the breath at every moment: when it starts, when it's at its height, when the turning point from the in-breath to the out-breath occurs, and when it ends. This is the knowingness we are after, the knowingness we want to achieve. It's called *sati*, and when it is established we have eyes and can see, but without it we are blind. When we can see clearly, we can start to investigate, but if we can't see, we can't examine all the things that agitate the heart.

With *ānāpānasati*, we keep our awareness on a fixed point around the tip of the nose, and we have to return to it each time the mind slips away. There is no external fixed point with the repetition of *buddho*, of course, but there is an internal point of repetition which we return to. In either case, we have to become one-pointed. Why? Because all we've ever known in the world is duality, subject and object; we've never known one-pointedness, when subject and object merge. If we can experience one-pointedness, we'll know what *Nibbāna* is like, and this preview of *Nibbāna* will increase the motivation to practise. Someone who's had a preview of *Nibbāna* will want to have the experience again and again, because it's where his real home is. It's like the biblical story of the prodigal son. He wants to go back home after a long series of adventures, and we want the same. Something inside

us wants to go back to our real home. We've all come from there, and we all want to get back.

At the beginning of practice, the knowingness that develops will be the worldly kind — what we call *sati* — but once we dive into one-pointedness, we'll find a different kind of knowing, a knowing that doesn't know objects. It's just pure knowingness, or the pure essence of the *citta*. This essence is the same for every being in the thirty-one realms of existence; they all have *cittas*, and all have the same essence. The *citta* is the owner of the five *khandhas*, which comprise the body, feeling, memory and association, thought and consciousness. Though the essence of the *citta* is the same for every being, the attachment or identification with these five *khandhas* differs for each *citta*. Human beings tend to make distinctions between themselves and others based on race, nationality, gender, family, and so on. That's where all the problems start and where all the fighting begins.

The identification with a personality, nationality or family creates a lot of *dukkha*, and the existence of *dukkha* is the first noble truth. The word *dukkha* encompasses all kinds of dissatisfaction, discomfort, unease, suffering, pain or restlessness, and we experience it all the time. *Dukkha* comes from our attachment to the things that we believe to be me, mine and myself, but which are not. Desire (*taṇhā*) is its cause — the desire to be or not to be, to have or not to have. People who kill themselves have the desire not to be, but what happens to them after death is a gruesome story. It doesn't end there, as they will discover sooner or later. When we die, it's not that the *citta* dies, for it is the everlasting tourist and it never dies. When people travel, they go from country to country, province to province, town to town, and when they cross borders they say they've gone from one defined place to another, such as from France to Spain. But really, all they've done is to travel from one place to another. And it's the same with rebirth: we can say that we've crossed a border when we go from one realm of existence to another.

There are many *deva* realms above the human realm, but there is also a hell realm which has quite a few regions within it.[1]

The sojourn through the realms of existence is an endless cycle, with no beginning and no end — unless we find the way out. I like the metaphor of the hamster wheel. Have you ever looked at a hamster running, running and running without getting anywhere? Picture it in your mind. A hamster in a hamster wheel — that's you. Running, running and running but going nowhere, always at the same spot. You need to open the door and get out, and the way out of *saṁsāra*, the cycle of birth and death, is to enter the stream and become a *Sotāpanna*. Stream entry needs a lot of meditation practice, however. Just getting the mind calm is not enough, for you must get into *upācāra samādhi* where thoughts and memories stop. You really do have to experience it; it's not an option.

When thoughts and memories stop, the future stops and so does the past. There's no more future, no more past, no more loneliness and no more anger. There's nothing but pure experience, without the little voice in our heads that constantly comments on experience. What is the voice that tells us that our practice is not going well, or that we are feeling calm or not? Why do we need it to tell us what we are experiencing? If we thrust a hand into a fire, we know immediately that it's hot. It's only afterwards that the voice, the commentator who runs our life, pops up to say that we've burned ourselves. The commentator also tells us to be angry or sad about what has happened. Actually, we spend our lives in an unreal universe, rather like a university professor living in an ivory tower. To make contact with reality, he has to step down and put his feet on the ground. We live in the ivory tower of language, of symbols, and to understand what these symbols represent and get beyond them, we have to experience directly to see what is really going on. We have to find the value that underlies them, just as programming languages

1 The thirty-one realms of existence are outlined in the Appendix.

need to refer to values which underlie the various symbols used. With pain, for instance, we have to know its underlying value, i.e. what it represents, otherwise it remains a symbol, and we are experts at manipulating symbols. The more symbols we create, the more complex the world is, the more deluded we are, and the higher is our ivory tower.

So you have to get down to the basics, and this means getting down to feelings. How does it feel when you take a shower? What do you think when you do it? If you look closely, you'll find that many thoughts come into the experience. When you taste, what do you feel? When the wind or an insect touches your skin, what do you feel? When you look at food, your thoughts are all about food, and you're not even aware of what you are tasting. What is it that tastes? There are seven basic tastes, and every kind of food gives rise to one or more of them, but what are you thinking while you taste? You're thinking that one food is spicy and another is bland, or that you want more or don't like the food at all. You're not completely aware of eating or tasting but are wrapped up in thoughts, and that's why I say you're living in an ivory tower. Well, you have to come down and get in touch with reality. What is the taste of the food you have in the mouth? What does pain feel like, and what is pain? You've been running away from pain all your life. If someone threatens you with pain, you get frightened, don't you? Even though you haven't yet experienced the pain, the threat is enough. You know the symbol and don't like it, so you run away. You've been doing this for millions of lives, hankering after things that you like and running away from those you dislike, living in a world of symbols without knowing what these symbols really represent. But symbols are just pointers to underlying values.

For example, what is the value of pain, what is the value of bitter, what is the value of a particular touch? You'll find that the value is always an experience – that's it! You have to get to that level, the level of pure experience, to be able to remove some of the hindrances to meditation or eliminate some of the

kilesas. That's why getting into *upācāra samādhi* is so important. It's where things just happen, where you just experience without anyone telling you about it or hiding it beneath a symbol. As soon as the little voice inside your head comments about an experience, thoughts start up saying how good it was, that you want more, that you didn't like it, and so forth. When that happens, you're already in thought, and you've missed everything that was otherwise going on. You have to be present at every moment, for only then can you understand what is really happening in your body and mind.

When a physicist performs an experiment, he has to examine the data from every moment if he is to understand the results and see why particular events have occurred. In the same way, we have to be aware of every movement within the *citta* if we are to understand what is going on there. But we're too lazy, aren't we? It's all so tiring, isn't it? Just think about when we start to meditate on the breath. When we feel calm, we lose interest in knowing about the breath and just want to stay with the calm. That's where we go wrong. We have to school *sati*, to put effort into knowing what is happening at every moment, until it becomes a habit. We have to know what's happening in the *citta*, know that there is a thought wanting to come up, know that there's an intention to think, know that there's an intention to move, know that there's an intention to speak. But do we realise that? No, because we're not yet there, and it may take a long time to get there. We don't know the intentions created inside the *citta*, and if we don't know them, we can't know why they were created. To put it bluntly, we don't know why we're doing what we're doing.

Let's think about the human state. Human beings can be conscious of their actions, why they're acting, and what the results will be: that's almost the definition of *Homo sapiens* — a wise man. Now look at your life — how often have you really been human in that sense, how often have you really been wise? Three or four times? Before you've done something, how often

have you thought about what you were going to do and why? And did you check the results afterwards? How often have you done that? Very rarely, so can you really call yourself human? Actually, to put it in programming language, most people are more like programmed robots with if-then-else conditioning. If I see my uncle then I react like this; if I see my mother then I react like that; if I see my father then I react in another way; if I see my boss I react in a particular way. This is conditioning, just like a robot, and that's why human beings are so good at programming — because they're all self-programmed. They've copied their own programming into computers, and that's why computers are as stupid as they are. Artificial intelligence can make computers smart, but they'll never be as smart as their creators. Yes, we are robots and they are robots, but we have the potential to become fully human by knowing what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what kind of results will occur. [At this point the temple dogs begin to howl.] See, even the dogs don't like me speaking about such things. It's the same when I speak about *asubha*, the loathsomeness of the body, or about the need for daily reflection to recollect each evening what you've done during the day. These are practices no-one likes to hear about — even the temple dogs start howling!

So let's become really human. Let's be responsible and aware of what we are doing and why — and the why is especially important. Then you'll realise that most of your actions are driven by *dukkha*. You sometimes eat because you're hungry, but most of the time it's because of *dukkha*, such as restlessness or boredom. Restlessness can make people really crazy, and it is one of the five hindrances to meditation that have to be overcome.[2] It is particularly difficult to deal with because the restless energy affects all parts of the body, but it can be counteracted by focusing it on one point, after which the restlessness goes away.

2 The five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) to meditation are sensual desire, anger and ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt.

Boredom is another problem for meditators. When *buddho* practice becomes boring, it means that you've lost interest in it. It's the same with the breath: you've watched it for half an hour, just going in and out, and it's boring, boring, boring. But if you get interested in boredom, you can see how it feels and explore the experience. Getting interested in boredom means that there's no more boredom, because boredom is the opposite of interest. You all want to be entertained, constantly entertained, entranced by something new. But if you got interested in the breath, you'd see that it is new every time. Every breath is different from the one before, and the same is true for *buddho*. If you put some effort into practice and get interested in it, you can get really concentrated. Of course, a little voice pops up whispering that it's all so difficult. But who is saying that? Who? Have you ever questioned that little voice, the voice of the *kilesas*, or have you just assumed it to be yourself?

Normally, we define ourselves as the five *khandhas*. The combination of the *khandhas* is what we call our personality, and we identify with certain characteristics of the body — tall or short, thin or fat, female or male, and so on — and with various types of feelings and moods, likes and dislikes. Think back to some of your encounters with other people; how did you present yourself to them? You showed them the picture that you want the world to see, didn't you? We all want to show off our good sides, but we also have bad sides — the greed, the anger, the stupidity — which other people notice after a while, as they get to know us better. Don't most relationships break up because people eventually come to see each other as they are? A very useful reflection is to ask yourself who you are at any particular moment. You'll see that the answer usually involves thought and memory, sometimes body and feeling, though rarely consciousness (*viññāṇa*) which is so transient that it's hard to grasp. You'll also have to face the fact that the heart has both wholesome and unwholesome tendencies, but once you recognise the good and bad within yourself you can stop pretending. You can just

be, just be the way you are, and start to work with whatever you are. None of us would have been born into the human realm, which is one of the sensual realms, unless we had greed, hatred and delusion in our hearts, so no-one is special in this regard. Greed and hate are overcome only at the stage of *Anāgāmī* or *Arahant*. The *Arahant*, of course, has gone beyond good and evil, has transcended duality, and will never return to any realm of existence.

To jump off the hamster wheel and escape from *saṁsāra*, we have to do a lot of work. We have to investigate everything we identify with, including the body, our feelings, and our views and opinions. But we also have to overcome the ten fetters that bind people to the endless round of birth and death.[3] The first fetter is doubt, and this is where many people get stuck. They don't believe that there are *devas* in higher realms — even though some people can see and communicate with them — or that there is a ghost or demon realm, or a hell realm filled with beings. We believe that animals exist, of course, because we can see them with our physical eyes, but there are beings in other realms we can see only with our inner eyes and communicate with only through the *citta*.

The second fetter concerns morality, being inconsistent with the five precepts, keeping them one day but not the next, and keeping them again the day after. The precepts comprise not harming any living being; not taking what is not given; not using untruthful or harsh speech; not indulging in sexual misconduct, which means being faithful to a partner and not using our power over someone for our sexual pleasure; and not drinking alcohol or taking drugs that lead to heedlessness. People drink alcohol or take drugs to avoid realising how awful the world is, to try to alleviate their *dukkha*, but they need to take more and more to get the same effect. Actually, most of us don't like living in the world, with all the *dukkha* that it involves. Don't you realise that?

3 A list of the ten fetters (*saṁyojana*) is given in the Appendix.

To put it crudely, the world is a shit-hole, and the purpose of the Lord Buddha's teaching is to show the way out. You all think meditation is so difficult, but it's not. It's simply taking one step at a time, just like the journey from your home to Beijing. You have to cross deserts, you have to cross mountains, you have to go through jungle or open meadows. When you cross meadows, you enjoy it; when you cross steep mountains, it gets too difficult and you get stuck; and when you go through jungle, fear comes up. But this is the path of meditation: you have to go through all sorts of experiences, including death, which is particularly difficult. But if you take just one step at a time, you'll end up at your destination — *Nibbāna*, the deathless, the unconditioned or whatever you want to call it.

I was talking earlier about the conditioned, the if-then-else condition. Well, *Nibbāna* is the unconditioned. There are no more conditions, and we are free, finally free of conditioning. When we see our parents, we are free to react in a wholesome way, not from blind conditioning. When families interact, memories normally come up and complicate the relationships, but that's a fruitless, unwholesome way of behaving. The unconditioned is the thing we're aiming for: it's where we need to arrive to escape from the shit-hole of existence. But as long as we love this shit-hole and find it fascinating and entertaining, we'll remain here. Fine — that's fine with me. It's your life, and it's your decision. If you want to stay with all your friends and relatives, all your money and riches, all your music, and all your entertainment, please go ahead. Nowadays, people have only one entertainment hub — the smartphone in their pockets. All their life is inside it, and they don't seem to need anything else. I see this as a really, really dreadful development, people walking through the streets with their heads down looking at their smartphone, unaware of themselves or other people, bumping into this and that, communicating by click-click-clicking on a machine. Who knows, future generations of human beings may have a smartphone in their foreheads with buttons that other people can press, and language might become redundant.

Things like smartphones make us even more deluded, for we already live in a world of delusion. Actually, life is a video game which we take seriously until it's game over. Then we want to play again until it's game over, and again and again. In one life we're a farmer, next time a minister or the owner of a company, sometimes a woman, sometimes a man, now a human, now an animal, and so forth. There's no end to this video game called life, whether in the human realm or one of the other realms. Of the billions of lives we've had, most have been spent somewhere other than the human realm. People are not normally reborn from the human realm straight back there; they go somewhere else first, and the wheel of rebirth goes on and on and on. We'll never get out unless we understand the first noble truth, that *dukkha* or dissatisfaction is there all the time.

Try to remember the effort that went into training the body to walk, talk and think. We spend sixteen years or more training the body, and then use it for our amusement for twenty or thirty years before it starts to fall apart. And that's a healthy body: it's even worse for people who have handicaps or diseases. Thereafter, we wait until the old body falls apart completely and start looking for a new one. People never think about such things, but this is the reality: the body is just a fancy biological robot that needs to be trained and maintained. We spend most of our lives concerned with the maintenance of the body, working for eight hours a day, coming home, fixing up some food, watching some television and going to sleep. And next morning we wake up and go through the process again. Every day is the same – get up, wash, work, eat and sleep. It's almost the same at weekends, getting up, doing something, doing something else and sleeping. If you want to find something boring, you ought to find that kind of everyday life boring, not being aware of *buddho* or the breath. We have thousands of labels for the different actions we do in a day, and that's how we get fooled. This is another example of living in an ivory tower: we think all these actions are different, but actually they're just movements of the body. When we eat, go for a walk, wash the dishes or go to the cinema, we move our

arms and legs. We like some activities and not others, but the movements they involve are always the same. We love it when we move our hand to eat, drink or go for a stroll but not when we have to wash clothes, clean the apartment or go out to buy groceries. These are all just movements of the body, but because we use different names for them, and call some good and others bad, we are fooled time after time.

Here in this monastery where there are few distractions, you have the opportunity to observe yourself and the movements of the body. When you have a shower, observe the body and how it moves. When you eat, observe the body and how it moves. When you do walking meditation, observe the body and how it moves. What's the real difference between all these activities? Go on — ask yourself. You like moving the arm one way (to hit a golf ball, for instance) but dislike moving it another way (to mop the floor). Why do you like one and not the other? What is the use of these attachments of like and dislike? If you find monastic life boring, use this kind of reflection. It's the same with pain. Investigate pain: what does it feel like? Breathe it in, really breathe it in, just like a bad smell. Actually, there are no bad smells, only things that smell different, and it's the same with the pain we feel sitting in meditation.

The first step is to accept pain and investigate its exact location. After a while, you'll find that it disappears and appears somewhere else. In this way, you can follow it until it reveals where it's actually coming from, its real location. Most of the time in meditation, the pain we experience has nothing to do with the body, but the little voice of the *kilesas* comes up suggesting that the pain is unbearable. The strange thing is that a knee might hurt so much that it seems intolerable, yet the pain can suddenly shift from that knee to the other. The knee in which the pain was excruciating no longer has pain. Isn't that amazing? In fact, it was a kind of magic pain — but we love magic shows, don't we? We're tricked over and over again by the magician, *avijjā*, the mastermind behind all this illusion. It tricks us every time, again and again and again. And even when we think we

know all its tricks and decide not to fall for another, it produces a new one we've never seen before – and wow, we're amazed and fooled again! But they are just the magician's tricks. Even when the breath seems to stop in meditation, and we think that we're going to die, it's just another one of its tricks. Whatever can die will die anyway, so don't fall for the tricks of *avijjā*.

In meditation practice, you can't take anything for granted. You have to challenge everything, including all the assumptions you've had since birth. That's why I encourage people to do an intensive retreat once in a while, to experience all the resistances that lurk within them, of which they are only dimly aware. People living a normal lay life can meditate for, say, four hours a day but live heedlessly for the twenty remaining hours, making the whole exercise shallow and lacking direction. But here in the forest, we meditate for sixteen hours a day or more. The aim of practice is to get to the bottom of things, and when practice has this level of intensity nothing can escape it. But I accept that it's not an easy path; practice is never easy. Why do you think so few people practise? There are many people who meditate but very few who really practise, and real practice is what it's all about.

Don't let yourself be captivated by thoughts, memories and associations. When they come up, immediately attack them, asking what they are, who they are, where they come from, what they're telling you, and why you should believe them. You have to see with your own eyes, your inner eyes, that these things are *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* if you are ever to understand them. Every thought that comes up will lead you astray, every thought. If you believe any thought, you're on the wrong track.

The hair in the soup

15th & 16th March 2009

Just listen. Listen to the sound of the forest: leaves rustling in the wind, birds chattering, animals calling to each other here and there. Everything is so peaceful. It's all so beautiful. Everything is perfect in itself. We would see the loveliness of being with nature, just being with it, if it wasn't for the *dukkha*, the dissatisfaction in our hearts. We're not satisfied with this, we don't like that, we want to change this, we need to keep that, there's pain in the body, worry in the mind — on and on it goes all the time. The Lord Buddha said that *Nibbāna* is in front of our eyes, but we don't see it. To see it, we first have to open our eyes. His injunction was to open our eyes — *Nibbāna* is here, right here before us. That's all we have to do. We know how to open our physical eyes but not our inner eyes, and that's the problem. If we really understood the Lord Buddha's teachings, we'd have no difficulty seeing *Nibbāna*, but we are blinded by attachments, likes and dislikes, greed and hate, and views and opinions about everything under the sun. Yet *Nibbāna* is open: it is there, it has always been there, and it will always be there. As long as we have our eyes closed, we're blind — so open them.

We've all come to this isolated forest to practise, but wherever we go, wherever we stay, we take our problems with us, and they come up in meditation practice. *Dukkha* exists whatever we do, whether we realise it or not. We try to avoid it by changing our environment, posture or method of practice, but sooner or later the same old problems resurface. And when they do, we react in the same old way, by changing our location, posture or practice. We go on and on facing the same old problems and acting in the same old way, never realising that the cause of all the torment lies within ourselves.

Think about a delicious dish of food, a streaming lobster soup, let's say. Imagine that you dive in, taking a spoonful and

savouring the wonderful smell. You take one spoonful after another, and then you see a big, dirty, greasy, stinking hair floating around. You wouldn't want to carry on eating, would you? Perhaps you'd feel sick. So you accuse the waiter or the cook of putting the hair in the soup. Then you order another dish, an exquisite vegetable ratatouille this time, and dig in, only to find another whopping, dirty, greasy hair. Now, imagine that whatever kind of dish you ordered, the same thing happened over and over again. After a while, you'd move restaurants, only to find that the same thing happened there — dirty, greasy, stinking hairs in all the dishes. Of course, I'm using dishes of food as a metaphor for the pleasures that come through any of the six senses (the food of the senses). Whatever the sense, sooner or later we find something that we don't like, and *dukkha* arises. As soon as we come across the hair, as we always do, the whole experience is ruined. We meet the perfect partner but tire of them sooner or later and start to find fault, or they tire of us and walk away, or they die and leave us alone again. There it is again — the hair in the soup that spoils the sense pleasure, and the same thing happens time after time. After lifetimes of exploring restaurants — and we've all been to *every* restaurant in the world many times over — we still can't find one that serves a plate of food without a greasy hair. Eventually, we might start to notice the hair more quickly than before, perhaps immediately or after one or two spoonfuls, but we still blame the world outside, and remain blind to *Nibbāna*.

We have this experience all the time and spend our lives looking for the culprit — the waiter, the cook, the kitchen staff — who puts hair in the food, but we're falsely accusing them. We have to stop blaming things outside of ourselves. Actually, each dish of the senses comes with a greasy hair already embedded, turning *sukha* into *dukkha*, pleasure into displeasure. Whatever comes in contact with the senses ends in displeasure and dissatisfaction. We look for *Nibbāna* in the sense pleasures or in the phenomena that appear in the world, but the *paṭiccasamup-*

pāda tells us that *avijjā pattayā sankhāra* — *avijjā* is the condition for all phenomena to arise — and we live in a universe of these phenomena, which include ourselves. If we look for *Nibbāna* in the various phenomena or sense contacts we experience, we're looking in the wrong place. In fact, any contact through any of the senses, whether seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching or thinking, always comes along with a greasy hair. Once we start to practise, we begin to realise that no sense contact is satisfactory in itself; it always comes associated with *dukkha*. If we fool ourselves into thinking that there is a sense contact without *dukkha*, it's just because we haven't yet recognised the *dukkha* that exists. In fact, the myriad of sense dishes in the world must lead to *dukkha* because they are polluted by *avijjā*, the fundamental ignorance that drops a big, dirty, greasy, stinking hair into every dish. People fall for its tricks every time, in whichever guise *avijjā* presents itself, depending on their characters. If they have a hate (*dosa*) character, for instance, they see imperfection everywhere and find fault, so they make sure that their environment is always clean and tidy. But if greed (*lobha*) predominates in their nature, people don't mind dirt and mess, for they are only interested in grabbing hold of sense pleasures time after time, and they suffer the consequences because sense pleasures are always fleeting.

To look at it another way, we can think of *avijjā* as putting a pinch of poison in all the dishes we consume, in all the sense contacts we make. This is why Than Ajahn Mahā Bua called the *kilesas*, which are the fangs or soldiers of *avijjā*, sugar-coated poison. When we act on the suggestions of *avijjā*, the first taste is sweet but the second piles on the poison, and the more poison we ingest, the sicker we get. In meditation practice, we have to get smart to see the danger as early as possible and stop becoming absorbed in the excitement of the senses. If we don't, we'll keep consuming poison, and eliminating poison is much more difficult than not eating it in the first place. We need to see sense contacts for what they are, rather than becoming attached to

them. We need to realise that, at the very moment liking or disliking arises, poison enters the heart, bringing up restlessness, unpleasantness, pain or suffering depending on the strength of our attachment. We have to be aware of this when we start practising, aware that *avijjā* puts poison into every sense contact, as well as into the five *khandhas* that we think of as self.

But please remember this: the poison (or the greasy hair) has nothing to do with the food. Once we remove it, the food will still taste delicious, but it will not contain poison that affects the *citta*, the heart. Once we take *avijjā* out of the picture, once we remove the *kilesas*, there will be no more displeasure, dissatisfaction or restlessness. When that happens, the senses will just be the senses and the five *khandhas* just what they are. The body will just be the body, feeling just feeling whether pleasant or unpleasant, memory just memory, thought just thought, and consciousness just consciousness. None will contain poison or greasy hairs, for they will have been cleansed of *avijjā*. The world will carry on in the same old way, but the *kilesas* will have gone. Then, whatever we do, there will only be satisfaction — *paramaṁ sukhaṁ*, the supreme happiness, the happiness that cannot be gained from anything in this world.

The first kind of happiness that we can gain from meditation practice arises in *upācāra samādhi*. It's a delight that we can't find in any of the sense pleasures that the world promises. We can only find it by concentrating the mind on one object until it becomes still. In this state, either great happiness arises or the mind becomes utterly peaceful and calm. The longer we stay in *upācāra samādhi* — or *appaṇā samādhi*, the deepest state of *samādhi* — the more we notice the contrast between it and our everyday experience when we emerge from it. We feel irritated by the intrusion of the senses, as if we were in a world war bombarded by sense data, particularly if we make the mistake of coming out too fast. For this reason, we should come out very slowly, having the intention to open our eyes, and come gradually back into the world, to avoid being shocked by the impact of

the senses. The experience of *samādhi* makes us realise what living in the world is like all the time, even though we never noticed it before. It makes us question why we run after sense contacts that bring only restlessness and *dukkha* compared with the great peacefulness of *samādhi*. This experience of peacefulness or joy is the reason most people want to drop back into *samādhi* as quickly as they can.

I want you to be aware of the greasy hair floating in every sense-dish that comes your way, and pick it out. The hair isn't put there by anyone else. The soup is served with the hair already embedded, and you are the culprit – you are guilty of putting it there. Your *avijjā* puts the hair in the soup. It's not that circumstances, society or anything outside puts irritation, dissatisfaction, restlessness or painful feelings into the dish of the senses. You have to train your *sati* to see this, to see that all the senses are unsatisfactory in themselves, that no lasting satisfaction can come from them. People in the world don't realise this, and that's why they eat the sugar-coated poison of *avijjā* and why they need the medical care of the Dhamma. They die from this poison, and are reborn again and again into the thirty-one realms of existence because of their attachments.

Let's look at the physical body we love and cherish so much. In *asubha* practice, we can imagine it without skin or imagine the faeces forming inside its large and small intestines. When we practise like this, we see the body as it really is. Its repugnance, its loathsomeness, is revealed, and we suddenly see the hair in the soup or the poison inherent in our attachment to our own body and the bodies of others. We don't like to think about the body in this way, of course. We want to see only the thin covering of skin, thinking how beautiful it is and how much we like its touch or smell. But ask yourself why you have to wash the body every day and where the rancid smell of an unwashed body comes from if not from inside. The air we breathe doesn't have a rancid smell and neither does the food we eat, so it must come from the body. If you look inside the body and see it as it really is,

you'll feel disgusted, and the same holds true for all our sense contacts and our views and opinions — dissatisfaction lurks inside them all. *Avijjā* doesn't want us to get wise, of course; it wants us to align with its way of thinking through the thoughts, views and opinions we've always had. It's the Dhamma that wants us to see, know or understand in line with the truth, to observe things until we find the greasy hair or the pinch of poison in every dish.

When we have *avijjā* in our hearts, we are dissatisfied and find fault with other people, our situation, the sounds around us, the food we eat or anything that contacts the senses. In fact, we all project our hate, irritation and dissatisfaction onto the world all the time. When we come to practise meditation, we project these feelings onto the sitting posture, the surrounding noises or the people nearby — the cushion is too hard, the food isn't good, he did this to me, she said that to me, and so on — and this is why our meditation doesn't go smoothly. Pain in the knees, pain in the back, pain in the shoulders, wanting to alter position or sit in another place, finding the climate too hot or too cold — these things come to the fore and plant themselves in front of our eyes, stopping us enjoying our lives and surroundings, even in a beautiful forest environment like this. People come to the forest thinking that it's pleasant and peaceful but get up and run away after five minutes because of their own in-built dissatisfaction, which sticks in the heart like a thorn that rots and poisons the flesh. People in the world try to remove the rotten flesh surrounding the thorns, without realising that the thorns themselves are the cause of the disease. We have to look for the poisonous thorn in the *citta* itself. If we excise the poisonous thorn, the flesh will no longer be infected, the rotting will stop, the wounds will heal, and experience will be pleasant.

Some meditators have lots of doubts about what they are doing. For instance, they think that their *samādhi* practice can't be right, that it ought to be like the descriptions they've heard or read about in books. But these are just views and opinions. Who told you that your practice should be like this, that or the

next thing? Just observe closely to find the poisonous thorn as quickly as possible and remove it; that's all you need do. And don't look at the faults of other people. Isn't there a saying in the Bible that we shouldn't look at the splinter of wood in the eyes of other people but rather see the beam in our own? We love looking for the teeny-weeny faults in other people but hide our own, ignoring our own mistakes. Remove the stains in yourself and become pure and clean. Just remove one stain after the other, as if you were washing the laundry. Once the first stain is removed, you can go on to the next and the next, removing each as you go. But the first step in meditation practice is to throw out all your views and opinions to get a free, unobstructed view of the highway. All the views and opinions that you've built up over the years just get in the way: this shouldn't be, that shouldn't be, why aren't things like this, why are they like that, and so forth. They all stop you from seeing things as they are, just as the greasy hair in the soup stops you enjoying the delicious taste.

In meditation, if you can recognise how *avijjā* puts the greasy hair or the poison in the food, you'll be up to speed with its tricks. When you can see what it's up to, you'll be able to observe with your own inner eyes how this magician performs its tricks. Then you can give it a slap or a rap on the fingers, and the deception will end. The sense contact will then be pure in itself, cleansed of the poison of *avijjā*. If only we could remember to do this, whatever feelings, memories or thoughts we have, whatever bodily position we are in and whatever sense contact we encounter, we would already be at peace. But we have likes and dislikes, wanting and not wanting. This is the poison, and wanting to repeat experiences again and again is also poison. It is the poison of craving (*taṇhā*), the second noble truth, the origin of *dukkha* — wanting, wanting, wanting, liking, disliking, wanting to come into existence, wanting not to exist, on and on and on. This is the source of the *dukkha* we experience, but fortunately there is a path (*magga*) that leads to the cessation of *dukkha*, the fourth noble truth, and it consists of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*.

Of course, if we are to walk the path, we first have to have a goal to work towards. Let me give you a parable. Imagine you are travelling through a country looking for land that will satisfy all your needs, and you come across a wide expanse that seems to fit the bill. The land has been dried up for a long time, maybe for aeons, but you can see that it could become extremely fertile if it was irrigated. So you hunt around to find water and, after walking for many hours, come to a small river. Eventually, you realise that the land could be irrigated if you collected a large enough volume of water from the river. When released, the water would flow out across the land and the irrigation would be sustained thereafter by the flow from the river.

So your first step is to build a dam big enough for storing the water. In terms of meditation practice, this is equivalent to building up a basis of moral virtue (keeping the five precepts, or *sīla*), as well as developing the three key virtues of generosity, gratitude and respect. Then you examine the land to see how to lay any pipes that are required (the work of *paññā*) and start laying the pipes (the work of *samādhi*). After this, you can open the dam to irrigate the land. Next, you have to investigate whether all the land can be irrigated (again, the work of *paññā*), using *samādhi* to work making any changes until, finally, all the land can be watered. In this parable, *sīla* is the dam for the water, *samādhi* is doing the actual work (laying the pipes, building the dam) and *paññā* is investigating what to do to be successful (making a plan, observing the flow, seeing how to correct the layout, and so on). All three are necessary to obtain fertile land. *Samādhi* on its own, even if very strong, would not be enough as it would never get the job done properly; for success, *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* have to work together. Once the water dam is filled, we can open it and obtain a fertile land where we'll never need anything again — in other words, attain *Nibbāna*.

The parable of the water dam is similar to one that the Lord Buddha himself gave in the parable of the raft in the *Majjhima Nikāya*. He said that if a traveller saw a large river whose near

shore was dangerous and fearful (*saṁsāra*), but whose further shore was safe and free of fear (*Nibbāna*), he would need to build a raft to cross over into safety. He would have to gather bamboo, branches, twigs and leaves to build the raft, and bind them all together to make a vehicle sturdy enough for the crossing. Once across, however, he could discard the raft and enter *Nibbāna*: as the *sutta* says, the raft is for the purpose of crossing over, not for grasping. The traveller can be grateful that the raft brought him to safety, but he doesn't have to carry it into *Nibbāna*. In fact, he wouldn't be able to enter *Nibbāna* if he did. In this parable, seeing the danger of the near shore, knowing the other shore, building the raft, and crossing over also involve *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*.

In our own practice, we have to find a middle way of building the raft. *Sīla* has to be strong enough to get us to the other side – you can compare it with the rope that holds the raft together – while *sati* and *paññā* need to be keen enough to navigate past all the obstacles in the dangerous river. But we need do only what is necessary, just enough to cross the river. Some people try to build an ocean liner with a snooker room, a snack bar and a tennis court. These are people who do additional or excessive practices that they have heard or read about but which aren't necessary for the crossing. By contrast, other people think that throwing a few bamboo reeds into the stream will be sufficient, and they are people without *sīla*, whose raft will never be secure or substantial enough to make the journey. There are even people who wonder why they should build a raft at all – why not just swim across the river? They want to make the crossing using *paññā* alone, oblivious to the importance of *sīla* and *samādhi* which protect against sharp stones or obstacles in the river.

So we have to strike a balance and do only what is necessary, gathering the components, binding them together into a firm raft, and navigating the crossing to the other side. Of course, *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* all have to be developed to a sufficient degree to be able to make the crossing, and these are

fostered and strengthened in meditation practice. *Paññā* has to be extremely sharp. At the beginning of practice, when we start to cross the river, hindrances come up, but they tend to be large and easy to see at this early stage. The closer we come to the other side, however, the sharper *sati* has to be because there are many obstacles and sharp stones that we have to bypass or remove altogether. If *sati* is not sharp enough to detect them, and *paññā* not keen enough to steer round them, we will be lost and will have to go back and start again. In the middle way of practice, the raft should be strong and flexible, for if it was too rigid it could break apart easily. Also, it shouldn't be weighed down by lot of unnecessary things, such as practices or beliefs that don't help and are actually burdens on the journey. And remember — don't just sit down by the riverside and dream about building a raft, or build one carelessly using a few sticks that break apart at the first contact with water: that will never get you anywhere.

The *kilesas* are very subtle, and they have many ways of making us avoid meditation practice. They bring to mind all the things we think we need to do or think we need to change for the better. By giving in to them, the whole day passes without any work being done, without *samādhi* or *paññā* being developed. Our practice gets strangled in this way: all we are doing is throwing the pieces of bamboo into the river, without getting anywhere near to building a raft. The middle way means that our raft is just strong and flexible enough for *samādhi* and *paññā* to steer it across the river. If you can steer across the river and come to the shore of *Nibbāna*, you can leave the raft behind and enter *Nibbāna* itself.

As I said at the beginning, *Nibbāna* is always there, but it seems far away. Please understand that any kind of contact that the *citta* makes with the senses is already poisoned. Remove that poison, and hate, anger and irritation no longer exist. *Dukkha* has little to do with the body and nothing to do with the *nāma khandhas* of feeling, memory, thought and consciousness. It just spoils your experience, that's all, so practise to end it once and

for all. All you have to do is open your eyes and see, and then you'll know for yourself. The Lord Buddha didn't fool us. He saw the truth with his own eyes, and he was kind enough to show us the way. As he said, the Dhamma is *sandiṭṭhiko* (immediately apparent and visible here and now), *opanayiko* (found by looking inwards) and *akāliko* (not dependent on time). Here it is. Open your eyes and see it for yourself.

Don’t stay stupid — get smart

10th February 2010

Most people coming to this monastery come stupid. By that I mean that they arrive at the door in ignorance, knowing very little about practice. After staying for a while, they become happy and contented in a foolish way, but their contentment slowly dissipates after they leave. They've learned nothing from their stay and remain as stupid as when they came. And whose fault is that? Mine, I suppose, because I haven't been able to get the message across. Maybe people come stupid and leave stupid because I haven't been able to teach them to be clever enough, who knows?

This is a forest monastery, and there are so few activities that you can spend most of the time in meditation, but you also have to be clever – you need to be smart. By that, I mean that you have to understand the decision processes going on inside yourself before you act or speak. There is a dialogue that happens in the *citta* before you move, scratch, eat, talk, wash, go to the toilet or do anything at all, and you need to be aware of it. You need to discover why you feel the need to make changes all the time. Don't you want to understand what is going on? Don't you want to understand what makes you tick? In fact, you are under the power of an inner tyrant, *avijjā*, that issues the orders. Don't you want to know how it manipulates you?

Look at it this way: before we act, *avijjā* has a discussion with us before a firm decision to take action is made. When we feel like getting up from a chair, a discussion takes place about why, what we intend to do and what we're looking for. But there are two parties to this discussion: the tyrant, *avijjā*, is not having a discussion with itself, is it? It's important to realise this, but many people don't seem to get it, and that's why I say they leave as stupid as they came. All they achieve after living this simple monastic life for a while is a kind of happy foolishness or foolish

happiness, which slowly disappears when they go out into the world again. They never get past first base. They've been living with their own five *khandhas* – the body, feeling, memory and association, thought and consciousness – for thirty, forty or fifty years, and are so used to obeying the commands of the tyrant that they never question them and believe them to be part of themselves. There's nothing wrong with actions of body, speech or mind, of course – we need them to live in the world. But we have to know why we are acting and what our real intentions are. This is not as easy as it sounds because the *kilesas*, the soldiers of *avijjā*, don't show us our real intentions; they don't offer them up as a gift, saying, "Here are you real intentions. Have a nice day". By practising meditation, however, we can reach the point where *sati* (awareness) is strong enough to catch the inner dialogue and see our intentions for what they are.

The Lord Buddha's first noble truth is that *dukkha* exists, that we have restlessness, unease, discomfort, pain and suffering in our lives. The second noble truth is that it has a cause – greed, hatred and delusion, the three great armies of *avijjā*. So, to become more happy and contented and make progress in the practice, we have to get control of the way we think, act, speak and behave instead of blindly following the commands of *avijjā*. For instance, when we decide to sit down, the internal discussion process does not take long, but it does when we get up. The *kilesas* suggest that we rise, and we moan about the nuisance, how stiff we are and our lack of energy, but in the end we get up. The *kilesas* have won, though we haven't realised it, and we've said, "Yes, my Lord, I'll get up now. Whatever you decree, I'm going to obey". Even if *avijjā* decreed that we should go to hell, we'd say, "Yes, my Lord, I'm willing to go. I'll do anything you say". Of course, *avijjā* wouldn't say such a thing directly, but we would, by obeying its commands, end up in hell nevertheless. We give in to *avijjā* and the whisperings of the *kilesas* all the time; it's happening every moment, but we just don't see it. We are not aware of the dialogue going on in the heart (*citta*) before

actions are triggered. This forest monastery is a protected environment, and there is really very little work to do, so we have the perfect opportunity to observe ourselves, unless we are too lazy to practise of course. Washing, taking care of our *kuti* and clothes, sweeping, eating, drinking and meditating – in all these activities, we can have *sati*, we can be aware.

The practice is really very simple. When something comes into the mind, just let it pass away. If you feel the need to scratch or drink, just let the feeling pass away and watch what happens in the *citta*. If you want to eat a particular kind of food, just let the thought pass away. This sounds simple but it's not, and we can always find ways to justify the suggestions of the *kilesas*. They tell us to eat a lot if we're very hungry and less if we're not. But who is hungry? It's not the body, which is just a biological robot. No, it's the *kilesas* that love the taste of food on the tongue. They tell us that we need something sweet, that we like this taste better than that, that we prefer cauliflower to broccoli, on and on and on *ad infinitum*. They've been with us for millions or billions of lifetimes, so there's no end to their wants and preferences. Actually, if you want to confuse the *kilesas*, eat something that they don't like and see how they react. The result might surprise you.

I want you to be more aware. Don't let yourself be fooled by the happiness or contentment you find from living in this monastery, because when you go back home it will all disappear like snow in a river. If you don't learn how to overcome difficulties, you'll have to face them wherever you go. Whatever we do, we meet the same problems. Wherever we go we take everything with us, including our decision processes. So ask yourself why you are doing this or thinking that. Why are you talking to other people, for instance? What goes on before you act, speak, go to the toilet, take a bath, wash clothes or sweep the area around your *kuti*? Thoughts have overwhelmed us all our lives, and we've made decisions without knowing where the orders came from. *Avijjā* and the *kilesas* have convinced us to follow their instructions. You could say that we've made a deal with the

devil. He tells us what we ought to like, what would be good for us and what would make us happy, and we think he's right and follow blindly. We think *avijjā*'s desires are our desires, and don't give them a second thought.

This is the power of *avijjā* — it deceives all the time, and we comply with the deception. We do this because disobeying is far more difficult than obeying. When *avijjā* suggests that we end the meditation session and do something else, it's far more difficult to ignore the command and carry on sitting than to get up. It's not easy to defy its orders. As long as his subjects are following his commands, a tyrant doesn't need to use force, but when they disobey, he lets them know who is master. We experience this whenever we stand up to *avijjā* and don't follow its commands. It shows its power by bringing up doubt, fear, pain, restlessness, boredom or worry, which drive us to do many things we would otherwise avoid. When such feelings arise, we should ask ourselves which of the five *khandhas* they fall into. For example, experiences like doubt, fear or worry belong in thought (*sankhāra*) while longing and guilt are more associated with memory and association (*saññā*), but they all disappear if we stop thinking, leaving only happiness and contentment. If we don't reflect in this way, we remain unaware of the decision processes behind our actions. Then we never learn: we stay stupid and don't advance in our practice. And if we don't advance, we retreat. If we don't swim against the stream, we'll get drawn along with the current like all the other people in the world. They flow downstream to destruction, to rebirth in one of the lower realms.

As meditators, it can sometimes seem as though we swimming upstream alone, struggling against the current of our decision-making processes while almost everyone around is taking the easy exit, the easy way out. As soon as we wake up and start walking the path of practice we can feel alone, like a solitary mountain ranger, but every advance we make against the current leads us closer to the source. It's the world that is wrong, and the mass of people are racing along a highway to hell, while

only a few manage to find a turn-off back the other way. There are hardly any of the latter, of course. Just look around at your relatives, friends and colleagues who don't keep the moral precepts and are not interested in Dhamma. Where will their next rebirth be? And more to the point, where will yours be? That's the question, so ask yourself whether you really intend to put in effort into this practice.

We've gone from one life to another thinking as we get older that the next life will be better, but how do we know? We don't even remember our last life; we just hope that future lives will be better. It's rather like the hope of believers in God that they'll be saved on the Day of Judgment. But hope doesn't help – it's action that helps. The Sermon on the Mount tells us exactly how to live to get into heaven or the higher planes of existence, and if we don't follow these instructions we end up in hell. The Lord Buddha also insisted that if we don't live a moral life – refraining from killing, stealing, lying, abusing others sexually, or taking drugs that cloud the mind – we will be on a journey to hell. Of course, if everyone around us is doing the same foolish, unwholesome things, we feel secure. It's much more fun to float down the river heedlessly like everyone else; we can chat, party and have a fun time, even though we go nowhere but down.

So while living in this monastery, I want you to take the opportunity to investigate your decision-making processes. When the thought of doing something pops into the mind, ask yourself who is trying to convince you to take this action. Who is telling me that I have to speak, drink or urinate? Do I really need to do these things? What am I trying to escape from by doing them? In fact, you're trying to escape from the truth. If you discovered the truth, there would be no loneliness, worry, doubt or fear – the truth is just the truth. But this voice inside your head, which you could call the *Kilesas* Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), not only convinces you to do things but gives a running commentary on your actions. This radio is on all the time, and it has only one channel, the KBC channel, which is on

twenty-four hours a day: I have to do this, I have to do that, I'm doing this at the moment, I'm reading a book, I'm feeling happy now, I want to practise *samādhi* but not *asubha* or vice versa, I want to call my mother, I don't want to go there, and on and on and on it goes twenty-four hours a day. If we are not engaged in meditation, if we are not being aware of the mental repetition of the word *buddho* or the breath as it comes in and goes out at the nose, the KBC channel is broadcasting, and it tries to fool us all the time. It tries to convince us, for instance, that meditation practice is not worthwhile, and if we are unaware we just accept its dictates saying, "Yes, my Lord. Please lead me as you have for millions of lives before, for you cannot be wrong".

All my life, I've been a fool who has gone against the stream. I never believed what other people told me was good or bad. I had to experience things for myself and make up my own mind. So when I started practising, the *kilesas* would come up asking why I couldn't just be like everyone else and obey their dictates. They did this because my practice was confronting them; I was questioning them, and the *kilesas* don't like being questioned. The *kilesas* don't always shout and scream, of course. They can also tempt, suggesting that it might be better to take it easy once in a while. But I recognised that once-in-a-while leads to twice-in-a-while, so I didn't even give in once. This is how the *kilesas* deceive, and it's amazing what they can come up with. Most of us are blind to their tricks, of course, and have never given them a second thought as we've rushed to follow their suggestions. But we have to confront them, and we do that by examining what is actually happening in the *citta*, and in the five *khandhas* that make up what we think of as ourselves. Worry, fear, loneliness and similar emotions are really only fabricated symbols, and we react to them. For example, if we feel lonely, we look for other people who accord with our ways of thinking and feel secure if we find some. And if we can't find anyone who fits the bill, we revert back to the leader of the herd who tells us what to do – go right, left, forward, back – and follow him.

So please get clever, get smart, and question the ways you make decisions. Think about it this way. If *avijjā* really was you, if it was what you really are, there would be no need for an inner dialogue to convince you to act in a certain way, right? In that case, *avijjā* would have the power to make something happen without an inner conversation. Interesting, isn't it? Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever asked *avijjā* who or what it is? We've experienced it all our lives, heard the KBC broadcasts all our lives, but we've never asked it that question. If someone comes to the door, we ask him who he is, where he's come from and what he wants, and if we don't like the answers, we don't let him in. We don't do that with *avijjā*, do we? We've never told it to get the hell out of our lives because we don't need it. Instead, we've said hello, invited it in and let it to destroy the house while we've paid for the damage. We've let the hooligans, the *kilesas*, run amok and paid the price in the end. We've acted on their suggestions that we drink alcohol, take drugs, have illicit sex and do all kinds of unwholesome or cruel things, while we've suffered the consequences in hell. What we should do is close the door and keep them out. Actually, that's all we have to do.

Closing the door to the *kilesas* means having *sati*, not following the commands of *avijjā* and not buying into anything it tells us. When we have *sati*, we're not only conscious of what we are doing but are fully attentive, full of awareness of what is going on. And remember this: one moment of *sati* is one moment without *kilesas*. If we have *sati* and are aware of a feeling, we are aware of just that. If we are aware that the feeling is triggering a memory or thought, we are aware of this too. Then, as we look at the contents of the thought or memory, we can see its uselessness, stupidity or fruitlessness – and stop it on the spot. We all have the capacity do this, but most of us don't, following our thought fabrications instead. Look what happens so often during meditation. We get a feeling of discomfort or pain, and slowly but surely the *kilesas* convince us to get up, whispering that we've gone on long enough, are in too much pain or not

getting results. It's better, they tell us, to sit back, relax and have a nice contented sleep. If we are doing investigation to develop wisdom (*paññā*), they might suggest that it's time to relax in *samādhi* instead. This may seem reasonable because in deep *samādhi* we have no unwholesome intentions, indeed no intentions at all, and do not make *kamma*. Yet their suggestion stops the investigation in its tracks. We need to be aware of these tricks of *avijjā*, the master magician. The more we have *sati*, the more we'll realise that our actions are rooted in *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha* – greed, hatred and delusion.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't think or act, of course. We don't have to sit around and vegetate; that's not helpful either. But we need to question what is happening, observe the decision process, and cut it off it we don't like where it is leading. You'll be amazed when you discover the cause, and it's usually just that an unpleasant feeling, a thought or a memory has popped up, starting a process that ends in action. There's no more to it than that. Take feelings: we have thousands of different words for different feelings, but they can all be classed as either bodily or mental feelings, and as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral in each case. Instead of attaching to them, we can try classifying them in that way. Similarly, memories are just memories, coming and going, arising and passing away. Thoughts seemingly arise from nowhere and pass back into nowhere. We don't have to grab them and follow them, thinking that we own them, that they are me or mine. If thoughts and memories really belonged to us, we would have to follow them, but we sometimes don't. In fact, they have nothing to do with us. The Lord Buddha was very clear about this: the five *khandhas* are *anattā*, not me or mine and do not belong to me. These five groups are what we know. We've lived with them all our lives and that's why they seem to have a personal quality, but they don't belong to us. And the same is true of the five *khandhas* of other people; we think they belong to them too, but they don't.

Ideas are just combinations of memories and thoughts, but we stick to them, attach to them as if they belonged to us. If you think that you have an idea, you are fooled; if you think you have a brilliant idea, you are fooled brilliantly. Just stick to basic principles. All things are *anicca*, they arise and cease; they are also *anattā*, not me or mine; and we have *dukkha* because we cling to things that are *anicca* and *anattā*. Please remember that anything we can experience happens in one or more of the five *khandhas*. An idea is a combination of two *khandhas*, memory and thought, and the more often we bring an idea to mind, the stickier it gets. But we can stop becoming stuck by not allowing ourselves to think it. We do this by cutting it off, most commonly by replacing it with *buddho* or the awareness of the breath. With this practice, we can see how all our ideas, mundane or brilliant, fall away. Plop — gone, plop — gone, plop — gone, and there's nothing left. They have no hold, because we see them for what they are, just combinations of feelings, memories or thoughts.

I want you to see that the one who gives meaning to memories and thoughts is yourself, no-one else. You yourself attach to these things. Let's think about how a television works. The input consists of only three colours (red, green and blue), but the output has many different colours and shades, and gives rise to comedies, news broadcasts, love stories or dramas. The huge variety of content arises from only three colours. Similarly, if we look at ourselves, there are really only five *khandhas*, but it's amazing what can be made out of the combinations of these five groups. In fact, that's the reason for all the different character types in the human realm. What we create from their combination becomes what we think we really are; we believe in it, and that's the problem. If we receive praise, we feel secure, but if our view of ourselves is challenged, we become angry, defend ourselves and start to repair the damage to the fortress of self. I invite you to become aware of these processes going on all the time. Understand the force that is leading you on, the tyrant that has the power over you. If you have an unpleasant feeling, look

and see what and where it is, rather than just blindly reacting to it. For instance, most people when they have an unpleasant feeling in the bowels or bladder find themselves on the toilet without ever thinking about how or why they got there. And most people when they lift a spoonful of food or a glass of water to their lips are completely unaware of how it got there. In fact, many steps and decisions have to happen between the feelings of discomfort, hunger or thirst and the act of excreting, eating or drinking, and you have to have *sati* to recognise each one of them. You have to stop the process and see.

Darkness has power when there is no light, but light banishes the dark. *Sati* is the light, and we need it to dispel the darkness cast by *avijjā*. Emotional states like fear, doubt, worry and loneliness don't just arise – whoosh – from nowhere. They build up like an avalanche that starts with the first stone. As the stone rolls down a mountain, it gathers more and more snow until it crashes into something, and our emotions start with a feeling that combines with memory and thought, rolling on and on until the *citta* becomes overwhelmed by an avalanche of emotion. Love, worry, fear – these emotions crash into the heart and are difficult to counteract. But please understand that you let this happen to yourself: you are to blame. If you caught and stopped the process from happening, you would be in control. There's a feeling – full stop; there's a thought – full stop; there's a memory – full stop. In this way, you can stop the stones rolling and collecting snow. You can't stop events from triggering each other if you're not aware of them, but you can stop them by being aware, and you can do this from moment to moment. This is what I mean by *sati* – full blown awareness. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used to invite us to think of the *citta* as a throne that can be occupied by either the light (Dhamma) or the dark (*avijjā*). Whichever sits on the throne has complete power over the five *khandhas*, but most of the time both of them vie for the throne and struggle for dominance. When we let the Dhamma take the throne, we practise Dhamma, and *sati* allows Dhamma to take possession of it.

We don't want *avijjā* to rule our hearts, do we? We want to rule our own hearts, but we need to fight for freedom. In the world, if someone tries to take our freedom away, we fight and put our lives on the line, but when it comes to spiritual freedom, most of us surrender at the slightest feeling of pain. We have to become spiritual warriors. Wherever we are, we need to be aware of what we are doing and why, and what the results will be. In fact, if *sati* is up to speed, we'll begin to see things we never realised before. To take *kamma* as an example, if we are unaware, we blame other people for much of what happens in our lives – our families, the government, society, and so on. Actually, almost everything that happens is a consequence of our own past actions by body, speech or mind; they are the result of *kamma* from this life or previous lives. We don't realise this, of course, because the present life is the only one we know. However, if we are aware of the processes going on in the heart and start to see our hidden inclinations, we can slowly begin to understand that whatever we do comes back to us.

I encourage you all to reflect each evening on what you've done during the day and why. You should take particular note of the inner dialogue that went on inside your head at particular moments. In the beginning, it's very difficult to go back over your thoughts and catch your motivations and desires, for we are accustomed to being unaware, but it really is a useful practice. For example, suppose you find yourself holding an ice-cream at a certain point in the day. How did that happen? Well, you saw an advert for an ice-cream on the wall and read it, and then you thought about going into the shop, and then you checked if you had enough money, and then you decided that you could afford it, and so the events unfolded. If you reflect like this, you'll find that there were many steps in the process. And, by the way, if you are unsure whether to follow a suggestion of the *kilesas*, just go ahead and act on it, see the results and reflect on them. Note what your intention was, the action that you took and the result you experienced. If the result was unwholesome, refrain from

doing the same thing again. Daily reflection is vital if we are to become aware of what we are doing and why; it is an important part of the training in *sati* and the development of wisdom.

I want you all to get smart. Arriving at this monastery stupid and leaving stupid is a tragic waste of an opportunity. I can point the way, but you have to do the work yourselves. If I had a vial with a solution of Dhamma wisdom, I would inject it into your veins – that would make you smart. But I don't have that power. I can't help people who are clever only in the ways of the world. The people who make practice a success are those who become clever in the ways of Dhamma. They question everything that happens within the five *khandhas*, continually asking what is going on. Of course, most people never look at life in this way because it's tedious; they just want to have fun, to follow the orders of *avijjā*, to roll down snowy mountains laughing while avalanches of emotion carry them away. Don't be like them – use you time here wisely.

Programming our biological robot

18th October 2009

How long did it take you to become a fully fledged, independent human being? Twenty years? It took two decades more or less for you to become self-sufficient and able to choose how you wanted to live. We were all helpless at birth, and had to learn everything from scratch. First, we learned how to digest food and interpret what we see, hear, taste, smell and touch. Then we learned to walk and talk. In effect, we had to program the body and mind of this biological robot before carrying it around for a lifetime. And in the next life we'll have to do the same all over again. Isn't that wonderful? We'll have to go through the same difficulties all over again. Imagine learning to walk again — getting up, falling down, bashing into things, bruising knees and being unable to control your muscles properly. Imagine learning to speak again. How long will that take? It takes several years to able to express our thoughts sensibly, and there's a great deal of frustration involved in trying to express ourselves but not being understood. There's a lot of *dukkha* involved in growing up. It's not a bed of roses, is it? The strange thing is that when we think about our lives, and speculate about future rebirths, we don't recall the long years growing up and all the problems involved. We focus on the young adult years, somewhere between eighteen and forty, when we were strong, capable and healthy. The infant and childhood years or the long years of decline as the body becomes painful and starts breaking down, we tend to ignore. You could say that human beings are at their peak for only twenty or thirty years, at least in this modern era. So if you think that human life is such a good thing and want to be born again, I encourage you to recall your infancy and childhood. Do you really want to go through it all again?

One of the most difficult times for most people is adolescence when sexual desire (*rāga taṇhā*) comes to the fore. It can be a crazy time, and it's probably the point in our young lives when

we experience most *dukkha*. We clash with our parents and with the opposite sex. Do you remember this difficult time in your life? Do you ever reflect on it? If not, then bring it to mind. Remember the arguments with your parents, the fights with your brothers and sisters or friends, and the unhappy times at school. Were these experiences really so pleasant that you want to have them again? Well, if you don't do anything to get yourselves out of the mess you find yourself in, you'll have to do it all again and again and again, because there is no end to the cycle of rebirth. You'll keep going round and round unless you find the way out. And the way out is to become a *Sotāpanna* and enter the stream that leads to *Nibbāna*. To enter the stream, we have to cut the first three of the ten fetters (*saṁyojana*)[1] that bind us to the wheel of rebirth: doubt, keeping the five precepts inconsistently, and the identification with the body.

Doubt of a sceptical nature (*vicikicchā*) is the first fetter, and it is a particular problem for Westerners. They have doubts about the existence of heaven and hell, about *kamma* and rebirth, and about the path leading to the end of *dukkha*. They also have doubts about the practice – this doesn't work, this can't be true, I don't see the point of that, and so on – because they don't put it into action and don't have the patience to see it through. They hear about meditation practice and want results immediately – success on a plate. But it's strange that they feel this way. After all, they happily spend four years getting a university degree, and they don't expect to be handed a diploma on the evening of the first day. They spend years in primary or secondary school and don't expect to become knowledgeable overnight. But we need to learn basic mathematics before we can play around with higher mathematics, don't we? There are many things in life we have to learn by rote initially, and it's the same with spiritual practice.

1 A list of the ten fetters (*saṁyojana*) is given in the Appendix.

We need to get the basics right first. This means being aware of the breath coming in and going out around the tip of the nose or being aware of the mental repetition of the word *buddho*. If we are investigating to develop wisdom (*paññā*), we have to do it over and over again until we become accomplished. We don't develop worldly skills like carpentry in a day, so why do we expect spiritual practice to be any different? In carpentry, we have to learn how to grip the tools and how to use them properly; we have to hone our physical abilities. And it's the same with meditation techniques. Someone can tell us what it's like to be aware of *buddho* or the breath, but that's not the same as actually doing the practice. We have to become skilled at it. The problem for many people is that another force (the force of the *kilesas*) always comes into play, the power that makes them think, "I'm bored, I don't want this, it's useless, it's not for me, I'm in the wrong place, I want to go home, I've had enough", and so on.

The second fetter (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*) concerns morality and keeping the five precepts inconsistently.[2] We keep them one day but not the next, and keep them again for a while but break them again when we feel like it. Laypeople sometimes come to the monastery intending to keep the five precepts, but afterwards go off and get drunk or cheat, steal, lie and kill. At the time, they want to live a moral life but lack the resolution to keep the precepts. To break the second fetter, all we need do is keep the precepts at all times and never lapse in our determination to keep them.

The third fetter (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*) is the belief that the *citta* and the body are one and the same thing. When the body is hurt, we become angry because we think it belongs to us, just as German people (who love their cars) go crazy if someone scratches the paintwork. But what does the car have to do with the driver? Nothing, really. And it's the same with the *citta* and the body. The *citta* is the driver of the body, and the body is just what it

2 The five moral precepts (*pañca-sīla*) are listed in the Appendix.

is — a biological robot. If the *citta* sleeps, the body does nothing. If the *citta* is completely calm, the body doesn't move; it doesn't go right or left, forward or back. In fact, if the *citta* is in deep *samādhi*, the body can stay for up to seven days without doing anything, without swallowing, drinking, eating or going to the toilet. This is something we have to understand, to see for ourselves, with our own inner eyes. This is the most difficult fetter to overcome. The first and second fetters are much easier to remove, but the third involves investigating the body to realise that it and *citta* are two different things.

To help us understand this, the Lord Buddha used a cart as a metaphor for the body. If we disassemble a cart into its bits and pieces and look at them lying on the ground, where is the cart? All we see are planks, bits of metal, wheel spokes, some rope and a few nails, but when we reassemble these pieces the cart suddenly reappears. We can do the same with the body as part of the practice of investigation. If we mentally take it to pieces and lay all the parts before us on the ground, the notion of a body suddenly vanishes.[3] Then we realise that there is something that remains, something that knows — the *citta*. The first time this happens we might think we understand, but this understanding is not deep enough, so we have to do the exercise over and over again, a hundred times, a thousand times, ten thousand times, until we truly understand. At that point something clicks, and this fetter is cut. You really must see this, you really must understand. When you lay all the body parts out in front of you in a heap, where is the body? The limbs, the head, the hair, the nails, the teeth, are they the body? We all have a concept of the body, but what is it? Take the eyes: without the brain and the head, they are just two lifeless structures. The body works only when assembled correctly in a certain way. This is the understanding that you must develop, but cutting this fetter is far from easy.

3 Ajahn Martin's talk, *How to practise body contemplation*, in his book, *Forest Leaves*, available on his website (www.forestdhammatalks.org), explains this practice in more detail.

When we look back on our lives, we tend to remember only the fun parts, the nice times. This is because we are not the one selecting the memories — something else is doing it. There are two powers inside the *citta*: Dhamma and *avijjā* (fundamental ignorance). In most of us, the power of Dhamma is so under-developed that we can hardly see it. Most of the time, we experience the power of the *kilesas*, which are the soldiers of *avijjā*. They can also be called the arms of *avijjā*, but they are very long arms, and we won't see *avijjā* itself until they are cut off. When we look at the path of practice, *avijjā* is a general with three main armies — greed (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). At first, we have to fight greed and hate, while the army of delusion sits further back and manipulates what the armies of greed and hate are doing. The soldiers we have to fight initially are the auxiliary troops, the least well-trained and most unreliable soldiers on the battlefield. Behind them come the regular soldiers, then the trained soldiers with specialist skills, and then the elite soldiers bringing up the rear. *Avijjā* is a clever general who doesn't use his elite soldiers for the easy first battles. He throws in his auxiliaries first, and they keep us under control without too much trouble. It's similar to a despot who wants to keep control of the population. He doesn't use expensive weapons until he has to, and as long as he can give the people bread and circuses, everything is fine. We don't see the heavy weapons of *avijjā* until we take up the fight, until we fight for our freedom. And the more we fight, the more we see the extent of his armoury and the more difficult the fight becomes. But the fight also gets more interesting as it goes on. Can I fight this type of soldier? Can I defeat that type? Should I jettison this weapon? Should I use a different one? Can I understand this move of the enemy? Can I investigate that? This is the power of Dhamma, and the stronger and sharper the Dhamma, the easier the fight.

We all know that it's far easier to cut things up with a sharp knife than a blunt one. Our most powerful weapon, our sharpest knife, is *sati* (awareness). *Sati* is the sharpest implement for the

practice of investigation, and it can cut through problems easily. In a dense jungle, it can be very difficult to find a way through, but with a sharp blade we can clear a path easily. A pocket knife would be useless. *Sati* sharpens the knife, and sharpening awareness is mostly what we are doing when practising meditation to attain *samādhi*. It's important, however, that we don't allow the mind to wander off at other times, when we are not doing sitting or walking meditation. We should keep it focused on the same object, whether the breath or the *buddho*, at all times. Even while washing ourselves, eating food or sitting on the toilet to expel the body's waste, we should be aware. We should have *sati* all day long. If we do, the practice will become much easier, and so will life generally. In the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Lord Buddha says that someone who has perfect *sati*, without lapse, for seven days and nights can gain enlightenment at the end of the seven days. If *sati* is less acute, it can take seven weeks, seven months, seven years or seven lifetimes. It all depends on the strength of *sati*. *Sati* is just the pure awareness of whatever comes into contact with the *citta*. A thought comes in – OK; a memory comes in – OK. We note them, but we don't follow-up on them.

Once the first three fetters have been cut down to a minimum, we either have to attain a state of one-pointedness where the last bits and pieces of the fetters can be removed once and for all, or we get there through our investigation, for instance investigation of the body, once the *citta* becomes completely empty and still. In both cases, if all three fetters have been cut down to a minimum, the *citta* can then enter *magga*, the path moment, which is similar to (though much deeper than) the experience of one-pointedness or the *citta* when it is empty and still. This is then *magga*, where the first three fetters are cut once and for all. After the *citta* retracts from this state, we enter the stream. When that happens, we are finally free of the first three fetters. The fruit (*phala*) of stream entry can happen at the same time or later – and then we know that we will never be reborn in the unhappy, *dukkha*-filled realms containing animals, hungry

ghosts (*petas*), demons (*asuras*) or beings in hell. We are guaranteed never to go backwards into these realms. Why? Because we'll always keep the five precepts; we'll never break them because we've no reason to. Please understand this — when we enter the stream, we see *Nibbāna* for the first time. It's a very short experience, but it's very impressive, and it eradicates the first three fetters forever.

The fourth and fifth fetters are greed and hate themselves, and they are much harder to overcome. We are no longer fighting auxiliary troops but the regular soldiers of *avijjā*. As greed and hate are rooted in the body, we have to practise *asubha* to investigate the repugnance and loathsomeness of the body outside and in. All our lives, we've run towards the attractive or the pleasant. Investigation of the body involves bringing up the unpleasant things until there is an equal balance between pleasantness and unpleasantness. At present, the scales are seriously unbalanced. For the past twenty, thirty or fifty years, we've pursued pleasant sensations while doing our best to avoid the unpleasant ones, and now we have to reverse the process by deliberately bringing up the unpleasant. In fact, *asubha* practice is an exercise in investigating unpleasantness and loathsomeness in order to get the scale in balance. Once it is balanced, we can walk through the middle. A door opens, we walk through, and that's the end of pleasantness and unpleasantness, the end of greed and hate. We have to face up to all the things we have evaded all our lives if we really want to cut the fourth and fifth fetters and go beyond greed and hate.

Once the armies of greed and hate have been vanquished, the army of delusion remains on the battlefield. It consists of elite troops, so we also need special skills to defeat them. Delusion mainly occurs in two of the five *khandhas* — memory and association (*saññā*) and thought (*sankhāra*). They seem to go hand in hand and move at great speed. Our remaining work involves investigating them until we understand and see through them. We have to be able to separate memory and thought from each

other, and see how they fool us with their tricks, until delusion is gone. After that, only the general himself, *avijjā*, is left. And once *avijjā* is destroyed, our work is at an end and we reach *Arahantship*.

I'm telling you these things to remind you. If you don't want to be reborn, you really have to do something to get off the wheel. If you still fancy being reborn, please remember the first fifteen or twenty years of your life. Bring them to mind very vividly. All the problems with your parents, the school, the teachers, your friends — bring them clearly to mind as if they were happening afresh. If you really want to do something meaningful with your life, start the process of undermining the first three fetters. You have to see clearly that the *citta* and the body are two different things. If you practise earnestly and with a lot of effort, you may be able to enter the stream in this very life. It all depends on your determination and effort. After all, you've had the determination and the good *kamma* to find the way to this forest monastery, so you ought to be able to do it. Remember the Lord Buddha's words about the three things that are hard to obtain: to be born as a human being, to find the true Dhamma, and to meet a Buddha or an *Arahant*. Not a lot of people find the way to the true Dhamma, but you have found it in Thailand, so put your time to good use.

Many people who come to Buddhism are fooled by externals, such as ceremonies or rituals, or their understanding of the scriptures, and never find the way to the truth. But you have had the merit (*vāsanā*) to find the way to the true Dhamma, so you should be able to enter the stream with determination and effort. But patience is a necessity: you need a lot of patience, and the *kilesas* won't make things easy. They bring up all these pretty pictures, such as memories from the past when we were happy for a moment. But how many happy moments do we have in one day? Five or ten, if at all? For the rest of the day, we experience some kind of *dukkha*, don't we? We get a happy moment once in a while, but these are rarer than we imagine. But the *kilesas*

are cunning, and they bring up happy memories that deceive us time and time again. They are masters of deception. They promise that if we do something we'll get the reward, but their promises are never kept. And they always have an excuse, and can correct themselves or change their story. They tell us, for instance, that we didn't get the reward because we didn't follow their orders correctly, and we are fooled again, thinking, "Yes, I should have done it like this". We always try to find happiness but it doesn't come, and we strive to find it again and again with the same result. We run after happiness, but usually fall short.

What we forget is that happiness is here all the time. All we need to do is be aware of the breath or the *buddho* to get beyond thought and into *samādhi*. Then happiness will arise. That's all we have to do. It's so easy. Happiness is there, peacefulness is there, contentment is there, everything is there in the *citta*, the heart. As soon as we put our attention on the world, happiness goes, but when we put our attention on the heart, happiness arises. It has to arise because contentedness, peacefulness, happiness (or whichever word we use) is the essence of the *citta*. Loving kindness (*mettā*) — not only for friends but also for bitter enemies, even those who kill — comes from understanding ourselves. Once we understand ourselves, we understand why other people are doing what they do. In particular, we understand *kamma*; if we realise that pretty much everything that happens to us in life is the result of our own past actions, why should we be angry with other people?

Spiritual training can be a long struggle, but the first step is to find the happiness and peacefulness within ourselves. And this is where meditation practice comes in, and why being aware of the *buddho* or the breath is so important. This is the way that leads to happiness. But what do we do? We think of the many pressing things we have to do, but we never question the force that impels us to do them. In fact, most of the time we are simply reacting to some unpleasantness boiling up in the heart. We need to stop doing that and find happiness within. Then we'll

realise that happiness is not invoked by anything we can do or say, or by any external stimuli. It has to come from within.

So, think about your lives. It's your life, after all. You're not doing me a favour by practising well; you're doing yourself a favour, and the more you practise well, the more favours you'll do yourself. The more you get calm, the more you'll see the fruits of practice, and the more you'll want to practise. The more you understand, the more you'll see the fruits of investigation, because investigation leads to wisdom, and it will undermine the ten fetters. But please remember that wisdom and knowledge are two different things. We get knowledge from books and we have learned to reason, but wisdom arises from the heart. The instant the heart sees the truth of something, it lets go. Wisdom lets go of things; knowledge is mere knowledge. Knowledge alone will never break the fetters. Even if we believe that the *citta* and the body are separate, that's still only a belief. It has not engraved itself on the heart as wisdom, because we haven't seen with our own eyes that the *citta* and the body really are two different things.

The tradition of Than Ajahn Mahā Bua

25th September 2007

Lots of meditation practices are taught in the West today. The two best known are *samatha* (calmness meditation) and *vipassanā* (insight meditation, or investigation), and in my experience people tend to misunderstand them somehow or get them muddled up. But it's important to get things clear at the beginning, to stop ourselves becoming befuddled and losing our way on the path of practice. If we don't, we'll never understand and never make progress.

Before coming to Thailand, I trained for several years in monasteries and meditation centres in the West, and it took me a while to understand just how different the practice was in Than Ajahn Mahā Bua's monastery. The words and concepts might sound similar – initially I thought they were – but the main difference is the emphasis put on three things: making a clear distinction between the practice of *samādhi* and the practice of investigation, instead of blurring or muddling them up as so often happens in the West; having *sati* to know what is happening in the *citta* from moment to moment; and undertaking body investigation and *asubha*.

In this tradition, the noble eight-fold path is said to comprise three columns – *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. *Sīla* is common to all Buddhist traditions, of course, and it involves keeping the moral precepts. *Samādhi* refers to the practice of concentration, and it has three levels (*khaṇika*, *upācāra* and *appaṇā*), while *paññā* is the wisdom that arises through investigation and the development of insight (*vipassanā*). In this monastery, we view *samādhi* and investigation as two separate, if complementary, practices. It's important that you understand this. When we practise to attain meditative calm (*samatha*) and enter *samādhi*, we do just that – nothing else. When we practise investigation, we do just that – nothing else. We keep them separate because we need to

understand the difference between the two. We have to be clear about what we are doing and why, for we can only understand clearly when we see clearly – and I mean understand with the heart (*citta*) not the brain. In our everyday lives, we make quick assumptions and grasp things superficially, but practice in this tradition involves a deeper kind of knowing, though it's difficult to get this distinction across to people who have never meditated.

The five *khandhas* are a good example of concepts we have to get clear. The conglomeration of these the five groups – body, feeling, memory and association, thoughts and consciousness – is what we normally think of as our personality, as ourselves. We usually say, "I feel sick" or "My opinion is this", but in reality we are referring to the five *khandhas* acting together. So, if we are to avoid spending our lives muddled up, we have to recognise the difference between them, seeing each for what it really is. In the West, meditators are often advised just to observe whatever comes into the mind, but we can spend our whole lives noting the contents of the mind without getting any wiser. I often describe it as standing on an overpass on the motorway observing the cars as they speed past. What's the point? Does it make us any wiser? Wisdom can only arise through investigation. We need to know when a feeling, memory or thought comes up and when it passes away, and we have to be able to stay with this practice without the mind wandering off. If we don't have enough concentration, we'll never catch these things, and that's why *samādhi* has to be developed as a first step. The ability to concentrate is vital; if we can stay on one object, such as the breath or the mental repetition of the word *buddho*, for fifteen minutes or longer without the mind running off onto something else, then we'll be ready to start the practice of investigation. *Samādhi* is also a rest for the mind, a break from its work. We can't work all day and all night without resting, and it's the same with the work of investigation, so we take a break by going into *samādhi*. *Upācāra samādhi* is enough, although the rest is much better in *appaṇā samādhi*, just

as a deep sleep is much more refreshing than a dreamy, fitful sleep.

This tradition also emphasises investigation of the body and *asubha* practice, which are rarely taught elsewhere. My only work for the first six years as a *bhikkhu* was investigation of the body. Ask teachers in the West how to overcome greed and hate, and they won't be able to tell you. They'll simply advise you to "let go", but Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used the example of an ant to illustrate the problem with this notion. The ant is crawling across the ceiling and it wants to get to the floor. You can tell it to let go, just let itself drop, but it won't know how to do that. It knows only how to take one step at a time, and if it goes step by step it will eventually reach the floor. Similarly, we can't just "let go" to reach the end of the path, the end of *dukkha*. If we could, we would all be enlightened in a flash, wouldn't we? Do you think *avijjā* (fundamental ignorance) will allow itself to be let go of — bye-bye — just like that? It can't be done; greed and hate can't just be let go of in that way. We can, of course, tell ourselves not to buy into greed and hate when they arise in the heart, and this makes them a little weaker, but it will not destroy them at the root. This is why Than Ajahn Mahā Bua particularly emphasised *asubha* practice, which reveals the body's repulsiveness, its loathsomeness. The body is a bag of blood, pus, urine and excrement covered over by a thin layer of skin, and it's the pot in which the plant of greed and hate is rooted. The aim of this practice is not to make the body loathsome as some people think, but to recognise how loathsome, how repugnant it really is.

We need to reflect on *asubha* because we've spent all our lives running after pleasant feelings and experiences. If we think of a scale with *subha* (the pleasant) and *asubha* (the unpleasant) at each end, we can see that our scale is way out of balance. Bringing up *asubha* brings it back into balance, and we have to do this if we want to overcome greed and hate and attain the state of *Anāgāmī*. We have to go through the middle, between

greed and hate, and if we don't balance the scale how can we go through the middle? I don't know any teachers in the West who can explain this process, this method of going through the middle of greed and hate, yet it's absolutely vital. We have to be able to bring up the unpleasant and the ugly, and to stay with the distasteful feelings that come up as we do this.

This can be a particular problem for people from the West who like to avoid unpleasant feelings, spending their lives running after pleasant sensations. They think that Buddhism has to be nice, pleasant and peaceful, and that if a particular practice brings up feelings of hate or nastiness something must be wrong. This is where their problems start. Let me be clear: if meditation doesn't bring up unpleasant feelings, we're just playing around. Body investigation and *asubha* practice are a must. The body has to be investigated inside out and outside in, from top to bottom and bottom to top, until we see it as it really is. One method is to dissect it into its bits and pieces, such as skin, hair, teeth, innards, faeces, and so on. Another is to see it consisting of the four elements of earth, fire, air and water. There are various methods, and we have to put them to use over and over again until the heart really understands.[1] We do this until no pleasant things arise in the heart, and then we bring up pleasant things again. You could say that at this stage we are just playing, playing with pleasant and unpleasant images as a way of training, for at this point we still haven't really understood.

The real work starts when we destroy the pleasant with the unpleasant and the unpleasant with the pleasant. Eventually, when unpleasant and pleasant things are roughly in balance, we can destroy subha with *asubha*. This happens so fast; in a flash of lightning we can destroy one thing with the other, for example, an unpleasant feeling with a pleasant one or a pleasant

1 Ajahn Martin's talk, *How to practise body contemplation*, in his book, *Forest Leaves*, available on his website (www.forestdhammatalks.org), explains this practice in more detail.

feeling with an unpleasant one. This needs a lot of training, but it is the only way. When we can do this all the time, when we have become masters at seeing pleasant and unpleasant feelings at the same time, we find a perfect balance and simply walk through the middle. Only then can we pass beyond greed and hate. This is the only way: there is no other. To reach the stage of *Anāgāmī*, we have to practise like this whether we like it or not. Then the investigation of the body is finished, and greed and hate are uprooted. Work then begins on the intricate task of investigating the mental components of personality (*nāma-khandhas*), namely, feelings, memory and association, thought and consciousness. This is the approach taught in Than Ajahn Mahā Bua's monasteries, and I haven't come across it anywhere else.

The first two stages on the noble path are *Sotāpanna* and *Sakadāgāmī*, but they are given no special importance in this tradition, for body investigation and *asubha* take the meditator all the way to the third stage, *Anāgāmī*. Success needs all our effort and determination, however, and it is mostly only possible for ordained people or *samaṇas*, who give their whole lives to the task. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua's main aim was to help *Anāgāmīs* who, at a certain stage, think they have finished their work because everything has disappeared and they feel completely at rest. For them, he pointed out that *avijjā* remains lurking in the background and still has to be overcome. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua himself described *avijjā* as being so radiant, wondrous and amazing that people think they have reached the end of their work.[2] If he hadn't reached that point in his own practice, he wouldn't have known about this potential pitfall.

Compare this with the instruction given by meditation teachers in the West. They teach the simple techniques, but when it comes to body investigation and *asubha*, the way to overcome greed and hate, they are very quiet indeed. They talk about

2 See the talk, *The supreme attainments*, in Than Ajahn Mahā Bua's book, *A Life of Inner Quality*, on the Luangta website (www.luangta.eu).

mindfulness, but if they really mean *sati* (awareness) they ought to call it mind-emptiness, for that is what *sati* really is. It is the emptiness of mind when the true nature of its awareness or knowingness arises.[3] With this level of *sati*, the *kilesas* have no power, for they cannot intrude. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used to say that a moment of *sati* is a moment when there are no *kilesas*, When I first came to Baan Taad forest monastery, it took me a while to understand what he meant, but if you realise that *sati* is mind-emptiness then, of course, the *kilesas* cannot intrude, for they have no power in that state. If we have *sati*, we really are doing the work of a *samaṇa*.

As I often say, you have to be able to allocate whatever arises and ceases in the heart to one of the five *khandhas*. If you do this long enough, you'll come to understand that what you think of as yourself is merely these five groups acting in concert. No "I" is involved, no me or mine; there are just five *khandhas* constantly arising and dying away. It's our attachment that makes something out of them, that gives them importance. If there is no attachment, they just arise and cease according to their nature. It's our attachment that makes them boil up, and a simple thought can give rise to a whole emotion, just as a small stone can start an avalanche. To catch these processes as they happen, we have to be aware of what's going on inside ourselves from moment to moment. Once we have enough *sati*, enough awareness, and once it is strong enough to concentrate on one point for a long enough time, we can start investigating the *khandhas*. Until we reach the stage of *Anāgāmī*, the primary focus of our investigation for the years to come has to be the first *khandha*, the body. Western meditators love to play around with the *nāma-khandhas*, which they think are easier to investigate than the body. But please take this to heart – the body is the pot containing the plant of greed and hate, and unless we destroy it every other

3 See Ajahn Martin's talk, *Sati is the key to practice*, in his book, *Forest Leaves*, available on his website (www.forestdhammatalks.org).

practice is futile. We cannot investigate the *nāma-khandhas* before we have thoroughly investigated the body and the bodily feelings (*rūpa-vedanā*) closely allied to it. So, from the moment our eyes open to the moment they close again at night, we have to investigate the body and bodily feelings, resting once or twice a day in *upācāra* or *appaṇā samādhi*.

When Than Ajahn Mahā Bua first went to live with Than Ajahn Mun, he trained himself in *samādhi*. He became so skilled that his *samādhi* was solid as a rock. But he became so addicted to the tranquility and peace that his meditation practice remained stuck at that level for a full five years. Then Than Ajahn Mun advised him to start investigating the body, and because his *samādhi* was so solid he was able to complete this work after only eight months. If we don't have such firm *samādhi*, it might take eight years or eight lifetimes or longer. It's not shameful to get stuck in *samādhi*, by the way. I don't worry about people getting stuck there, for when *samādhi* is rock solid under all circumstances, their investigation will take off like a racing car. Nevertheless, it's also true that *samādhi* helps to develop wisdom (*paññā*), and vice versa, so it's wise for most people to start investigating as soon as their concentration is strong and stable enough. Actually, *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* work hand in hand; it's not that we have to develop them one after another. But we should develop first the one that we lack the most, and for most people this is the ability to concentrate on one thing, which is actually the ability to be aware of what is happening from moment to moment.

In your practice, you can apply the concept of *anattā* or not-self, the second of the three characteristics of existence. Instead of having thoughts like, "I am depressed", you should think, "There is depression", and the same goes for sickness or any other experience. If there is a feeling or a memory that is really sticky, really hard to get rid of, you can reflect that it's not you, not yours, not yourself and does not belong to you. Remember – the observer cannot be the observed. We all know this when

we look at objects in the world — cups, animals, spittoons — but as soon as we look at our own bodies we believe them to belong to us. Understand this clearly: there is the knowing nature of the heart (the observer) and the object to be known about (the observed). They cannot be the same thing. A feeling must be different from whatever knows the feeling. After all, the feeling doesn't know about itself, does it? The body doesn't know itself, memory doesn't know itself, and thoughts don't know themselves, do they? There has to be something sitting in the background which knows all these phenomena but is not them and is not attached to them. We fool ourselves all the time by calling things me and mine. My body, my feeling of sadness, my feeling of happiness — on and on it goes, and we clutch at the body and the feeling of sadness or happiness. Reflecting on *anattā* helps to reduce attachment, and when it is reduced, we can investigate it more easily. A feeling that arises has to cease by its very nature, and it's the same with memories and thoughts.

There's not a lot we have to understand to practise, but there are key concepts that it is important to grasp: the four noble truths; the three universal characteristics of existence — *anicca*, *anattā* and *dukkha*; the four elements — earth, air, fire and water — which are useful hooks for the investigation the body or food; the reality of *kamma*; and, of course, the five *khandhas*. That's all. These are the basic concepts we need to understand to walk the path, and they can be very useful. For example, if we are stuck on some aspect of our practice and accept that *kamma* influences our lives, we can simply recognise the blockage as *kamma* from the past, smile and walk on. Some things are like that; they are the consequence of old thoughts or deeds, and we can't change them. We can't change the things that have arisen in the mind, but we can change our attitude towards them, which may prevent them from arising in future. This is the only power we have. We have to understand that revisiting the past is a waste of time, unless we are consciously reflecting on some unwholesome actions to avoid repeating them. Most people

spend their time riding along in memories of the past, and hours and hours pass by to no end and with no advance in practice. It's the same with the future, daydreaming about tomorrow and what it's going to bring. Why do we spend our lives in memories of the past or fantasies about the future? Well, it's mostly to relieve the boredom of the present, isn't it? Actually, when boredom arises in meditation practice it means that the mind is not interested in the object being observed and is looking for some other occupation. However, if we can get this monkey mind really one-pointed, we'll realise after the session just how many occupations it usually finds for itself, and how silly they all are!

Once you are clearly aware of things, once you get them crisp and clear, the heart will understand immediately. It will know that a particular feeling, memory or thought leads to a particular memory, thought or feeling. And when the heart, the *citta*, the knowingness itself, understands that a thought or an action has an unwholesome outcome, it lets go immediately, like a child touching a hot stove. When we have deep, true insight into the dangers of thoughts or actions, we won't repeat them a second time. But please understand — we can't just call upon that insight at will; we can't just let go. We can do wholesome things and avoid doing unwholesome things, but we can't just let go. The heart is the only thing that can let go, but we have no control over it. So we have to teach it over and over, and if it still doesn't see or understand, we have to teach it over and over again until it understands and lets go of its own accord. The power of *avijjā* is that it clouds everything, so the way of practice is to uncloud, to clarify things and see them crisply and clearly. This needs a lot of awareness or *sati*, and it's why *sati* is so important. It's the only shortcut, and in the *Majjhima Nikāya* the Lord Buddha said that a person able to maintain *sati* for seven days and nights without lapse could attain the state of *Anāgāmī* or *Arahant*. This level of *sati* may have been more common at the time of the Lord Buddha when a number of people attained enlightenment using this method, but it seems to be rare now. For most people today,

developing *sati* takes years or lifetimes because their minds wander here and there, unable to stay at one point.

For *samādhi*, you have to be able to keep the mind on one point, either the breath or *buddho*. But investigation is different: you have to work with thought, turning things around in the mind, dissecting them and asking what they are and what their nature is. Taking the body as an example, you have to ask why everything that comes out of it smells and stinks, why you don't want to see its saliva, urine or excrement, and why you spend so much time fondling it and taking care of it. When asking questions like this, the mind cannot stay at one point, but you can train it to stay on one subject. In fact, *samādhi* practice, where the mind is concentrated on one point, also strengthens investigation, helping the mind to stay on one subject without always trying to switch between topics. The idea is to stay on one topic of investigation for one, two, six hours or more, just as you stay with the breath or the *buddho* for one whole session of *samādhi* practice however long it lasts. You shouldn't switch between *samādhi* and investigation in a single session, or take different topics of investigation in a single session. It's important to determine at the start of a session what you are going to do, and stick with that decision, not switching from this to that because your feelings tell you to.

Are you starting to see the importance of being clear about your practice, about what to do and why? There's not much to know, but we need to be clear about what we do know. There are many books on Buddhism, but they tend to make our hearts heavy with opinions and views. This is because we don't really know what they are talking about. We have an idea, but an idea is not reality. If we see a signpost to Rome, we might get an idea about Rome. If the signpost is very pretty, we might assume Rome is pretty too, but that's just an idea. The signpost has nothing to do with Rome. All our lives, we've been constructing views and opinions from signposts we've seen or heard about. So when we hear or read about *Nibbāna*, we develop ideas about

it, but we only really know when we experience it for ourselves – then we know. So what's the use of carrying around opinions and views about *Nibbāna*, for example? They don't help, and they can actually hinder progress because we're looking for a particular experience. If our view of Rome is mistaken, we may not even recognise it when we get there. Similarly, people who have a particular view of what *samādhi* must be like may not recognise it when it happens. In fact, *upācāra samādhi* can differ greatly between individuals, and two people can have very different experiences of it, while *appaṇā samādhi* is very similar for everyone.

I mentioned earlier that it took Than Ajahn Mahā Bua only eight months of investigation of the body to get rid of greed and hate after five years of *samādhi*. However, it took him almost another two and a half years to cut through delusion rooted within the two main *nāma-khandhas*, memory (*saññā*) and thought (*sankhāra*). The *nāma-khandhas* are where delusion mainly lies, and this *saññā–sankhāra* combination makes up pretty much everything we know either in the world or the Dhamma. When delusion is gone, only *avijjā* is left. *Avijjā* is amazing, so amazing that you think it's the real deal. That's why some people think they have finished their work, attained *Arahantship*, when delusion has been removed. However, *avijjā* also arises and ceases, and we have to recognise this; it arises and ceases so quickly that we can hardly catch it.

Old film reels used to run at twenty-four or forty-eight frames per second, making the audience believe that something was happening on the screen. Actually, one picture was different from another, but their procession made up a continuous stream of apparent action. Each of the pictures on a reel of film was separated by a thin black bar. The fifth *khandha*, consciousness (*viññāṇa*), is similar: each mind-moment is like a picture on the film reel, separated from the others by a black bar which can be thought of as a moment of *non-viññāṇa*. However, in a blink of an eye, we have several thousand mind-moments, so *sati* has

to be up to this speed to be able to investigate *viññāṇa*. *Viññāṇa* arises and ceases, but what happens when it isn't there? Well, you'll have to get to know that for yourself. It's not impossible to do, but it needs all your determination and effort. You really have to want to understand, and I'm referring to understanding with the *citta*, with the heart not the mind. There's no reason why you can't do it, actually. You've done so many things in your lives, and made enough merit to arrive at this monastery and hear the Dhamma, so you should make something of this opportunity. But it's up to you.

However long it takes, that's how long it will take. For some people it takes a long time, for others a shorter time. It took Than Ajahn Mahā Bua nine years from the time he first met Than Ajahn Mun to reach *Arahantship*. He had practised a little beforehand, but most of his time had been spent studying for his Mahā degree in *Pāli* studies. Another *bhikkhu*, Luang Pu Lee, took only four years, but he was under the personal tutelage of Than Ajahn Mahā Bua for the whole time. It was just the two of them. Imagine that — four years of hell. Whenever he did something wrong, Than Ajahn Mahā Bua would jump on it straight away. But Luang Pu Lee stayed with his teacher through thick and thin, even though he was very strict. If people really have the intention to get free, they will stay with a very strict teacher. I haven't come across very many people like that. I'm not too strict, but I find that people just disappear because the life is too much for them to bear. They just can't handle it. Some have opinions and views about why this or that aspect of monastic life is unnecessary, and unless they can discard them, I just have to let them go. As soon as the monastic life or the practice gets difficult, people turn away, looking for an easier way out, for easier teachings or a softer teacher. It's only years later the realisation dawns that they are no further forward in their practice — if they ever notice it at all.

It's not a soft cuddly teacher. It's the teacher who is strict with the *kilesas*, extremely strict, who brings people to enlightenment.

Please understand that a teacher is not being strict with the person, but with his defilements, his *kilesas*. Actually, strict teachers have a lot of *mettā*, and it took me a long time to understand this about Than Ajahn Mahā Bua. I used to wonder why he always picked on me when other *bhikkhus* were doing similar foolish things. When I did something right, he never appeared, but when I did something wrong, he was in front of me straight away. I used to wonder why, until I realised that he had *mettā* for me, and thought that I might, in fact, be able to understand.

A strict teacher will point out when the *citta* is going in the wrong direction, and this stops the student going down blind alleys in practice. I understand that strictness is hard to bear, particularly for Westerners who have such a lot of conceit, who always know better, but conceit has to be overcome before we can become enlightened. Conceit involves views and opinions, but where does conceit lie? Well, it lies within thought, memory or the combination of the two, which makes it really thorny to deal with. But you have to get to know these things for yourself. If you understand how the five *khandhas* work, it will set you free. But don't imagine that freedom is within any of the *khandhas*. After enlightenment, the body will keep working until it falls apart, and memories and thoughts will continue to arise, but the *citta* will be free. It's as though the *citta* is watching a movie that keeps running but isn't interested in it any more. This is very different from the worldly state of affairs where we become concerned with feelings that arise, or get upset and start thinking about death if the body gets sick. The five *khandhas* are just what they are, so just observe what is going on within your own heart.

I recommend that you get things clear at the beginning. Understand things clearly, and don't get them muddled up. The cause of the confusion is *avijjā*, which wants to lure you into discursive thinking. The only thing that matters is the knowingness of the heart; it's the only quality left over when everything else disappears. We spend our lives looking outwards — at this

person, that city or that country — and do everything we can to avoid looking at the place where things arise and cease, the heart. The heart knows; it has known all along, so get to know what's happening inside it. When we are free, it will continue to know, but will never again be lured into becoming attached to anything. Knowingness is there all the time; it's just that we don't care to look.

Arahantship takes many lifetimes

28th August 2019

When Than Ajahn Mun reached a certain point in his meditation, he reviewed his previous lives and realised that, in ages past, he had made a resolution to become a Buddha.[1] He had strived for ninety aeons — an immeasurably long period of time[2] — to reach his present life, but he saw that finishing the task would take another ninety aeons, with all the *dukkha* involved in growing old, becoming ill and dying, over and over again. So he made the decision to renounce his vow and make the present life his last. I don't know how long it takes to become an *Arahant*, but it must be quite a few aeons — an unimaginable length of time. How many previous Buddhas did the Buddha of the present age meet before he became one himself? When we read the Jātaka tales of the previous lives of the Buddha, we get an inkling of some of them: in one he was a recluse, in another an ordinary layman, in some he was an animal and in others a *deva*, but there must have been millions of others.

How many Buddhas did Than Ajahn Mun, Than Ajahn Mahā Bua or Than Ajahn Sao meet before they became *Arahants*? How many lives did they spend training themselves? A countless number. How many Buddhas have we met? We don't know. How many lives have we spent studying the basics of the religion before becoming confident in the Dhamma and starting to practise? We don't know. In a way, our relationship with the Dhamma over past lives has been like going to school. We start in kindergarten, learning the basics of the religion, before going to elementary school and then high school, where we study

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1 See *Venerable Ācariya Mun Bhūridatta Thera — A Spiritual Biography* (page 18), available on the Luangta website (www.luangta.eu).

2 An aeon is defined in the *Saṁyutta Nikāya* as longer than the time it would take to wear away a mountain of solid rock by brushing it lightly once every hundred years with a fine Benares cloth.

more and listen to various Dhamma teachers. It's not easy to understand their meaning, but we eventually become more confident and start taking the teachings to heart. For example, the truth of rebirth has to become imprinted on the heart (*citta*), and this takes many lifetimes, probably many aeons. After all, only a minority of people in the world today accept the fact of rebirth, and most think that their present life is the only one.

By the end of high school, we have started practising a little as well as learning. How many lives have we spent before arriving here at the forest university where we can just practise? You could say that we've graduated from high school; we don't have to learn from books any more, and we don't have to search for the right teaching because we know in our hearts that we've found it. Now we can devote ourselves to getting the work done. But please remember: this is not the first life you've practised the Dhamma, and it probably won't be the last. How many more lives will you have to practise before you can become one of the four kinds of noble being (*ariya-puggala*) — *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmī*, *Anāgāmī* and *Arahant*? Well, it's up to you, but if you can make the effort now to become a *Sotāpaññā*, you'll have only seven more lives before becoming enlightened.

In the Buddhist religion, there is a need for teachings to suit all levels of understanding — kindergarten, to learn the basics; elementary and high school, to broaden knowledge and deepen understanding; and university, to get meditation practice underway. Books and scriptures always have a role, of course, but there's a stage where people spend time going backwards and forwards between study and practice, mainly because they haven't fully understood the basic concepts. That's why it's important to get these concepts straight. Take the four noble truths, for example. The first is that *dukkha* exists, and the word *dukkha* encompasses all kinds of dissatisfaction, restlessness, boredom and unease — no single word in English encapsulates its meaning. Everyone thinks that they know what *dukkha* means, but do they? It starts in the morning when we don't want to get up, and

it continues throughout the day. Hunger, thirst, tiredness, the need to go to the toilet – these are all forms of *dukkha*. These everyday experiences, including all the unpleasant feelings you have during the day, are *dukkha*. Most of you seem unable to grasp this, but you really have to get it clear.[3] Until you do, you'll think that life in the world is brilliant, amazing fun, and never find the way out. The more you recognise *dukkha*, the more you see it, the more motivation you'll have to find the exit. Don't you see the *dukkha* occurring from moment to moment, or are you so accustomed to it that you've stopped noticing? People overlook *dukkha*: they get up in the morning, wash their faces and run blindly on, eat something when they're hungry, drink something when thirsty and run to the doctor when in pain. These are the ways they usually relieve *dukkha*. Most human beings only know how to relieve their *dukkha*, without recognising or completely understanding its cause.

The second noble truth, the cause of *dukkha*, is wanting (*taṇhā*) – wanting to become, wanting to be and wanting to have, or not wanting to become, be and have. And we see this most clearly in *samādhi* where we are completely satisfied and peaceful, so unlike our usual state of continuous wanting. In *samādhi*, we don't want anything; everything is just fine. It's when we come out of *samādhi* that we notice just how much *dukkha* there is in everyday life, wanting one thing or another, wanting to change this and that. *Dukkha* is particularly apparent with the body, the first of the five *khandhas*, which wants to change position continually whether sleeping or awake. If you don't understand the first noble truth, you won't have enough motivation to find the way out. And if you haven't yet experienced *samādhi*, you'll just have to take it on trust that wanting – the cause of *dukkha* – can cease for a while. Once you enter *samādhi* and thoughts and memories stop, you'll be completely

3 See Ajahn Martin's talk, *Dukkha is a very profound teaching*, in his book, *Forest Leaves*, available on his website (www.forestdhammatalks.org).

satisfied, comfortable and happy depending on your individual character, and you'll see the difference for yourself. The third noble truth is simply that *dukkha* can end, while the fourth is that there is a path (*magga*) leading to the end of *dukkha*. This is the path of practice, and why we've arrived at this forest university where our only interest is Dhamma practice.

The path of practice is *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. *Sīla* involves keeping the moral precepts, normally five but eight for laypeople living in a monastery. *Bhikkhus*, of course, keep two hundred and twenty-seven rules, and in this tradition we also keep some of the ascetic (*dhutanga*) practices, including eating only once a day. *Samādhi* seems to be difficult for many people to achieve, for they find *samatha* (calmness meditation) a problem, not to say a real headache. It's not easy to stop thinking, because we love to entertain ourselves with thoughts and memories, painting the future, thinking about the past. But if we can let go of thoughts and memories, we can enter *samādhi* and feel contentment. There's nobody there except a knowingness, so we can have a holiday from the commentator — call it an ego if you like — which tells us what we are experiencing, and what to think or do all the time. This little voice is in our ears twenty-four hours a day, commenting on its likes and dislikes, on what it does and doesn't want. Don't you realise that this voice is going on all the time? This is where *sati* comes in — it helps us to be aware of this incessant voice.

Most of the time, we don't even notice that there is something (the *citta*) that knows everything that's going on. When we see an object in the external world, such as a spittoon or a tree, we realise that the knower and the object are two different things, don't we? Well, it's the same with internal objects. There is something that knows when a thought is coming up, that knows when a feeling arises, that hears the little voice of the commentator whispering about what and what not to do. From the moment of birth to the instant of death, the *citta* knows everything, and we have to find the way to make contact with this knowing nature.

The *citta* realises that a feeling has occurred, but it's not interested, and it knows that a thought has arisen, but it's not interested. Can this knowing nature be the feeling or the thought? It can't – how can subject be object? Our language tells us that subject and object are two different things and that the subject normally observes the object or relates to it. But this is where we get confused: as soon as we (as the subject) think that a feeling (an object) belongs to us, we're in a predicament. When we think that feelings, memories and thoughts are me or mine, we're in trouble. The language we use points to the problem, for the personal pronoun is usually centre stage – I feel like this, I think like this, I have this idea, and so forth. But who is this "I"? Well, we take it to be the little voice that tells us what we feel or think, and which comments the experience.

The first step is to disentangle ourselves from our thoughts or memories, and this means getting into the stillness of *samādhi*. There is no I in *samādhi*, for the I is created by the *kilesas*, which are grouped into three armies – greed, hate and delusion – supervised by their general, *avijjā*, the mastermind behind it all. *Avijjā* presents mental phenomena and tells us they are me or mine. In the West, we often hear people say that their feelings have been hurt, meaning that they have been insulted in some way. But what is insulted? What is hurt? It's mainly the views people have about themselves, but we all know that views and opinions change over time; the older we get, the more they've changed, and they change a lot, don't they? So what is it that's constant, that never changes, that never comes and goes? Everything we can observe comes and goes – everything is *anicca*, impermanent. A feeling comes – and goes; a thought comes – and goes; a memory comes – and goes. Consciousness also comes and goes, but very rapidly. Some of you will remember the older movies which relied on reels of film made up of frames with black edges between them. If something was wrong with the synchronisation at the projection machine, people could see these black edges between the frames. We can think

of consciousness in the same way: the moving pictures represent transient moments of consciousness. There is a moment of consciousness, it lapses, and a new picture appears, but the lapse in consciousness is so fleeting that we think there is a continuum of consciousness. We're fooled into thinking there is a timeline, and this is where we get the idea of time and space. You could say that we're living in a Hollywood dream factory but don't realise it.

Actually, there is something that never changes, something that you really can call me or mine, but its nature is the same for every being, so it would be misleading to personalise it. You can call it the knowingness of the *citta*, and it doesn't change. You can only enter it in *appaṇā samādhi*, the deepest state of *samādhi*, where everything — all the five *khandhas* — disappears for a while. This knowingness doesn't know any object: it's just pure knowingness and a preview of *Nibbāna*. To experience it, all you need do is keep your attention focused on one object, whether the breath at nose or the mental repetition of the word *buddho*. You need to know if the breath is going in or out, if it's fast or slow, deep or shallow, rough or smooth, and so on. It's the same with the repetition of *buddho*: you need to know all its qualities, including whether it's clear or unclear, fast or slow. It's this knowingness that we have to develop, and this is the hard part of the practice. Some people rest on the *buddho*, but then it becomes automatic while the mind carries on thinking in the background, so they never get deeper into *samādhi*. Also, people can start to feel calm when foreground memories and thoughts stop coming up; they like the peacefulness and want to stay with it, but that is superficial calmness, not *samādhi*.

Samādhi is when all the thoughts and memories stop coming in, and you feel comfortable and really at peace. No-one has to tell you that the experience is comfortable; no little voice comments on the experience — it's just a pure experience. The world of *upācāra samādhi* is the world of experience; it's experience

without anything telling you what you experience. When you grab something very hot, you know it and instantly withdraw your hand — the experience just happens. The comments about the feeling or the heat, and the thoughts about burnt fingers, come later — they are just labels, they are made up. The experience itself is just the experience. When you act or speak or feel, you know about it, but you don't have to put a label on it. The labels that you put on experience just confuse; they will get you thinking and bringing up memories, and you'll end up being deluded by thought and memory.

The same can happen with the experience of *samādhi*. We can put labels on it and judge it, comparing it with previous experiences of *samādhi* which might have been better or worse, but this is delusion. Actually, we should be interested only in the breath or the *buddho* until no more thoughts or memories arise. Whatever happens, just bring the mind back to the breath or the *buddho*, but don't let them become automatic, because that's when background thoughts and memories start up. Yes, there will be calmness, but it will only be superficial. Actually, *upācāra samādhi* is a state that people can't get enough of, because it's so peaceful; they want to go straight back in as soon as they come out. And if they want to go further and really get down to the pure knowingness — which can be called a true self, though it's not really a self — they have to stay with the breath or the *buddho* until the mind gets so concentrated that it can't even think another thought. Sometimes the breath stops at this point, and people can become frightened and think they're going to die. But really, they ought to ask themselves what is left when the breath stops — and what is left is the knowingness. Then the whole universe disappears, and when they come out — wow!

This experience is the first wonder of meditation or, as Than Ajahn Mahā Bua called it, the *Nibbāna* of the little man. It's a preview of *Nibbāna*. It's where *Arahants* are, permanently, after

they attain — *Nibbāna*.[4] As long as an *Arahant* is alive, he still has a functioning body and behaves like a human being. There's nothing special about his external form, and no one can tell that he's an *Arahant* unless they have some knowledge about practice and perceive something out of the ordinary. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua was an *Arahant*, for example, but most of the time he wasn't there, in the sense that you saw him but didn't notice him. Unless he was on stage giving a *desanā*, he just merged into the background. That's not the case with most people, whom we notice because they show themselves and display a persona. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua was very animated while giving a *desanā*, but went back into *Nibbāna* afterwards and rested there, so that most people were unaware of his presence. You could say that he wasn't there most of the time but was fully present if required. All the faculties he had trained as a human being could manifest instantly and vanish again.

Getting into *samādhi* is not difficult. Actually, it's so easy that we find it difficult. We like complicated things, and the more complicated a story is, or the more complicated we make the practice, the more we like it. That's why we find returning to the *buddho* or the breath time after time extremely boring. But it gets interesting when we really get hold of the meditation object and it becomes more and more established. When we can observe, and be with, the breath or the *buddho*, they become interesting because we realise that each one is completely different from the one that came before, and our interest makes the mind stay with them. But until that happens, we have to fight; we have to bring the mind back when it starts to find the practice boring. We need to ask ourselves who finds it boring. Boredom is just a thought — it's not me or mine or myself. Think of it in the context of the Lord Buddha's three characteristics of existence. It's *anicca* — arising and ceasing; it's *anattā* — not me or mine; and

4 After death, an *Arahant* is said to be in *Parinibbāna*, *Nibbāna* without remainder.

it's *dukkha* — suffering, as long as we attach to it. We have a lot of *dukkha*, but we don't see it or don't want to see it. We'd rather live in a dream world, and we create dream worlds all the time: tomorrow I'll do this and afterwards do something else, and then this or that will happen. We make stuff up all the time and don't want to see reality. But the truth is that if we do see reality, we'll be much happier and feel unburdened. As long as we live in dreams, we feel burdened. What's going to happen tomorrow? Do I have some food to eat? What will happen at work? These fears come up as long as we live in a dream world. If we live in reality, there's just one moment and the next and the next. The interesting thing about living in the present is that you don't have to worry about the next moment, because whenever something appears, you know exactly what to do.

The *citta* has lived for aeons and had countless lives, so it must know what to do in a particular situation. But as soon as we think, we complicate everything and become confused. When we read lots of different teachings we get bewildered; one says something and another says something different, and we end up perplexed. How do we know what to believe? Actually, we should just practise, just do it, and go the way of the Lord Buddha, the absolute authority. He and the *Arahants* teach the same thing — *ānāpānasati* (meditation on the breath) or the use of a *parikamma* word such as *buddho* to get the mind calm, and thereafter *vipassanā* (investigation). And what do we investigate? The body and bodily feelings until the stage of *Anāgāmī* is reached. We don't need to know lots of different teachings.

The Lord Buddha was very clear about what to do and how to find the way out of the hamster wheel. Remember this, please. At the moment you are like a hamster in a wheel, running and running and running without getting anywhere, chasing after things you like and away from things you dislike. That's your life in a nutshell, isn't it? And you'll keep running after what you think you like and running away from what you think you dislike until *paññā* reveals that there's nothing to them, until you really

understand the truth of likes and dislikes. The body should be your first object of investigation because likes and dislikes arise within the body and are related to it. If you don't believe that, investigate it for yourself. Whatever you like or dislike has some reference to the body and the six senses that come along with it, doesn't it? When investigation of the body is finished, like and dislike — greed and hate — are gone. Those two armies are vanquished, defeated forever. The enemy then is the army of delusion, with its *kilesas* of delusion, which hides out in the *nāma-khandhas* of *saññā* and *sankhāra*, thought and memory. And, finally, we have to fight the mastermind, *avijjā*, itself. That's the path — so walk it.

Stream entry – a life-changing moment

27th December 2019

Life in a forest monastery is hard, isn't it? It's difficult practising here, particularly if you're visiting for the first time. It's certainly very different from practising in comfort at home, where you can choose if and when to meditate. The difference is that here you have to practise day in and day out, whether you want to or not. As my teacher Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used to say, this is the forest university. In school, people are told which classes to take. In Germany, for example, there are nine school grades, and the children in each grade are told the classes to take, when to attend them and which teacher is in charge. They don't have a choice. But when people get to university, they can attend any classes they like. If they want to finish a degree, there are requirements for a set of classes they have to take, classes that contribute towards their degree and classes that do not, but they have the freedom to take any classes that interest them. At least that's how it was when I went to university.

Similarly, here in the forest university, you have a certain freedom, but you need the self-discipline and inner determination to use your time wisely and follow the correct path. The forest university has the advantage of teaching you the path leading to the four stages of liberation: *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmī*, *Anāgāmī* and *Arahant*. You can call these stages university degrees if you like, for you can't get these kind of degrees in high school: you have to move up to university to obtain them. A high school education is necessary, however, for it lays the groundwork for university studies, and only once you've completed it can you go to university. The same holds true in Buddhism. If you haven't finished your preliminary studies of Buddhism and done some kind of meditation practice in the higher grades of high school, you won't be able to enter the forest university.

Once school is finished, and if you are interested in going further, you can find the way to university. Not every university will accept you, of course, and not every school leaver goes on to university: many are perfectly happy with what they've already achieved. In the same way, some people are content just to practise calmness meditation (*samatha*). When their meditation session ends, they feel calmer, but otherwise nothing has changed. The point of coming to the forest university, however, is to change ourselves – and to make the change permanent. This isn't easy, for sure, and that's why we need determination and effort to use the time here wisely. Getting up at three o'clock in the morning to start meditating, having one meal a day in the early morning, helping to clean the *sālā*, and then getting straight back to the practice – this is using the time wisely. After the meal, *bhikkhus* generally do walking meditation, otherwise they'd doze off in the sitting position. Later on, they sit in meditation until it's time to sweep the grounds of the monastery, and afterwards there is a time for a hot or cold drink before having a shower. Then it's back to meditation practice again. Tough life, eh? This practice is the same for the *bhikkhus,* mae chees (nuns) and laypeople in the monastery, and it leads to the four stages of liberation.

That's why it's called the forest university, and it will lead to the four stages of enlightenment if you walk the path. But it's a difficult path, and it's easy to get distracted. The same happens at university, where we can stay at home some days rather than go to classes, choose a new subject if we find one too difficult, or take classes that don't contribute to our degree, and so on. We can all be easily distracted, whether at a worldly university or a forest university. At university, you don't have to appear for any particular lecture, whereas at school your attendance is checked, and if you've been found absent too many times you may have to repeat the year, as happened to me. Nobody checks your attendance at the worldly university or the forest university, and that's why determination and effort are required. Of course,

people can meditate at home, but everyone who has tried practising at home knows that it's very different from practising in a monastery.

Monastic practice takes everything we've got, all our effort and resolve, because the *kilesas* come up. We can see the *kilesas* most clearly around food, at the one meal of the day. In a monastery, food is normally presented by laypeople to the Ajahn, before being passed down the food line according to monastic seniority. This is the same as receiving food on alms round. The most senior monk gets the greatest variety, and if there are many monks, the last one may be left with only a handful of rice. This can mean that the most junior monks and the laypeople practising at the monastery get only the most basic food if food is scarce. At this monastery, there is ample food most of the time, but the *kilesas* come up nevertheless. Whenever the trays of food come past, greed can come up. We can find ourselves grabbing at this foodstuff or that, looking at what others are taking and measuring our choices against theirs. It's the same story on alms round. If the monk in front gets the last bag of tasty food, we can be left with just a handful of rice or some sweets. Greed can be very obvious at such times. But because it's so obvious, we can recognise that it exists.

Living and practising in a monastery, we can clearly see the *kilesas* when they arise, because we're away from the comforts of home where the *kilesas* are satisfied. Here we can observe, "Ah, *kilesas* of greed and hatred are coming up", or "Discomfort is starting to happen". When we spend our lives in comfort, we don't see the *kilesas*, for they don't show themselves. We can't tackle them if we can't see them, so we need them to come up. Then, when one of the *kilesas* shows it's head, we can chop it off. Once the head is off, it will never rise again. That's the way to handle them. Why do you think the Lord Buddha advised his *bhikkhus* to live not only in monasteries but also in forests, in dangerous environments, in fearful places, and to live there alone, without being able to rely on anybody? It was because

such places bring up the *kilesas* to the greatest degree. When you live in a cave with frightening spirits or animals, you'll have to deal with fear.

In the past many *Arahants* in Thailand, if they felt too comfortable, deliberately created frightening situations for this purpose. Some of them would sit on the edge of a cliff when tired, so that if they fell asleep they would fall to their deaths: as far as I know, none ever dozed off and fell because their fear prevented it. Others would deliberately sit on a path known to be used by tigers. They sat there because they were frightened of tigers, and this practice made them face their fear, for fear is something that drives us all crazy. Fear of future is a significant challenge – whether we have enough money for tomorrow, whether we'll have a house over our heads, what tomorrow will bring – yet it's a minor fear. The major fear is the fear of death. All of us will have to tackle fear sooner or later, and to do that we have to bring it up, bring up the *kilesa* of fear to chop off its head. This is what forest practice is for.

Once *bhikkhus* have done enough practice and can live comfortably in a forest monastery, they can go out, alone or in groups of two or three, and live in the forest, in dangerous areas that are full of wild animals or haunted by ghosts or demons, to learn to deal with the fear of the unknown, the fear of pain and the fear of death. Fear makes people crazy, and it drives them to look for places of safety and comfort. After all, if we're afraid of something we run home and hide behind the curtains, don't we? If we're afraid of a certain situation, we try to avoid it, and if we're afraid of going hungry we run to the supermarket to buy lots of food. People try to anticipate the future, and their decisions are based on fears and how to best avoid frightening things happening. But *bhikkhus* or practitioners don't do that – they go out to face their fears, and they'll learn from them if they're ready. But not everyone is ready. There is a certain level of wisdom, a certain level of practice, people need in order to be able to deal with fear, otherwise they can become unhinged.

I've seen people who couldn't cope with living in forest or a cave become unhinged because of their constant dreadful thoughts and imaginings. This showed that they weren't able to handle the situation correctly, and that it wasn't yet time for them to leave the safety of the monastery for life in the forest, whether alone or in a small group.

Please make sure you understand this. Practice at home is so much easier because the *kilesas* don't arise. But you have to be able to see the *kilesas* — not just once but time after time. How they nag, nag and nag all the time, constantly getting on your nerves — this is what you have to see. Only then will you be willing to fight the *kilesas*, and fighting them is a tough job. If they don't get on your nerves, if you give way to them too often, you'll never be willing to fight them, and you'll have no way to avoid their onslaught. For instance, if you're able to go to the fridge and have a sandwich whenever hunger comes up, you'll never fight the *kilesas* of hunger: actually, you won't even understand what hunger is. Similarly, you won't understand what fear is because you haven't yet faced fear, and won't understand what pain is because you haven't yet faced pain. Just look at what happens during meditation when you investigate pain. How long can you sit for? When do you give up? At what level of pain do you stop? When do you stop meditating to rest or go off to do something or other?

If we constantly give in, we can't chop the heads off these *kilesas*; we'll never see their full force, and never understand how fear, pain or hunger can drive us nuts. Normally, people living in the world don't experience these drives to their fullest extent because they can run to the doctor for a happy pill to get rid of pain, run to the fridge to get rid of hunger, or hide in the house or behind friends to avoid fear. They don't actually face fear and know what it is doing to them. Think about your own life: how many of your decisions have been based on fear or pain? Even if you focus only on recent events, you'll realise that many decisions are based on wanting not to face fear or wanting not

to face pain. You've always looked for the easy way out. There's nothing wrong with wiggling around looking for the easy way out, but the path of practice in the Thai Forest Tradition is not the easy way out. In fact, it's a pretty straight path. It's the path of practice as described in the fourth noble truth, the path that leads to the end of *dukkha*, and it consists of the three columns of *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration) and *paññā* (wisdom).

To walk this path, we first have to keep the five moral precepts (*sīla*). Then we train ourselves in *samādhi*, which has two aspects. The first is concentration, being able to concentrate on one point, whether the mental repetition of *buddho* or the breath as it goes in and out; and the second is the development of the knowingness about the object of concentration. It is essential to be able to know the quality of the breath or the quality of the *buddho* that we are observing. Remember, we must be able to know the quality of the object that we observe. This is called *sati* – awareness of the object observed. If we don't develop *sati*, we won't be able to investigate properly. If we don't investigate properly, we won't be able to develop wisdom. Being aware means knowing what is going on, and this is the key for investigation. We have to be aware of the experience of feeling pain or fear.

Normally, when confronted with pain or fear, we label them through association with memories of previous similar experiences, but that's not really knowing by experience; it's knowing through association – putting labels on the experience. The moment we put a label on the experience, it's gone, and what remains is association, memory and thoughts which distract us from the ongoing experience. We all know this: when a child falls and hurts its knee, it cries, but if the mother gives it an ice cream it will smile happily, even though the knee still hurts. So we need to go deeper than labels, by observing the experience of pain or fear from beginning to end. While doing this, we have to be sure to concentrate on the feeling without thinking about it. We have to ask ourselves what exactly the feeling of pain is; what exactly the feeling of fear is; why we constantly run away from pain and

fear; and what we are afraid of. We never bother to investigate these things, but if we do, we'll see that they boil down to either fear of pain, fear of death or fear of non-existence. But what was the sensation, the feeling, before pain or fear arose?

There's something most people don't understand when I talk about *samādhi* or the path to stream entry (*Sotāpanna*). These experiences are three-dimensional. Can you describe a three-dimensional object using a two-dimensional picture? There's the front, but it looks very different to the back. I sometimes describe the front and sometimes the back, and at other times the left side or the right or the top or the bottom. People sometimes accuse me of contracting myself, but this is because I'm trying to describe a three-dimensional object with a two-dimensional picture, and each description seems different from the others. As Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used to say, trying to describe *Nibbāna* is like trying to describe Baan Taad forest monastery. Coming from the South, you see the entrance differently than coming from the North, and similarly for East and West. Each time he spoke about *Nibbāna*, he described it in a different way. It's only if you know all the facets of *samādhi* or stream entry that you really know. But you'll only really know once you pass the gate and get inside.

In the last hundred years, there have been more than one hundred *Arahants* in Thailand, which shows that the Dhamma taught by these forest masters is the true Dhamma. However, none of them ever described the actual door to stream entry: they didn't say, "This is what you see before you enter the stream". There's no sign saying that it's the door to stream entry. Forest masters can only describe what you'll see after opening the door and going in. Actually, everyone will see the door in a different way. There are many roads leading to Baan Taad, but no matter which door or entrance you take to get here, as soon as you enter the monastery, you know – this is it, and it doesn't matter what you call it! The same holds true for stream enterer, once-returner or non-returner; you won't know that the

stage of *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmī* or *Anāgāmī* has been attained. There won't be a sign flashing to say that you've attained this or that stage. You'll only know that something has happened, that something has changed fundamentally, and that it was a life-changing event. But there will be no label or sign flashing as an indicator – no name and no label to tell you.

Sometimes people come to visit or even write to me to ask, "Am I a *Sotāpanna*?" But let's be clear; if you need to know whether or not you're a stream-enterer, then you're not. Even if you've entered the stream, you wouldn't ask, "Have I entered the stream?" If you feel the need for verification, then you certainly are not. However, there are teachers who will tell students that they have entered the stream. Then, when these students come and tell me that they are stream enterers, all I can do is say that I'm happy for them, even though I know that their experience has nothing to do with the real thing. This holds true for any affirmation that a student might want from a teacher, even if only about *samādhi*. If you have to ask for confirmation, the answer will be no. When it happens, you'll know without having to ask. You might go to your teacher and ask about the strange experience you had, but you certainly wouldn't go to him boasting about or asserting your experience with a label!

If you listen very carefully to my talks, you'll know that when you enter *samādhi*, you'll have certain kinds of experiences. It will probably feel like being in a safe house, but the experience can differ between people. To really experience *samādhi*, you must have been immersed for a certain amount of time, about fifteen to twenty minutes at least, not only for a few seconds. The experiences people have in *samādhi* can be very different, but what they all have in common is that people feel concentrated and energised when they come out. You don't feel tired – just the opposite. *Samādhi* is like charging your batteries. When you've been in a state of *samādhi* and come out again, you'll know what the experience was like, and that it was a state you've probably never experienced before. When you are skilled at going in

again and again, you'll know, "I've experienced a different state of mind, not one that's only in my dreams or imagination. When I come out I feel really concentrated, and the longer I'm there, the more concentrated I feel. I feel completely awake, and I don't need to sleep".

If you come out of *samādhi* and feel tired, you'll know that it wasn't really *samādhi*, even if you feel happy or satisfied. Some people when they meditate approach the state of *samādhi*, opening the door and feeling a nice, cool freshness which is very pleasant. Then they close the door in front of them. They do this for an hour, opening the door, feeling the cool freshness and closing the door in front of them again. When they come out, they think they've had a pleasant or happy experience, but they feel very tired. Of course they feel tired, opening and closing the door all the time. How can they not feel tired? But that is not *samādhi*. *Samādhi* is a state where you are relieved of the *kilesas* for the time you are there. The *kilesas* can't bother you in *samādhi*, and they can't comment on whatever is happening. In *samādhi* there is no "I": there is just experience, so there is no-one comment on what you are or are not experiencing, or whether it is good or bad. It's only when you come out that you know the experience was good. This is because the *kilesas* have regained their power, and are able to say, "Oh, that was so great, I want to go back". Of course, in the above I'm only describing *upacāra samādhi*, where there is knowing and the experience, the object of knowing. On going deeper, into *appaṇā samādhi*, only knowing will be left – subject and object will have merged.

The experience of entering *appaṇā samādhi* and the experience of attaining *Sotāpanna* will be very similar. What do you actually have to do to become a *Sotāpanna*? I can explain it in different ways, but the main thing to realise is that the first three fetters have to be cut.[1] The first fetter is doubt, doubt that heaven

1 Ajahn Martin describes the first three fetters in a sequence different from traditional Buddhist texts. He lists them according to the hurdle each presents for the Western mind, with doubt as the first.

and hell exist and that there are beings in these realms. People sometimes believe that heaven and hell exist but that there are no beings in them. In fact, they are full of beings. Hell is stacked full of beings. There are twenty six different *deva* realms, the human realm, and the four lower realms which include the twenty five different areas of hell. However people only believe what they can see, and we humans believe we are the cream of creation. But we aren't! We are conditioned, absolutely conditioned in the same way as robots. If I see this person, I react like this; if I see that person, I react like that; if I see my boss, I behave in this way; and if I see my mother, I behave in that way (like a little child, for example). This is called conditioning. Behaving like this, we can't call ourselves human beings, because a human being is a reflective person. Actually, we lose the quality of the reflection through the process of education, through being forced to know a lot of different things. And we don't even have time to question what we know.

Look at universities nowadays: they teach you to know this and know that, but they don't teach you how to develop knowledge for yourself. They'll just tell you to Google it. This is ridiculous, isn't it? And the so-called knowledge changes every two or three years, so that you have to load up another package of knowledge, and then another to replace the old outdated one. They call this progress. Every time new findings come along, we are told that the previous understanding was incorrect but that the new findings are one hundred percent valid and true. Take cholesterol, for example: we were told thirty years ago that high cholesterol caused cardiovascular problems, and that it was necessary to take medication to lower it. Now, however, official guidelines have changed, and we're told that the previous advice was wrong, albeit that someone made a lot of money from the previous medications. I'm sure that someone will come along in future with a new threat about the dangers of something or other, and that new kinds of pills will be needed to counteract it, only for the advice to be overturned. This is what they call progress.

Knowledge allows us to find solutions to our immediate problems, but it doesn't help us develop wisdom or insight into the true causes of things. Wisdom is developed in the heart, while knowledge is developed in the brain through inference and supposition. Wisdom understands what is actually going on. Everyone is different, of course, so each of us has to work with our own unique circumstances. As the old saying goes, one man's medicine is another man's poison. Someone who goes deeply into his heart and understands his own composition and conditioning will be his own best doctor, because he'll know what is helpful or unhelpful, healthy or unhealthy, wholesome or unwholesome. Of course, for the mass of people who are not spiritually developed, medicine has a valid role to play, but the more spiritual a person becomes, the less empirical knowledge makes sense. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua provided a good example of this at the end of his life when he had this conversation with his doctor:[2]

Doctor: Dear Luangta, your fever is going up just now.

Luangta: Search for it.

Doctor: Dear Luangta, your fever has increased and I ask permission to inspect your body a little bit.

Luangta: There is no need for a checkup, for Luangta checks his own body all the time.

Doctor: Please let me check your blood pressure.

Luangta: I check it all the time. My checkup is much more thorough than yours. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Doctor: I understand, thank you.

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2 This excerpt is from the talk, *The beauty comes from within*, in the book, *In Commemoration of the Venerable Ajahn Mahā Bua Nanasampanno*, available on the Luangta website (www.luangta.eu).

Luangta: Don't go thinking that Luangta is the crazy one, for it's you yourself who is foolish but don't know it. Do you understand this?

Doctor: Yes, thank you.

Luangta: That's all I want to say…

Coming back to the attainment of *Sotāpanna* and the fetter of doubt, people also have considerable doubts about *kamma*, which is the law of cause and effect. Everything you do will have an effect in the short or the long term. Whatever you say to a person will come back to you sooner or later, and most of the time only in the next life. It's the same for actions; their effects will mainly come back in the next life. The *kamma* of thought, on the other hand, comes back to people much more quickly. Even so, if you create unwholesome thoughts, they'll not only haunt you in this life but also in the next, because you take your baggage of *kamma* with you when you die. Actually, it's the only thing you take with you. You can't take your body with you; it was created because of your *kamma*, and you were born in your present situation because of your *kamma*. People are born in Thailand if they have the good *kamma* to be in touch with the Dhamma. By contrast, people are born in Western or other countries where the true Dhamma doesn't have a foothold because they don't have such good *kamma*, or because they despised or affronted the Dhamma in previous lives. People who have always respected the Dhamma are born in places where Dhamma exists. Thailand is the cradle of Dhamma at the moment, but this may change in future. The Dhamma has moved from India to Thailand, China, Korea and Japan, and it has remained and developed in Thailand.

As I said, there have been more than one hundred *Arahants* in Thailand in the last hundred years, more than any other place on this earth. This means that the Dhamma taught here in Thailand by the forest masters is the true Dhamma. You are hearing

the true Dhamma; you are listening to the true Dhamma. There are quite a few false Dhamma teachers around, however, and they hum and haw, suggesting that the path could be like this or like that. But Than Ajahn Mahā Bua would say, "I tell it straight — this is the path and this is not the path". If someone says, "Maybe if you go this way, this will happen, but maybe if you go that way, that will happen, or maybe this or that won't happen…" — No! That is not the language of a forest teacher. That is not the language of a master. A master will say, "Go straight this way; this is the way. That is not the way, but the right way is there". He won't say, "Perhaps this is a *Sotāpanna* but perhaps it's not, or maybe this is an *Arahant* but maybe it's not". He doesn't teach like that because he teaches from experience, just like the Lord Buddha himself.

At the time of the Lord Buddha, there were no books, so the monks didn't read scriptures. They heard talks (*desanās*); they heard the teachings of the Lord Buddha in that form. Then they practised according to the teachings they'd heard and what they'd understood from them. If they didn't quite understand, if they found the pure teachings of the Lord Buddha hard to comprehend, they could go and see one of his senior *Arahant* disciples, such as Venerable Sāriputta, who would explain the teachings in detail. Then they would realise, "Oh, that's what the Lord Buddha meant". Nowadays it's the same. Some Thai Forest Masters just give the gist — "Do this, then that; investigate this and then that" — and Than Ajahn Mahā Bua was the same. He didn't give away too much when he explained something, but he did point out the signs people will see as they walk the path.

As I was saying, the second fetter is *sīlabbata-parāmāsa*, and it involves keeping the five moral precepts inconsistently. In English, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* is usually translated in as "attachment to rites and rituals", but I don't know where this translation comes from. It has nothing to do with the second fetter. The first word is *sīla*. There is a word in Thai — sin — stemming from *sīla*, and it means keeping the *sīla*, keeping the precepts.

Sīlabbata-parāmāsa means playing around with the precepts, keeping them one day but not the next and keeping them again the day after. How often do we break the precepts because it is inconvenient to keep them? Yes, we sometimes break them unintentionally, or think we can tell a little white lie that seems unimportant, but these are still ways of breaking the precepts. This is the true meaning of the this fetter: it has nothing to do with rites and rituals. The Western mind might think, "I shouldn't perform any rites or rituals, for attachment to these is a fetter", but this is irrelevant. Keep the five precepts and you'll be able to break this fetter.

The third fetter is very clear. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua describes it beautifully in his book, *A Life of Inner Quality*,[3] where he explains all of the ten fetters. I've never heard anyone describe them better. This fetter is the view, the understanding, the belief that the body is self. Some people think that it means getting rid of the body completely, but that's not right. To break this fetter, we have to investigate the loathsomeness, the repugnance of the body in order to understand that it is not the beautiful or adorable thing we believe it to be. We have to understand that the body is not self, and I often use the analogy of a car and its driver. Someone born in a car, who has never left the car and will die in the car, makes the assumption that the car and the driver are the same thing. Similarly, we are born in the body, have never left the body and will die in the body, and this is why we believe that the *citta* (the driver or self) and the body are one and the same. However, we need to understand that the *citta* and the body are two different things. This is the understanding necessary to cut the third fetter.

So, the first fetter is broken by erasing doubt and accepting that heaven and hell exist, that there are beings in these realms,

3 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).

and that there is *kamma* — good and bad — which comes back to us in future. The second fetter is broken by keeping the precepts, and the third by realising that the body is not self. But there is one other thing we need to cut the fetters — the power of concentration. We need it in order to cut the fetters that have already been loosened by investigating and understanding them and by keeping the precepts. You could say that, in the beginning, these three fetters are like iron chains binding us to *saṁsarā*, but that by putting effort into practice, by keeping the *sīla* and by investigating the body, we can cut them down to the size of a single hair. However, we then need a tool to cut them off for ever, and that tool is *appaṇā samādhi*. It is the deep state of *samādhi* where everything disappears. The whole world disappears and, as Than Ajahn Mahā Bua used to say, it's a preview of *Nibbāna*. As soon as you come out of *appaṇā samādhi*, I guarantee that your first thought will be, "How can I get back in?" You won't want to go back into the world, where sense data bombards you and compels you act in this way or that. In the worldly realm, the senses constantly make you think, "Now it's too hot; now I need a shower; now I'm hungry and need some food; now I'm tired", and so on. None of that exists in *appaṇā samādhi*. When you come out, you realise what the senses are doing all the time. People don't know this, because they are born with the senses and will die with them. They think that being assailed by sense data is normal, unless they enter that special state of deep *samādhi* where everything disappears, and they realise that they don't need the senses to be happy. That's the experience of *appaṇā samādhi*.

Through practice and investigation, you'll be able reduce the first three fetters to the size of a fine thread. But you'll need the experience of *Nibbāna* — through *magga*, the path moment — to be able to eliminate them forever. Only *magga*, an experience similar to *appaṇā samādhi*, can remove the fetters that have previously been cut down to a minimum; only then are they gone forever. This moment can last perhaps a millisecond, perhaps a

second or even longer, and as soon as you come out you'll know that some life changing event has occurred. But there won't be signs saying that now you're a *Sotāpanna* or, later, *Sakadāgāmī* or *Anāgāmī*. There won't be any flashing neon sign indicating the stage of your achievement. It's only with complete liberation, at the stage of *Arahant*, that you'll know you are free, and that there will be no more birth and no more death.

The fruit moment (*phala*) can come instantly, and with it one gets a realisation that arises at the stage of *Sotāpanna*. But it doesn't have to be like that, and the realisation can arise later, even days or weeks later. After your experience, you might get up from your meditation seat, go somewhere and then it will come up. The moment you'll receive the fruit, you'll see the world in a completely different light. It won't be the same. And interesting things can happen; in some Buddhist texts monks or nuns report poems popping up that describe the nature of their experience. It could be something like this:

"There is no way to hide the fact
That I am dying right away.
There is no will to keep alive
And all that's left is vain.
The emptiness itself reveals
The rise of birth and death.
It's only life that hides the fact
So I am glad to die."

Whether a poem arises or not depends on the type of personality, but the *phala* is coupled with a kind of knowing that comes along with it. What it is, I won't tell you. But if you have attained *Sotāpanna* – entered the stream leading to *Nibbāna* –

there are two things you can be sure of: you'll never again go to hell, and you'll have at most seven more lives to live before becoming an *Arahant*. To be clear, the path moment, *magga*, is really distinctive. It is different from everything else. Once the first three fetters have been reduced to a minimum, the path moment can be achieved in two ways – by going into deep *samādhi*, or through investigation. One can investigate so deeply that the mind goes utterly blank. It completely blanks out. Than Ajahn Mahā Bua describes this in his book, *Wisdom Develops Samādhi*.[4] He discusses the kind of investigation which can lead to this state, where the *kilesas* suddenly have no answers to anything that you ask them; they are gone for a while, and then you drop into deep *samādhi*. It's so beautiful. Why deprive yourself of the beauty of meditation practice? Of course, I understand that it is hard, especially when people come from the worldly life and say to themselves, "Oh, I have to do another hour of meditation. I'm so tired. I'm bored," and so on. This practice is really only for determined people.

If you are interested in getting out of *saṁsāra*, you have to find a place where the path to *Nibbāna* is taught: in worldly terms, it's as though you've finished high school and are able to go to university. Of course, you still have to find the right university, but if you find one and are allowed to enroll, you can take at least one of the exams to become a *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmi*, *Anāgāmi* or *Arahant*. However, progress in the forest university depends on the determination and effort you put into the practice. Let's say you practise for two hours a day; what are you doing with the other twenty-two hours? You're creating some good karma and a lot of bad karma, that's all. When you live here as a *bhikkhu* or a layperson, you ought to be striving for the Dhamma by putting effort into your practice. People just don't seem to understand how important this is. We have to see the *kilesas*, and they really have to get on our nerves before we are willing to fight them.

4 *Wisdom Develops Samādhi*, one of Than Ajahn Mahā Bua's most famous books, is available on the Luangta website (www.luangta.eu).

If we find an easy way out, if we say, "Alright, alright, I'll deal with it later," then we'll never get around to fighting them. Here in this forest environment, the *kilesas* constantly present themselves as greed or lust or hatred, so we can deal with them. When they come up, we can chop off their heads.

I have just explained the first three fetters, but the next two are greed and hatred, and to cut them we have to understand the loathsomeness of the body. We have to see it for what it is. Wherever we go, we have to carry its flesh and bones with us. We have to drag the body, all fifty or a hundred kilos of it, around with us, heave it into a car, drive off, and then haul it out the car again. Or we have to heave it onto an airplane to fly around the world, and feed it so that it gets even more heavy, and so on. It's a mess, as we can see if we open it up, though people normally don't want to do that. What happens the first time someone opens up or dissects a body in reality? Ask any doctor about the first corpse he opened; people can faint or throw up at the sight. But what's so different about a body that's open and one that's closed? Normally we just look at the form, the appearance of the body, but when we open it up and look inside we suddenly feel like throwing up. Why? Because of all the repugnant things inside. Some people can't even handle seeing blood being taken; they just faint. Now, open yourself up, take away the skin and look in the mirror. Do you like the look of it? It's just the skin, a covering as thin as tissue paper, that hides the gory mess underneath. Everything underneath is disgusting.

In the West, some Buddhists think that the point of *asubha* practice is to make the body loathsome, but this is wrong understanding. We already have a feeling of abhorrence when we look inside the body. When we go to the toilet and look at the shit in the pan, we already feel disgust. We don't want to see it, we don't want to touch it, and we certainly don't want to eat it again. But it has just come out of the body, hasn't it? Beforehand, we liked the a nice, warm feeling in the belly, but as soon as it comes out, we don't want to see it, smell it, touch it or eat it. We don't

put the sweat from our armpits into a little bottle and spray it on ourselves as perfume, do we? Anything that comes out of the body is disgusting — nobody has to tell you this. You don't have to make it disgusting, you already find it disgusting, and everybody has this experience. Your hair is filthy and your body is filthy. When you take a shower and wash your hair with soap, the hair and soap go together into the drain, and you feel disgusted just by touching the mess. Nobody teaches you that. Do you understand? You don't have to make the body loathsome, for you already find it loathsome.

Whatever goes into the body or onto the skin or hair, we find delicious, beautiful or sweet smelling, but whatever comes out we find disgusting. We don't say, "Ah, that's lovely", when we smell body odour. No! It doesn't smell good. We are disgusted and spray on deodorant or perfumes. We don't want other people to smell it, because they're disgusted as well. People in America all use deodorants, and they didn't like it when people came from Europe and smelled: "Oh, look at that, he smells bad!" I went to America nearly forty years ago, and they didn't like it when people smelt bad — everyone had to use deodorants to get rid of the body smells. Please understand this clearly. We don't have to make the body loathsome; we already find it loathsome. Normally we can't see the inside of the body, so now we have a look at it as part of our meditation practice. Take off the skin and start cutting out the parts. Take out the heart and feel it in your hands. Do you find it pleasant? No. It's the same as slaughtering an animal and feeling its quivering intestines in your hand. You don't find this pleasant, but as soon as you throw its parts on a barbecue, you think they taste and smell delicious.

I hope by now this is clear. We don't have to make the body disgusting, because we already find it disgusting. All we have to do is look underneath the paper-thin tissue we call skin. Do you understand this now? How many skin care products do you have? How many do you smear on your face to moisturise the skin and make it smooth or attractive? How many deodorants or

perfumes do you use to get rid of the odour of the body? How many different shampoos do you use to make your hair light and buoyant? How many items do you use to get rid of the dirt that comes from the body? These are things that most people don't want to understand. Let me put it like this. Suppose someone showed you a lovely car, let's say a Mercedes or a Rolls-Royce, but only showed the area around the dirty engine. You wouldn't like it, would you? You wouldn't be able to distinguish between a Rolls-Royce, a Mercedes and a Fiat, for their engines are all dirty and full of oil. But the moment you get into the passenger seat, or admire the structure and style of the car, you think the car is impressive and the seats comfortable. We look at the body in the same way.

So, to further your spiritual development, to cut the next two fetters of greed and hate and become an *Anāgāmī*, you have to get rid of your attachment to the body. Yes, the body is a nice tool, but you have to see it as just a tool. It's not you, it's not me, it's not mine, it's not myself. When we die we have to leave the tools and the toolbox behind. It's the same as having a nice car that breaks down. How long can you drive it? Not for very long nowadays; when I was young, you could drive a car for twenty years before it really broke down and went into the scrap-yard. However, when your car breaks down and becomes irreparable, you don't sit in it and cry, "Oh, this poor car, this poor car!", and wait until it rots away, do you? As soon as it doesn't drive any more, you open the door, get out, and go off to buy the next car. And what happens when the body dies and the *citta* is released from it? It looks for the next body, because it loves having one. The *citta* loves having bodies so much that it can't get enough of them.

Every one of you knows this. If you listen to a catchy song, you can't get enough of it. You repeat it over and over and over and over again, until you find another catchy tune, and then you repeat that over and over again. We go from one human life to another life, forgetting all the billions or trillions of lives that

we've already been through. If we could look at all our lives from a bird's-eye perspective, we'd see how boring it all was and how much *dukkha* we experienced in each of these lives. It would actually be quite a sobering exercise. Do you understand now? How many more lives do you want to live? Ask yourself. And if you don't want to have any more lives, then make an end of it all, or at least start by becoming a *Sotāpanna*. I've explained how to do it, so get to work.

Your home is not a forest university. It's a nice comfortable space where you can do all the things you like, and where you don't have to see all the things you don't like. So, as long as you're here, use the time wisely and put all your effort into the practice, because you can't practise like this at home.

Glossary & Appendix

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 *citta* 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 (see page 252). It is the third of the four stages of the noble path culminating in *Arahantship*.
Ānāpānasati	Awareness 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 (Discourses) 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 *citta* 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 the *citta* 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 practise 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 (*ariya*) truth (*sacca*); 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*.
Ariyo-aṭṭhangiko-maggo	The noble eight-fold path, which leads to *Nibbāna*, and comprises right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), right thought (*sammā-sankappo*), right speech (*sammā-vāca*), right action (*sammā-kammanto*), right livelihood (*sammā-ājivo*), right effort (*sammā-vāyamo*), right awareness (*sammā-sati*) and right concentration (*sammā-sāmadhi*). Each of these steps has many facets, and has a subtle, intricate relationship to the others.

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. *Āsavas* are born out of 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 (see page 252).
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 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 (including the brain).
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 (see page 252).
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.
Dosa	Hatred or ill-will.
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.

Ehipassiko	An invitation to come and see to know for yourself. *Ehipassiko* is a traditional epithet for the Dhamma.
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* (see page 252).
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 practising Buddhist monk, namely, the training of *sati* and *samādhi*, and the contemplation of certain meditation themes that are conducive to uprooting the defiling forces of greed, hatred and delusion from his *citta*.
Karuṇā	Compassion; the wish that others be free of suffering. It is one of the four *brahmavihāras*, along with *mettā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā*.

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 stage of *samādhi* 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 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 noble eight-fold path (*see ariyo-aṭṭhangiko-maggo*) leading to *Nibbāna*, When it is used in the phrase "*magga, phala and Nibbāna*", *magga* refers to the four path moments 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. The *Majjhima Nikāya* is the book of Middle Length Sayings (Discourses) in the *Pāli* Canon.
Māna	Conceit.
Māra	Temptation; the evil one, the personification of evil or the devil.
Mettā	Friendliness, pure love, loving kindness.
Moha	Delusion.
Muditā	Gladness at the wellbeing of others. It is one of the four *brahmavihāras*, along with *mettā, karuṇā* and *upekkhā*.
Nāma	Literally, "name", as in *nāma-rūpa* (name and form), one of the links in the *paṭiccasamuppāda*. It is also used to refer to the mental components of personality (*nāma-khandhas*), which include feelings, memory, thought and consciousness, in contrast to *rūpa-khandha* which is the strictly physical component.
Nibbāna	Literally, "extinguished"; liberation; the release of the *citta* from mental outflows (*āsava*) and the ten 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; it is the deathless, a state without conditioned aspects, beyond space and time.

Nimitta	A sign; a mental image, usually visual, that normally arises in meditation practice.
Nirodhā	Cessation. The cessation of *dukkha* is the third of the four noble truths.
Nīvaraṇa	Hindrance. The five hindrances to meditation are sensual desire; anger and ill will; sloth and torpor; restlessness; and worry and doubt.
Pāli	The ancient language in which Theravāda 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.
Pāramīs	Ten virtues to be perfected to become a Buddha; spiritual practices conducive to liberation. In Thailand, the term *pāramī* refers to virtues and spiritual techniques which one has trained for lifetimes and which then form the basis of one's practice in this life.
Parikamma	A preparatory meditation object. The most common *parikammas* are the inflow and outflow of the breath around the tip of 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 (see page 252).
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 components), *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* (access *samādhi*) 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 thirty-one planes or realms of existence 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 (see page 252). 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 (see Appendix).
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, truly objective seeing. A moment of *sati* is a moment without *kilesas*. *Sati* is often mistranslated as mindfulness.
Satipaṭṭhāna	The practice and method of developing *sati*. It usually refers to the four foundations of *sati* (or awareness) — 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* (see page 252).
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.
Ti–lakkhaṇa	The three characteristics of existence that are invariably found to be natural to all phenomena, namely, impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and not-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*).
Tudong	(Thai) The practice of wandering in forests, usually alone, to cultivate meditation practice. It is one of the ascetic practices (*dhutangas*) practised by Buddhist monks.
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 *citta* 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*[1] are a list of ten factors or fetters that bind people to the endless round of birth and death. They are:

1. *Vicikicchā*: doubt of a sceptical nature based on delusion. This includes doubt that heaven and hell exist, and doubt about *kamma* and rebirth.
2. *Sīlabbata-parāmāsa*: inconsistency in keeping the moral precepts. It is often translated as "attachment to rules and

rituals", but this is incorrect, for the word *sīla* refers to morality and moral precepts.

3. *Sakkāya-diṭṭhi*: the belief that the body (*kāya*) is self.
4. *Kāma-rāga*: craving for sense desires. Although this is a correct translation, amongst those who practise the main emphasis is on sexual craving and all that proliferates from it.
5. *Vyāpāda*: ill-will, malevolence.
6. *Rūpa-rāga*: attachment to or craving for form; the desire for the exalted states of the *rūpa* realms.
7. *Arūpa-rāga*: attachment to or craving for non-form; the desire for the exalted states of the *arūpa* realms.
8. *Māna*: conceit; the belief that one is better, worse or equal to others.
9. *Uddhacca*: restlessness. This term does not refer to worldly restlessness but to a very subtle kind of wanting to do something.
10. *Avijjā*: blind unknowing; blinding ignorance; wanting to know but not being able to know in line with the truth.

The fundamental mover, the so-called "will", lies hidden in both the ninth and tenth fetters. It is mainly hidden in the ninth, but its most subtle aspect is hidden in the tenth. In the final stages of practice, a person can be blinded by the extreme brightness of *avijjā*, yet there remains the very subtle will to overcome *avijjā*. It is only after overcoming *avijjā* that the will to do something or know something disappears.

These ten fetters are overcome progressively. Thus the *Sotāpanna* has overcome the first three; the *Sakadāgāmī* has reduced the fourth and fifth; the *Anāgāmī* has overcome the first five; and the *Arahant* has overcome all ten fetters.

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1. The first three fetters are usually listed with *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* as the first, but Ajahn Martin prefers to place *vicikicchā* as the first fetter because doubt is a fundamental problem for many of his students and a particular problem for Westerners.

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.

Descriptively, the five *khandhas* can be thought of as a toolbox that either the *kilesas* or the Dhamma, which both reside within the *citta*, can use to their advantage or as a playground.

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 in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries 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, etc.,; 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 just means memory, and this is universally accepted by both scholars and those who practise meditation.

Not enough thought has been given to the overwhelming importance of memory. This should be clear to anyone who understands 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 Five Precepts (*Pañca-Sīla*)

The five precepts are the rules of training observed by all lay Buddhists who practise the Dhamma. The precepts are often recited along with the three refuges (Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha) in a formal ceremony. In the Theravāda tradition, lay Buddhists visiting temples during *uposatha* (lunar observance) days will often observe an additional three precepts — making

eight precepts in all – and on these occasions the third precept is strengthened to require the strict abstinence from all sexual activity.

1. To refrain from killing and harming living creatures. Every living being values its own life, so no one should destroy that intrinsic value by taking the life of another creature.
2. To refrain from taking things not given. All beings cherish their own possessions. Regardless of its worth, nothing belonging to another person should be debased by theft or taking without permission.
3. To refrain from sexual misconduct. This precept relates to all forms of illicit sex, not just adultery. It means being faithful to a spouse or partner, and not using one's power over dependent people for one's sexual pleasure. This includes the power teachers have over students, parents over children, employers over employees, and so on.
4. To refrain from untruthful or harsh speech. As well as lies and deceit which destroy other people's trust, this precept includes slander and speech not beneficial to the welfare of others, and it also includes white lies.
5. To abstain from intoxicating drinks and drugs which lead to heedlessness. Alcohol and drugs increase delusion, and damage physical and mental health. They also make people do things they later regret, such as breaking the other four precepts.

The Lord Buddha gave the five precepts to the laypeople as their protection. If they don't keep them, they are sure to spiral down and down, to the animal, ghost (*peta*), demon (*asura*) or hell realms. Keeping them, however, ensures wholesome results in this and future lives, for good *kamma* is the best insurance policy.

The Thirty-One Realms of Existence

	Realm	Cause of rebirth	
The Immaterial World *(arūpa-loka)*			
31	Neither-perception-nor-non-perception *(nevasaññānāsaññāyatanupaga deva)*	8th (*arūpa*) *jhāna*	
30	Nothingness *(ākiñcaññāyatanupaga deva)*	7th (*arūpa*) *jhāna*	
29	Infinite consciousness *(viññāṇañcāyatanupaga deva)*	6th (*arūpa*) *jhāna*	
28	Infinite space *(ākāsānañcāyatanupaga deva)*	5th (*arūpa*) *jhāna*	
The Fine-Material World *(rūpa-loka)*			
27	Peerless *devas (akaniṭṭha deva)*	Attachment to *avijjā*	
26	Clear-sighted *devas (sudassi deva)*	Remaining subtle restlessness	
25	Beautiful *devas (sudassa deva)*	Remaining subtle conceit	
24	Untroubled *devas (atappa deva)*	Attachment to non-form	
23	*Devas* not falling away *(aviha deva)*	Attachment to form	
22	Unconscious beings *(asaññasattā)*	4th (*rūpa*) *jhāna*	
21	Very fruitful *devas (vehapphala deva)*		
20	*Devas* of refulgent glory *(subhakiṇṇa deva)*	3rd (*rūpa*) *jhāna*	
19	*Devas* of unbounded glory *(appamāṇāsubha deva)*		
18	*Devas* of limited glory *(parittāsubha deva)*		
17	*Devas* of streaming radiance *(ābhassara deva)*	2nd (*rūpa*) *jhāna*	
16	*Devas* of unbounded radiance *(appamāṇābha deva)*		
15	*Devas* of limited radiance *(parittābha deva)*		
14	Great *Brahmas (Mahā brahma)*	1st (*rūpa*) *jhāna*	
13	Ministers of *Brahma (brahma-purohitā deva)*		
12	Retinue of *Brahma (brahma-pārisajjā deva)*		

	Source in the *suttas*	Description
	Majjhima Nikāya 121	The realms of the Immaterial World are accessible to those passing away while meditating on the formless (*arūpa*) *jhānas* (*jhānas* 5–8 for realms 28–31, respectively). The inhabitants have *cittas* but no physical form or location, and are unable to hear Dhamma teachings.
	Anguttara Nikāya 3.86 & 4.124	Realms 23–27 (the Pure Abodes or *suddhāvāsa*) are accessible only to the *Anāgāmī*, a person who has abandoned the five lower fetters (*saṁyojana*) that bind the *citta* to the cycle of rebirth. On exiting the 27th realm, the *Anāgāmī* enters *Nibbāna*.
	Anguttara Nikāya 5.28	The inhabitants of realms 12–22 experience extremely refined degrees of mental pleasure. They are said to possess exceedingly refined bodies of pure light. These realms are accessible to those who have attained at least some level of *jhāna* (from the first to the fourth *rūpa jhāna*), and have therefore managed to suppress hatred and ill-will, at least temporarily. Meditation on the four *brahmavihāras* is said to lead to rebirth in the *Brahma* realms. Thus, *upekkhā* (equanimity) leads to realm 21; *muditā* (empathetic joy) to realm 20; *karuṇā* (compassion) to realm 17; and *mettā* (loving-kindness) to realm 12.
	Anguttara Nikāya 4.123 & 5.28	
	Anguttara Nikāya 4.123 & 5.28	
	Dīgha Nikāya 11; *Anguttara Nikāya* 4.123	

The Thirty-One Realms of Existence (continued)

	Realm	Cause of rebirth	
The World of Sensuality (*kāma-loka*)			
11	*Devas* wielding power over the creation of others *(paranimmita-vasavatti deva)*	Abstaining from the ten unwholesome actions[1] and cultivating their opposite, namely, generosity, respect and gratitude, as well as virtue and wisdom	
10	*Devas* delighting in creation *(nimmānarati deva)*		
9	Contented *devas (tusita deva)*		
8	*Yāma devas (yāma deva)*		
7	The thirty-three Gods *(tāvatimsa deva)*		
6	*Devas* of the four great kings *(cātumahārājika deva)*		
5	Human beings *(manussa loka)*	Keeping the five moral precepts and developing virtue and wisdom	
4	Demons (*asura*)	Ten unwholesome actions[1]; lack of virtue; holding wrong views	
3	Hungry ghosts/shades *(peta loka)*		
2	Animals *(tiracchāna yoni)*		
1	Hell *(niraya)*	Ten unwholesome actions[1]; lack of virtue; holding wrong views; committing any of the five heinous deeds[2]	

Source: Access to Insight (www.accesstoinsight.org)

1 The **ten unwholesome actions** leading to states of deprivation comprise killing, taking what is not given, and misconduct in sexual desires (bodily actions); false, malicious and harsh speech, and gossip (verbal actions); and covetousness, ill-will and wrong views (mental actions).

	Source in the *suttas*	Description
	Majjhima Nikāya 41; *Anguttara Nikāya* 7.49 & 10.177	The World of Sensuality contains beings whose experience (pleasurable and not pleasurable) is dominated by the five senses. Realms 5 (human realm) to 11 are considered favourable destinations. The attainment of *Sotāpanna* is the guarantee that all rebirths in future will be in the human or *deva* realms.
	Anguttara Nikāya 10.177	The human realm is also considered to be the gateway or springboard out of *saṁsarā*.
	Majjhima Nikāya 12 & 41; *Anguttara Nikāya* 10.177 *Majjhima Nikāya* 12 & 41; *Anguttara Nikāya* 5.129	Realms 1–4 are termed states of deprivation *(apāya)*, as they are unhappy and filled with *dukkha*. Hell consists of eight major regions (each with subdivisions), the deepest being the great Hell of *Avīci*. Beings in hell suffer indescribable torments and anguish.

2 The **five heinous deeds** are killing one's mother; killing one's father; killing an *Arahant*; maliciously wounding a Buddha so that his blood is spilt; and instigating a schism in the monastic Sangha. Each of these five deeds leads to hell for around a hundred and fifty thousand years.