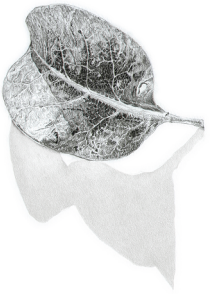
NOW IS THE KNOWING

Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha | Anapanasati | Happiness, Unhappiness, Nibanna

AJAHN SUMEDHO



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Published by:

Aruna Publications,
Aruna Ratanagiri Buddhist Monastery,
2 Harnham Hall Cottages,
Harnham, Belsay,
Northumberland, NE20 0HF
UK

Contact Aruna Publications at www.aruno.org
This book is available for free download at
www.forestsanghapublications.org

ISBN 978-0-9568113-5-6

Cover photo by Chinch Gryniewicz.

Leaf drawing by Scott Charles Leichhardt Hollingsworth.

Produced with the LaTeX typesetting system. The body-text is typeset in Gentium, distributed with the SIL Open Font Licence by SIL International.

Third edition, 10,000 copies, printed in Malaysia – 2011

Printed in Malaysia by Bolden Trade.

"The past is a memory.
The future is the unknown.
Now is the knowing."

AJAHN SUMEDHO

We would like to acknowledge the support
of many people in the preparation of this book,
especially to the Kataññutā Group of Malaysia, Singapore
and Australia, for bringing it into production.

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BUDDHA, DHAMMA, SAṄGHA

When people ask, 'What do you have to do to become a Buddhist?', we say that we take refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha. And to take refuge we recite a formula in the Pāḷi language:

Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi
I go to the Buddha for refuge

Dhammaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi
I go to the Dhamma for refuge

Saṅghaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi
I go to the Saṅgha for refuge.

As we practise more and more and begin to realize the profundity of the Buddhist teachings, it becomes a real joy

to take these refuges, and even just their recitation inspires the mind. After twenty-two years as a monk, I still like to chant '*Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi*' – in fact I like it more than I did twenty-one years ago, because then it didn't really mean anything to me, I just chanted it because I had to, because it was part of the tradition. Merely taking refuge verbally in the Buddha doesn't mean you take refuge in anything: a parrot could be trained to say '*Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi*', and it would probably be as meaningful to a parrot as it is to many Buddhists. These words are for reflection, looking at them and actually investigating what they mean: what 'refuge' means, what 'Buddha' means. When we say, 'I take refuge in the Buddha,' what do we mean by that? How can we use that so it is not just a repetition of nonsense syllables, but something that really helps to remind us, gives us direction and increases our devotion, our dedication to the path of the Buddha?

The word 'Buddha' is a lovely word – it means 'the one who knows' – and the first refuge is in Buddha as the personification of wisdom. Un-personified wisdom remains too abstract for us: we can't conceive a bodiless, soul-less wisdom, and so as wisdom always seems to have a personal quality to it, using Buddha as its symbol is very useful.

We can use the word Buddha to refer to Gotama, the founder of what is now known as Buddhism, the historical sage who attained *Parinibbāna* in India 2,500 years ago, the teacher of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, teachings from which we still benefit today. But when we take

refuge in the Buddha, it doesn't mean that we take refuge in some historical prophet, but in that which is wise in the universe, in our minds, that which is not separate from us but is more real than anything we can conceive with the mind or experience through the senses. Without any Buddha-wisdom in the universe, life for any length of time would be totally impossible; it is the Buddha-wisdom that protects. We call it Buddha-wisdom; other people can call it other things if they want, these are just words. We happen to use the words of our tradition. We're not going to argue about Pāḷi words, Sanskrit words, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, English or any other words, we're just using the term Buddha-wisdom as a conventional symbol to help remind us to be wise, to be alert, to be awake.

Many forest bhikkhus in the North-East of Thailand use the word 'Buddho' as their meditation object. They use it as a kind of *koan*. Firstly, they calm the mind by following the inhalations and exhalations using the syllables BUD-DHO, and then begin to contemplate, 'What is Buddho, the "one who knows"? What is the knowing?'

When I used to travel around the North-East of Thailand on *tudong* (journeying), I liked to go and stay at the monastery of Ajahn Fun. Ajahn Fun was a much-loved and deeply respected monk, the teacher of the Royal Family, and he was so popular that he was constantly receiving guests. I would sit at his *kuṭī* (hut) and hear him give the most amazing kind of Dhamma talks, all on the subject of 'Buddho' – as far as I could see, it was all that he taught. He could make it into a really profound meditation, whether for an illiterate farmer or an

elegant, western-educated Thai aristocrat. The main part of his teaching was not just mechanically to repeat 'Buddho', but to reflect and investigate, to awaken the mind really to look into the 'Buddho', 'the one who knows', really investigate its beginning, its end, above and below, so that one's whole attention was stuck onto it. When one did that, 'Buddho' became something that echoed through the mind. One would investigate it, look at it, examine it before it was said and after it was said, and eventually one would start listening to it and hear beyond the sound, until one heard the silence.

A refuge is a place of safety, and so when superstitious people would come to my teacher Ajahn Chah, wanting charmed medallions or little talismans to protect them from bullets, knives, ghosts and so on, he would say, 'Why do you want things like that? The only real protection is taking refuge in the Buddha. Taking refuge in the Buddha is enough.' But their faith in Buddha usually wasn't quite as much as their faith in those silly little medallions. They wanted something made out of bronze and clay, stamped and blessed. This is what is called taking refuge in bronze and clay, taking refuge in superstition, taking refuge in that which is truly unsafe and cannot really help us.

Today in modern Britain we find that generally people are more sophisticated. They don't take refuge in magic charms, they take refuge in things like the Westminster Bank – but that is still taking refuge in something that offers no safety. Taking refuge in the Buddha, in wisdom, means that we have a place of safety. When there is wisdom, when we act wisely

and live wisely, we are truly safe. The conditions around us might change. We can't guarantee what will happen to the material standard of living, or that the Westminster Bank will survive the decade. The future remains unknown and mysterious, but in the present, by taking refuge in the Buddha we have that presence of mind now to reflect on and learn from life as we live it.

Wisdom doesn't mean having a lot of knowledge about the world; we don't have to go to university and collect information about the world to be wise. Wisdom means knowing the nature of conditions as we're experiencing them. It is not just being caught up in reacting to and absorbing into the conditions of our bodies and minds out of habit, out of fear, worry, doubt, greed and so on, but it is using that 'Buddho', that 'one who knows,' to observe that these conditions are changing. It is the knowing of that change that we call Buddha and in which we take refuge. We make no claims to Buddha as being 'me' or 'mine'. We don't say, 'I am Buddha,' but rather, 'I take refuge in Buddha.' It is a way of humbly submitting to that wisdom, being aware, being awake.

Although in one sense taking refuge is something we are doing all the time, the Pāḷi formula we use is a reminder – because we forget, because we habitually take refuge in worry, doubt, fear, anger, greed and so on. The Buddha-image is similar; when we bow to it we don't imagine that it is anything other than a bronze image, a symbol. It is a reflection and makes us a little more aware of Buddha, of our refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha. The Buddha image sits in great

dignity and calm, not in a trance but fully alert, with a look of wakefulness and kindness, not caught in the changing conditions around it. Though the image is made of brass, and we have these flesh-and-blood bodies and it is much more difficult for us, still it is a reminder. Some people get very puritanical about Buddha-images, but here in the West I haven't found them to be a danger. The real idols that we believe in and worship, and that constantly delude us, are our thoughts, views and opinions, our loves and hates, our self-conceit and pride.

The second refuge is in the Dhamma, in ultimate truth or ultimate reality. Dhamma is impersonal; we don't in any way try to personify it, to make it any kind of personal deity. When we chant the verse on Dhamma in Pāḷi, we say it is *'sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassiko opanayiko paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi'*. As Dhamma has no personal attributes, we can't even say it is good or bad, or anything that has any superlative or comparative quality; it is beyond the dualistic conceptions of mind.

So when we describe Dhamma or give an impression of it, we do it through words such as *'sandiṭṭhiko'*, which means immanent, here-and-now. That brings us back into the present; we feel a sense of immediacy, of now. You may think that Dhamma is some kind of thing that is 'out there', something you have to find elsewhere, but *sandiṭṭhikodhamma* means that it is immanent, here-and-now.

Akālikadhamma means that Dhamma is not bound by any time condition. The word *akāla* means timeless. Our conceptual mind can't conceive of anything that is timeless, because

our conceptions and perceptions are time-based conditions, but what we can say is that Dhamma is *akāla*, not bound by time.

Ehipassikadhamma means to come and see, to turn towards or go to the Dhamma. It means to look, to be aware. It is not that we pray to the Dhamma to come, or wait for it to tap us on the shoulder; we have to put forth effort. It is like Christ's saying, 'Knock on the door and it shall be opened.' *Ehipassiko* means that we have to put forward that effort, to turn towards that truth.

Opanayiko means leading inwards, towards peace within the mind. Dhamma doesn't take us into fascination, into excitement, romance or adventure, but leads to Nibbāna, to calm, to silence.

Paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi means that we can only know Dhamma through direct experience. It is like the taste of honey – if someone else tastes it, we still don't know its flavour. We may know the chemical formula or be able to recite all the great poetry ever written about honey, but only when we taste it for ourselves do we really know what it is like. It is the same with Dhamma: we have to taste it, we have to know it directly.

Taking refuge in Dhamma is taking another safe refuge. It is not taking refuge in philosophy or intellectual concepts, in theories, in ideas, in doctrines or beliefs of any sort. It is not taking refuge in a belief in Dhamma, or a belief in God, or in some kind of force in outer space or something beyond or something separate, something that we have to

find some time later. The descriptions of the Dhamma keep us in the present, in the here and now, unbound by time. Taking refuge is an immediate, immanent reflection in the mind; it is not just repeating '*Dhammaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi*' like a parrot, thinking, 'Buddhists say this so I have to say it.' We turn towards the Dhamma, we are aware now, take refuge in Dhamma now, as an immediate action, an immediate reflection of being the Dhamma, being that very truth.

Because our conceiving mind tends always to delude us, it takes us into becoming. We think, 'I'll practise meditation so that I'll become enlightened in the future. I will take the Three Refuges in order to become a Buddhist. I want to become wise. I want to get away from suffering and ignorance and become something else.' This is the conceiving mind, the desire mind, the mind that always deludes us. Rather than constantly thinking in terms of becoming something, we take refuge in being Dhamma in the present.

The impersonality of Dhamma bothers many people, because devotional religion tends to personify everything and people coming from such traditions don't feel right if they can't have some sort of personal relationship with it. I remember one time a French Catholic missionary came to stay in our monastery and practise meditation. He felt at something of a loss with Buddhism because he said it was like 'cold surgery', there was no personal relationship with God. One cannot have a personal relationship with Dhamma, one cannot say 'Love the Dhamma!' or 'The Dhamma loves me!'; there is no need for that. We only need a personal relationship with

something we are not, like our mother, father, husband or wife, something separate from us. But we don't need to take refuge in mother or father, someone to protect us and love us and say, 'I love you no matter what you do. Everything is going to be all right', and pat us on the head. The Buddha-Dhamma is a very maturing refuge, it is a religious practice that is a complete sanity or maturity, in which we are no longer seeking a mother or father, because we don't need to become anything any more. We don't need to be loved or protected by anyone any more, because we can love and protect others, and that is all that is important. We no longer have to ask or demand things from others, whether from other people or even some deity or force that we feel is separate from us and has to be prayed to and asked for guidance. We give up all our attempts to conceive Dhamma as being this or that or anything at all, and let go of our desire to have a personal relationship with the truth. We have to be that truth, here and now. Being that truth, taking that refuge, calls for an immediate awakening, for being wise now, being Buddha, being Dhamma in the present.

The third refuge is Saṅgha, which means a group. 'Saṅgha' may be the *Bhikkhu-Saṅgha*, the order of monks, or the *Ariya-Saṅgha*, the group of Noble Beings, all those who live virtuously, doing good and refraining from evil with bodily action and speech. Here, taking refuge in the Saṅgha with '*Saṅghaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi*' means we take refuge in virtue, in that which is good, virtuous, kind, compassionate and generous. We don't take refuge in those things in our minds that are

mean, nasty, cruel, selfish, jealous, hateful, angry – even though admittedly that is what we often tend to do out of heedlessness, out of not reflecting, not being awake, but just reacting to conditions. Taking refuge in the Saṅgha means, on the conventional level, doing good and refraining from doing evil by bodily action or speech.

All of us have both good thoughts and intentions and bad ones. Saṅkhāras (conditioned phenomena) are like that: some are good and some aren't, some are neutral, some are wonderful and some are nasty. Conditions in the world are changing conditions. We can't just think the best, the most refined thoughts and feel only the best and the kindest feelings; both good and bad thoughts and feelings come and go, but we take refuge in virtue rather than in hatred. We take refuge in that in all of us that intends to do good, that is compassionate and kind and loving towards ourselves and others.

So the refuge of Saṅgha is a very practical refuge for day-to-day living within the human form, within this body, in relation to the bodies of other beings and the physical world that we live in. When we take this refuge we do not act in any way that causes division, disharmony, cruelty, meanness or unkindness to any living being, including ourself, our own body and mind. This is being '*supaṭipanno*', one who practises well.

When we are aware and mindful, when we reflect and observe, we begin to see that acting on impulses that are cruel and selfish only brings harm and misery to ourself as well as to others. It doesn't take any great powers of observation to see that. If you've met any criminals in your life, people who

have acted selfishly and evilly, you'll find them constantly frightened, obsessed, paranoid, suspicious, having to drink a lot, take drugs, keep busy, do all kinds of things, because living with themselves is so horrible. Five minutes alone with themselves without any dope or drink or anything would seem to them like eternal hell, because the kammic result of evil is so appalling mentally. Even if they're never caught by the police or sent to prison, don't think they're going to get away with anything. In fact, sometimes that is the kindest thing, to put them in prison and punish them; it makes them feel better. I was never a criminal, but I have managed to tell a few lies and do a few mean and nasty things in my lifetime, and the results were always unpleasant. Even today when I think of those things, it is not a pleasant memory, it is not something that I want to go to announce to everybody, not something that I feel joy when I think about it.

When we meditate we realize that we have to be completely responsible for how we live. In no way can we blame anyone else for anything at all. Before I started to meditate I used to blame people and society: 'If only my parents had been completely wise, enlightened arahants, I would be all right. If only the United States of America had a truly wise, compassionate government that never made any mistakes, supported me completely and appreciated me fully. If only my friends were wise and encouraging and the teachers truly wise, generous and kind. If everyone around me was perfect, if society was perfect, if the world was wise and perfect, then I wouldn't have any of these problems. But all have failed

me.' My parents had a few flaws and they did make a few mistakes, but now when I look back on it they didn't make very many. At the time when I was looking to blame others and I was desperately trying to think of the faults of my parents, I really had to work at it. My generation was very good at blaming everything on the United States, and that is a really easy one because the United States makes a lot of mistakes. But when we meditate it means we can no longer get away with that kind of lying to ourselves. We suddenly realize that no matter what anyone else has done, or how unjust the society might be or what our parents might have been like, we can in no way spend the rest of our lives blaming anyone else – that is a complete waste of time. We have to accept complete responsibility for our life, and live it. Even if we did have miserable parents, were raised in a terrible society with no opportunities, it still doesn't matter. There is no one else to blame for our suffering now but ourselves, our own ignorance, selfishness and conceit.

In the crucifixion of Jesus we can see a brilliant example of a man in pain, stripped naked, made fun of, completely humiliated and then publicly executed in the most horrible, excruciating way, yet without blaming anyone: 'Forgive them, Lord, they know not what they do.' This is a sign of wisdom – it means that even if people are crucifying us, nailing us to the cross, scourging us, humiliating us in every way, it is our aversion, self-pity, pettiness and selfishness that are the problem, the suffering. It is not even the physical pain that is the suffering, it is the aversion. Now if Jesus Christ

had said, 'Curse you for treating me like this!', he would have been just another criminal and would have been forgotten a few days later.

Reflect on this, because we tend easily to blame others for our suffering, and we can justify it because maybe other people are mistreating us, or exploiting us, or don't understand us or are doing dreadful things to us. We're not denying that, but we make nothing of it any more. We forgive, we let go of those memories, because taking refuge in Saṅgha means, here and now, doing good and refraining from doing evil by bodily action and speech.

So may you reflect on this and really see Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha as a refuge. Look on them as opportunities for reflection and consideration. It is not a matter of believing in Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha – not a faith in concepts, but the using of symbols for mindfulness, for awakening the mind here and now; being here and now.

2

ĀNĀPĀNASATI

We tend to overlook the ordinary. We are usually only aware of our breath when it's abnormal, like if we have asthma or when we've been running hard. But with *ānāpānasati* we take our ordinary breath as the meditation object. We don't try to make the breath long or short, or control it in any way, but simply to stay with the normal inhalation and exhalation. The breath is not something that we create or imagine; it is a natural process of our bodies that continues as long as life lasts, whether we concentrate on it or not. So it is an object that is always present; we can turn to it at any time. We don't have to have any qualifications to watch our breath. We do not even need to be particularly intelligent – all we have to do is to be content with, and aware of, one inhalation and exhalation. Wisdom does not come from studying great theories and philosophies, but from observing the ordinary.

The breath lacks any exciting quality or anything fascinating about it, and so we can become very restless and averse to it. Our desire is always to 'get' something, to find something that will interest and absorb us without any effort on our part. If we hear some music, we don't think, 'I must concentrate on this fascinating and exciting rhythmic music'; we can't stop ourselves, because the rhythm is so compelling that it pulls us in. The rhythm of our normal breathing is not interesting or compelling; it is tranquillizing, and most beings aren't used to tranquillity. Most people like the idea of peace, but find the actual experience of it disappointing or frustrating. They desire stimulation, something that will draw them into itself. With *ānāpānasati* we stay with an object that is quite neutral – we don't have any strong feelings of liking or disliking for our breath – and just note the beginning of an inhalation, its middle and its end, then the beginning of an exhalation, its middle and end. The gentle rhythm of the breath, being slower than the rhythm of thought, takes us to tranquillity; we begin to stop thinking. But we don't try to get anything from the meditation, to get *samādhi* or get *jhāna*, because when the mind is trying to achieve or attain things, rather than just being humbly content with one breath, then it doesn't slow down and become calm, and we become frustrated.

At first the mind wanders off. Once we are aware that we have wandered off the breath, then we very gently return to it. We use the attitude of being very, very patient and always willing to begin again. Our minds are not used to being

held down; they have been taught to associate one thing with another and form opinions about everything. Being accustomed to using our intelligence and ability to think in clever ways, we tend to become very tense and restless when we can't do that, and when we practise *ānāpānasati* we feel resistance, a resentment of it. We are like a wild horse when it is first harnessed, getting angry with the things that bind it.

When the mind wanders we get upset and discouraged, negative and averse to the whole thing. If out of frustration, we try by sheer will to force the mind to be tranquil, we can only keep it up for a short while and then the mind is off somewhere else. So the right attitude to *ānāpānasati* is being very patient, having all the time in the world, letting go or discarding all worldly, personal or financial problems. During this time there is nothing we have to do except watch our breath.

If the mind wanders on the in-breath, then put more effort into the inhalation. If the mind wanders on the exhalation, then put more effort into that. Keep bringing it back. Always be willing to start anew. At the start of each new day, at the beginning of each inhalation, cultivate the beginner's mind, carrying nothing from the old to the new, leaving no traces, like a big bonfire.

One inhalation and the mind wanders, so we bring it back again – and that itself is a moment of mindfulness. We are training the mind like a good mother trains her child. A little child doesn't know what it is doing; it just wanders off; and if the mother gets angry with it and spanks and beats it, the child becomes terrified and neurotic. A good mother will just

leave the child, keeping an eye on it, and if it wanders she will bring it back. Having that kind of patience, we're not trying to bash away at ourselves, hating ourselves, hating our breath, hating everybody, getting upset because we can't get tranquil with *ānāpānasati*.

Sometimes we get too serious about everything, totally lacking in joy and happiness, with no sense of humour, just repressing everything. Gladden the mind, put a smile on your dial! Be relaxed and at ease, without the pressure of having to achieve anything special – nothing to attain, no big deal, nothing special. And what can you say you have done today to earn your board and keep? Just one mindful inhalation? Crazy! But that is more than most people can say of their day.

We're not battling the forces of evil. If you feel averse to *ānāpānasati*, then note that too. Don't feel it's something you have to do, but let it be a pleasure, something you really enjoy doing. When you think 'I can't do it', recognize that as resistance, fear or frustration and then relax. Don't make this practice into a difficult thing, a burdensome task. When I was first ordained I was dead serious, very grim and solemn about myself, like a dried-up old stick, and I used to get in terrible states, thinking, 'I've got to... I've got to....' At those times I learned to contemplate peace. Doubts and restlessness, discontent and aversion – soon I was able to reflect on peace, saying the word over and over, hypnotizing myself to relax. The self-doubts would start coming – 'I'm getting nowhere with this, it's useless, I want to get something' – and I was able to be peaceful with that. This is one method that you

can use. So when we're tense, we relax and then we resume *ānāpānasati*.

At first we feel hopelessly clumsy, like when we're learning to play the guitar - when we first start playing, our fingers are so clumsy it seems hopeless, but when we've done it for some time we gain skill and it is quite easy. We're learning to witness what's going on in our mind, so we can know when we're getting restless and tense or when we're getting dull. We recognize that: we're not trying to convince ourselves that it's otherwise, we're fully aware of the way things are. We sustain effort for one inhalation. If we can't do that, then we sustain it for half an inhalation at least. In this way we're not trying to become perfect all at once. We don't have to do everything just right according to some idea of how it should be, but we work with the problems that are there. If we have a scattered mind, then it's wisdom to recognize the mind that goes all over the place – that is insight. To think that we shouldn't be that way, to hate ourselves or feel discouraged because that is the way we happen to be – that is ignorance.

We don't start from where a perfect yogi is, we're not doing Iyengar postures before we can bend over and touch our toes. That is the way to ruin ourselves. We may look at all the postures in the *Light on Yoga* book and see Iyengar wrapping his legs around his neck in all kinds of amazing postures, but if we try to do them ourselves they'll cart us off to hospital. So we start from just trying to bend a little more from the waist, examining the pain and resistance to it,

learning to stretch gradually. The same with *ānāpānasati*: we recognize the way it is now and start from there, we sustain our attention a little longer, and we begin to understand what concentration is. Don't make Superman resolutions when you're not Superman. You say, 'I'm going to sit and watch my breath all night,' and then when you fail you become angry. Set periods that you know you can do. Experiment, work with the mind until you know how to put forth effort and how to relax.

We have to learn to walk by falling down. Look at babies: I've never seen one that could walk straightaway. Babies learn to walk by crawling, by holding onto things, by falling down and then pulling themselves up again. It is the same with meditation. We learn wisdom by observing ignorance, by making a mistake, reflecting and keeping going. If we think about it too much, it seems hopeless. If babies thought a lot, they'd never learn to walk, because when you watch a child trying to walk it seems hopeless, doesn't it? When we think about it, meditation can seem completely hopeless, but we just keep doing it. It is easy when we're full of enthusiasm, really inspired with the teacher and the teaching – but enthusiasm and inspiration are impermanent conditions, they take us to disillusionment and boredom.

When we're bored, we really have to put effort into the practice. When we're bored, we want to turn away and be reborn into something fascinating and exciting. But for insight and wisdom, we have to endure patiently through the troughs of disillusionment and depression. It is only in this

way that we can stop reinforcing the cycles of habit, and come to understand cessation, come to know the silence and emptiness of the mind.

If we read books about not putting any effort into things, just letting everything happen in a natural, spontaneous way, then we tend to start thinking that all we have to do is lounge about – and then we lapse into a dull passive state. In my own practice, when I lapsed into dull states I came to see the importance of putting effort into physical posture. I saw that there was no point in making effort in a merely passive way. I would pull the body up straight, push out the chest and put energy into the sitting posture; or else I would do head stands or shoulder stands. Even though in the early days I didn't have a tremendous amount of energy, I still managed to do something requiring effort. I would learn to sustain it for a few seconds and then I would lose it again, but that was better than doing nothing at all.

The more we take the easy way, the path of least resistance, the more we just follow our desires, the more the mind becomes sloppy, heedless and confused. It is easy to think, easier to sit and think all the time than not to think – it is a habit we've acquired. Even the thought, 'I shouldn't think,' is just another thought. To avoid thought we have to be mindful of it, to put forth effort by watching and listening, by being attentive to the flow in our minds. Rather than thinking about our mind, we watch it. Rather than just getting caught in thoughts, we keep recognizing them. Thought is movement, it is energy, it comes and goes, it is not

a permanent condition of the mind. Without evaluating or analyzing, when we simply recognize thought as thought it begins to slow down and stop. This isn't annihilation; this is allowing things to cease. It is compassion. As the habitual obsessive thinking begins to fade, great spaces we never knew were there begin to appear.

We are slowing everything down by absorbing into the natural breath, calming the kammic formations, and this is what we mean by *samatha* or tranquillity: coming to a point of calm. The mind becomes malleable, supple and flexible, and the breathing can become very fine. But we only carry the *samatha* practice to the point of *upacāra samādhi* (approaching concentration), we don't try to absorb completely into the object and enter *jhāna*. At this point we are still aware of both the object and its periphery. The extreme kinds of mental agitation have diminished considerably, but we can still operate using wisdom.

With our wisdom faculty still functioning, we investigate, and this is *vipassanā* – looking into and seeing the nature of whatever we experience, its impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality. *Anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* are not concepts we believe in, but things we can observe. We investigate the beginning of an inhalation and its ending. We observe what a beginning is, not thinking about what it is but observing, aware with bare attention at the beginning of an inhalation and its end. The body breathes all on its own: the in-breath conditions the out-breath and the out-breath conditions the in-breath, we can't control anything.

Breathing belongs to nature, it doesn't belong to us – it is not-self. When we see this we are doing *vipassanā*.

The sort of knowledge we gain from Buddhist meditation is humbling. Ajahn Chah calls it the earth-worm knowledge – it doesn't make you arrogant, it doesn't puff you up, it doesn't make you feel that you are anything, or that you have attained anything. In worldly terms, this practice doesn't seem very important or necessary. Nobody is ever going to write a newspaper headline: 'At eight o'clock this evening Venerable Sumedho had an inhalation'! To some people thinking about how to solve all the world's problems might seem very important - how to help all the people in the Third World, how to set the world right. Compared with these things, watching our breath seems insignificant, and most people think, 'Why waste time doing that?' People have confronted me about this, saying: 'What are you monks doing sitting there? What are you doing to help humanity? You're just selfish, you expect people to give you food while you just sit there and watch your breath. You're running away from the real world.'

But what is the real world? Who is really running away, and from what? What is there to face? We find that what people call the real world is the world they believe in, the world that they are committed to, or the world that they know and are familiar with. But that world is a condition of mind. Meditation is actually confronting the real world, recognizing and acknowledging it as it really is, rather than believing in it or justifying it or trying mentally to annihilate it. Now, the real world operates on the same pattern of arising and

passing as the breath. We're not theorizing about the nature of things, taking philosophical ideas from others and trying to rationalize with them, but by watching our breath we're actually observing the way nature is. When we're watching our breath we're actually watching nature; through understanding the nature of the breath, we can understand the nature of all conditioned phenomena. If we tried to understand all conditioned phenomena in their infinite variety, quality, different time span and so on, it would be too complex; our minds wouldn't be able to handle it. We have to learn from simplicity.

So with a tranquil mind we become aware of the cyclical pattern, we see that all that arises passes away. That cycle is what is called *saṃsāra*, the wheel of birth and death. We observe the 'samsaric' cycle of the breath. We inhale and then we exhale: we can't have only inhalations or only exhalations, the one conditions the other. It would be absurd to think, 'I only want to inhale. I don't want to exhale. I'm giving up exhalation. My life will be just one constant inhalation'. That would be absolutely ridiculous. If I said that to you, you'd think I was crazy; but that is what most people do. How foolish people are when they want only to attach to excitement, pleasure, youth, beauty and vigour. 'I only want beautiful things and I'm not going to have anything to do with the ugly. I want pleasure and delight and creativity, but I don't want any boredom or depression.' It is the same kind of madness as if you were to hear me saying, 'I can't stand inhalations. I'm not going to have them any more.' When we

observe that attachment to beauty, sensual pleasures and love will always lead to despair, then our attitude becomes one of detachment. That doesn't mean annihilation or any desire to destroy, but simply letting go, non-attachment. We don't seek perfection in any part of the cycle, but see that perfection lies in the cycle as a whole: it includes old age, sickness and death. What arises in the uncreated reaches its peak and then returns to the uncreated, and that is perfection.

As we start to see that all saṅkhāras have this pattern of arising and passing away, we begin to go inwards to the unconditioned, the peace of the mind, its silence. We begin to experience *suññatā* or emptiness, which is not oblivion or nothingness, but a clear and vibrant stillness. We can actually turn to the emptiness rather than to the conditions of the breath and mind. Then we have a perspective on the conditions and don't just blindly react to them any more.

There is the conditioned, the unconditioned and the knowing. What is the knowing? Is it memory? Is it consciousness? Is it 'me'? I've never been able to find out, but I can be aware. In Buddhist meditation we stay with the knowing: being aware, being awake, being Buddha in the present, knowing that whatever arises passes away and is not-self. We apply this knowing to everything, both the conditioned and the unconditioned. It is transcending – being awake rather than trying to escape – and it is all in our ordinary activity. We have the four normal postures of sitting, standing, walking and lying down – we don't have to stand on our heads or do back-flips or anything. We use four normal

postures and the ordinary breathing, because we are moving towards that which is most ordinary, the unconditioned. Conditions are extraordinary, but the peace of the mind, the unconditioned, is so ordinary that nobody ever notices it. It is there all the time, but we don't ever notice it because we're attached to the mysterious and the fascinating. We get caught up in the things that arise and pass away, the things that stimulate and depress. We get caught up in the way things seem to be – and forget. But now we're going back to that source in meditation, to that peace, in that position of knowing. Then the world is understood for what it is, and we are no longer deluded by it.

The realization of *saṃsāra* is the condition of Nibbāna. As we recognize the cycles of habit and are no longer deluded by them or their qualities, we realize Nibbāna. The Buddha-knowing is of just two things: the conditioned and the unconditioned. It is an immediate recognition of how things are right now, without grasping or attachment. At this moment we can be aware of the conditions of the mind, feelings in the body, what we're seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling and thinking, and also of the emptiness of the mind. The conditioned and the unconditioned are what we can realize.

So the Buddha's teaching is a very direct teaching. Our practice is not 'to become enlightened', but to be in the knowing, now.

3

HAPPINESS, UNHAPPINESS AND NIBBĀNA

The goal of Buddhist meditation is Nibbāna. We incline towards the peace of Nibbāna and away from the complexities of the sensual realm, the endless cycles of habit. Nibbāna is a goal that can be realized in this lifetime. We don't have to wait until we die to know if it's real.

The senses and the sensual world are the realm of birth and death. Take sight, for instance: it's dependent on so many factors – whether it's day or night, whether or not the eyes are healthy, and so on. Yet we become very attached to the colours, shapes and forms that we perceive with the eyes, and we identify with them. Then there are the ears and sound: when we hear pleasant sounds we seek to hold on to them, and when we hear unpleasant sounds we try to turn away. With smells we seek the pleasure of fragrances and pleasant odours, and try to get away from unpleasant

ones. Also with flavours: we seek delicious tastes and try to avoid bad ones. And with touch: just how much of our life is spent trying to escape from physical discomfort and pain and seeking the delight of physical sensation? Finally there is thought, the discriminative consciousness; it can give us a lot of pleasure or a lot of misery.

These are the senses, the sensual world. It is the compounded world of birth and death. Its very nature is *dukkha*, it is imperfect and unsatisfying. You'll never find perfect happiness, contentment or peace in the sensual world; it will always bring despair and death. The sensual world is unsatisfactory, and so we only suffer from it when we expect it to satisfy us. We suffer from it when we expect more from it than it can possibly give, things like permanent security and happiness, permanent love and safety, hoping that our life will only be one of pleasure and have no pain in it. 'If we could only get rid of sickness and disease and conquer old age.'

I remember 20 years ago in the States people had this great hope that modem science would be able to get rid of all illnesses. They'd say, 'All mental illnesses are due to chemical imbalances. If we can just find the right chemical combinations and inject them into the body, schizophrenia will disappear.' There would be no more headaches or backaches. We would gradually replace all our internal organs with nice plastic ones. I even read an article in an Australian medical journal about how they hoped to conquer old age! As the world's population keeps increasing, we'd keep having more

children and nobody would ever get old and die. Just think what a mess that would be!

The sensual world is unsatisfactory and that's the way it's supposed to be. When we attach to it, it takes us to despair – because attachment means that we want it to be satisfactory, we want it to satisfy us, to make us content, happy and secure. But just notice the nature of happiness – how long can you stay happy? What is happiness? You may think it's how you feel when you get what you want. Someone says something you like to hear, and you feel happy. Someone does something you approve of, and you feel happy. The sun shines and you feel happy. Someone makes nice food and serves it to you, and you're happy. But how long can you stay happy? Do we always have to depend on the sun shining? In England the weather is very changeable: happiness about the sun shining in England is obviously very impermanent and unsatisfactory!

Unhappiness is not getting what we want: wanting it to be sunny when it's cold, wet and rainy; people doing things that we don't approve of; having food that isn't delicious, and so on. Life gets boring and tedious when we're unhappy with it. So happiness and unhappiness are very dependent on getting what we want, or getting what we don't want.

But happiness is the goal of most people's lives; the American constitution, I think, speaks of 'the right to the pursuit of happiness'. Getting what we want, what we think we deserve, becomes our goal in life. But happiness always leads to unhappiness, because it's impermanent. How long can you really be happy? Trying to arrange, control and manipulate con-

ditions so as always to get what we want, always hear what we want to hear, always see what we want to see, so that we never have to experience unhappiness or despair, is a hopeless task. It's impossible, isn't it? Happiness is unsatisfactory, it's *dukkha*. It's not something to depend on or make the goal of life. Happiness will always be disappointing, because it lasts so briefly and then is succeeded by unhappiness. It is always dependent on so many other things. We feel happy when we're healthy, but our human bodies are subject to rapid changes and we can lose that health very quickly. Then we feel terribly unhappy at being sick, at losing the pleasure of feeling energetic and vigorous.

Thus the goal for the Buddhist is not happiness, because we realize that happiness is unsatisfactory. The goal lies away from the sensual world. It is not rejection of the sensual world, but understanding it so well that we no longer seek it as an end in itself. We no longer expect the sensory world to satisfy us. We no longer demand that sensory consciousness be anything other than an existing condition that we can use skilfully according to time and place. We no longer attach to it, or demand that the sense impingement be always pleasant, or feel despair and sorrow when it's unpleasant. Nibbāna isn't a state of blankness, a trance where you're totally wiped out. It's not nothingness or annihilation: it's like a space. It's going into the space of your mind where you no longer attach, where you're no longer deluded by the appearance of things. You are no longer demanding anything from the sensory world. You are just recognizing it as it arises and passes away.

Being born in the human condition means that we must inevitably experience old age, sickness and death. One time a young woman came to our monastery in England with her baby. The baby had been badly ill for about a week with a horrible racking cough. The mother looked totally depressed and miserable. As she sat there in the reception room holding the baby, it fumed red in the face and started screaming and coughing horribly. The woman said, 'Oh, Venerable Sumedho, why does he have to suffer like this? He's never hurt anybody, he's never done anything wrong. Why? In some previous life, what did he do to have to suffer like this?' He was suffering because he was born! If he hadn't been born, he wouldn't have had to suffer. When we're born we have to expect these things. Having a human body means that we have to experience sickness, pain, old age and death. This is an important reflection. We can speculate that maybe in a previous life he liked to choke cats and dogs or something like that, and he has to pay for it in this life, but that's mere speculation and it doesn't really help. What we can know is that it's the kammic result of being born. Each one of us must inevitably experience sickness and pain, hunger, thirst, the ageing process of our bodies and death – it's the law of kamma. What begins must end; what is born must die; what comes together must separate.

We're not being pessimistic about the way things are, but we're observing, so we don't expect life to be other than it is. Then we can cope with life and endure it when it's difficult, and delight in it when it's delightful. If we understand life,

we can enjoy it without being its helpless victims. How much misery there is in human existence because we expect life to be other than what it is! We have these romantic ideas that we'll meet the right person, fall in love and live happily ever after, that we'll never fight and have a wonderful relationship. But what about death? So you think, 'Well, maybe we'll die at the same time.' That's hope, isn't it? There's hope, and then despair when your loved one dies before you do, or runs away with the dustman or the travelling salesman.

You can learn a lot from small children, because they don't disguise their feelings, they just express what they feel in the moment; when they're miserable they start crying, and when they're happy they laugh. Some time ago I went to a layman's home. When we arrived, his young daughter was very happy to see him. Then he said to her, 'I have to take Venerable Sumedho to Sussex University to give a talk.' As we walked out of the door, the little girl fumed red in the face and began screaming in anguish, so her father said, 'It's all right, I'll be back in an hour.' But she wasn't developed to that level where she could understand 'I'll be back in an hour.' The immediacy of separation from the loved meant immediate anguish.

Notice how often in our life there is that sorrow at having to separate from something we like or someone we love, from having to leave a place we really like to be in. When you are really mindful you can see the not wanting to separate, the sorrow. As adults, we can let go of it immediately if we know we can come back again, but it's still there. From last

November to March, I travelled around the world, always arriving at airports with somebody meeting me with a 'Hello!' – and then a few days later it was 'Goodbye!' And there was always this sense of 'Come back', and I'd say 'Yes, I'll come back'... and so I've committed myself to do the same thing next year. We can't say, 'Goodbye forever' to someone we like, can we? We say, 'I'll see you again,' 'I'll phone you up,' 'I'll write you a letter', or 'Until next time we meet'. We have all these phrases to cover over the sense of sorrow and separation.

In meditation we're noting, just observing what sorrow really is. We're not saying that we shouldn't feel sorrow when we separate from someone we love; it's natural to feel that way, isn't it? But now, as meditators, we're beginning to witness sorrow so that we understand it, rather than trying to suppress it, pretend it's something more than it is, or just neglect it.

In England people tend to suppress sorrow when somebody dies. They try not to cry or be emotional, they don't want to make a scene, they 'keep a stiff upper lip'. Then when they start meditating they can find themselves suddenly crying over the death of someone who died fifteen years before. They didn't cry at the time, so they end up doing it fifteen years later. When someone dies we don't want to admit the sorrow or make a scene, because we think that if we cry we're weak, or it's embarrassing to others. So we tend to suppress and hold things back, not recognizing the nature of things as they really are, not recognizing our human predicament and learning from it. In meditation we're allowing the mind

to open up and let the things that have been suppressed and repressed become conscious, because when things become conscious they have a way of ceasing rather than just being repressed again. We allow things to take their course to cessation, we allow things to go away rather than just push them away. Usually we just push certain things away from us, refusing to accept or recognize them. Whenever we feel upset or annoyed with anyone, when we're bored or when unpleasant feelings arise, we look at the beautiful flowers or the sky, read a book, watch TV, do something. We're never fully consciously bored, fully angry. We don't recognize our despair or disappointment, because we can always run off into something else. We can always go to the refrigerator, eat cakes and sweets, listen to the stereo. It's so easy to absorb into music, away from boredom and despair into something that's exciting or interesting or calming or beautiful. Look at how dependent we are on watching TV and reading. There are so many books now that they'll all have to be burnt – useless books everywhere, everybody's writing things without having anything worth saying. Today's not-so-pleasant film stars write their biographies and make a lot of money. Then there are the gossip columns: people get away from the boredom of their own existence, their discontent with it, the tediousness, by reading gossip about movie stars and public figures.

We've never really accepted boredom as a conscious state. As soon as it comes into the mind we start looking for something interesting, something pleasant. But in meditation

we're allowing boredom to be. We're allowing ourselves to be fully consciously bored, fully depressed, fed up, jealous, angry, disgusted. All the nasty, unpleasant experiences of life that we have repressed out of consciousness and never really looked at, never really accepted, we begin to accept into consciousness – not as personality problems any more, but just out of compassion. Out of kindness and wisdom we allow things to take their natural course to cessation, rather than just keeping them going round in the same old cycles of habit. If we have no way of letting things take their natural course, then we're always controlling, always caught in some dreary habit of mind. When we're jaded and depressed we're unable to appreciate the beauty of things, because we never really see them as they truly are.

I remember one experience I had in my first year of meditation in Thailand. I spent most of that year by myself in a little hut, and the first few months were really terrible. All kinds of things kept coming up in my mind – obsessions and fears and terror and hatred. I'd never felt so much hatred. I'd never thought of myself as one who hated people, but during those first few months of meditation it seemed like I hated everybody. I couldn't think of anything nice about anyone, there was so much aversion coming up into consciousness. Then one afternoon I started having this strange vision – I thought I was going crazy, actually – I saw people walking off my brain. I saw my mother just walk out of my brain and into emptiness, disappear into space. Then my father and my sister followed. I actually saw these visions walking out of

my head. I thought, 'I'm crazy! I've gone off!' – but it wasn't an unpleasant experience.

The next morning, when I woke from sleep and looked around, I felt that everything I saw was beautiful. Everything, even the most unbeautiful detail, was beautiful. I was in a state of awe. The hut itself was a crude structure, not beautiful by anyone's standards, but it looked to me like a palace. The scrubby-looking trees outside looked like a most beautiful forest. Sunbeams were streaming through the window onto a plastic dish, and the plastic dish looked beautiful! That sense of beauty stayed with me for about a week and then, reflecting on it, I suddenly realized that's the way things really are when the mind is clear. Up to that time I'd been looking through a dirty window, and over the years I'd become so used to the scum and dirt on the window that I didn't realize it was dirty, I'd thought that's the way it was.

When we get used to looking through a dirty window, everything seems grey, grimy and ugly. Meditation is a way of cleaning the window, purifying the mind, allowing things to come up into consciousness and letting them go. Then with the wisdom faculty, the Buddha-wisdom, we observe how things really are. This is not just attaching to beauty, to purity of mind, but actually understanding. It is wisely reflecting on the way nature operates, so that we are no longer deluded by it into creating habits for our life through ignorance.

Birth means old age, sickness and death, but that's to do with your body, it's not you. Your human body is not really

yours. No matter what your particular appearance might be, whether you are healthy or sickly, whether you are beautiful or not beautiful, whether you are black or white or whatever, it's all non-self. This is what we mean by *anattā*, that human bodies belong to nature, that they follow the laws of nature: they are born, they grow up, they get old and they die. Now, we may understand that rationally, but emotionally there is a very strong attachment to the body. In meditation we begin to see this attachment. We don't take the position that we shouldn't be attached, saying, 'The problem with me is that I'm attached to my body. I shouldn't be. It's bad, isn't it? If I was a wise person I wouldn't be attached to it.' That's starting from an ideal again. It's like trying to start climbing a tree from the top, saying, 'I should be at the top of the tree. I shouldn't be down here.' But as much as we'd like to think that we're at the top, we have to accept humbly that we aren't. To begin with, we have to be at the trunk of the tree, where the roots are, looking at the most coarse and ordinary things, before we can start identifying with anything at the top of the tree.

This is the way of wise reflection. It's not just purifying the mind and then attaching to purity. It's not just trying to refine consciousness so that we can induce high states of concentration whenever we feel like it, because even the most refined states of sensory consciousness are unsatisfactory, they're dependent on so many other things. Nibbāna is not dependent on any other condition. Conditions of any quality, be they ugly, nasty, beautiful, refined or whatever, arise and

pass away – but they don't interfere with Nibbāna, with the peace of the mind.

We are not rejecting the sensory world out of aversion, because if we try to annihilate the senses, then that too becomes a habit that we blindly acquire, trying to get rid of that which we don't like. That's why we have to be very patient.

This lifetime as a human being is a lifetime of meditation. See the rest of your life as the span of meditation rather than this ten-day retreat. You may think, 'I meditated for ten days. I thought I was enlightened but somehow when I got home I didn't feel enlightened any more. I'd like to go back and do a longer retreat where I can feel more enlightened than I did last time. It would be nice to have a higher state of consciousness.' In fact, the more refined your experience, the more coarse your daily life must seem. You get high, and then when you get back to the mundane daily routines of life in the city, it's even worse than before, isn't it? After going so high, the ordinariness of life seems much more ordinary, gross and unpleasant. The way to insight wisdom is not by following preferences for refinement over coarseness, but recognizing that both refined and coarse consciousness are impermanent conditions, that they're unsatisfactory, their nature will never satisfy us, and they're *anattā*, they're not what we are, they're not ours.

Thus the Buddha's teaching is a very simple one. What could be more simple than 'what is born must die'? It's not some great new philosophical discovery; even illiterate tribal

people know that. You don't have to study in university to know it.

When we're young we think, 'I've got so many years left of youth and happiness.' If we're beautiful we think, 'I'm going to be young and beautiful forever,' because it seems that way. If we're twenty years old, having a good time, life is wonderful and somebody says, 'You are going to die some day', we may think, 'What a depressing person. Let's not invite him to our house again.' We don't want to think about death, we want to think about how wonderful life is, how much pleasure we can get out of it.

But as meditators we reflect on getting old and dying. This is not being morbid or sick or depressing, but it's considering the whole cycle of existence; and when we know that cycle, then we are more careful about how we live. People do horrible things because they don't reflect on their deaths. They don't wisely reflect and consider, they just follow their passions and feelings of the moment, trying to get pleasure, and then feeling angry and depressed when life doesn't give them what they want.

Reflect on your own life and death and the cycles of nature. Just observe what delights and what depresses. See how we can feel very positive or very negative. Notice how we want to attach to beauty, or to pleasant feelings, or to inspiration. It's really nice to feel inspired, isn't it? 'Buddhism is the greatest religion of them all', or 'When I discovered the Buddha I was so happy, it's a wonderful discovery!' When we get a little bit doubtful, a little bit depressed, we go and read

an inspiring book and get high. But remember, getting high is an impermanent condition; it's like becoming happy, you have to keep doing it, sustaining it, and after you keep doing something over and over again you no longer feel happy with it. How many sweets can you eat? At first they make you happy – and then they make you sick.

So depending on religious inspiration is not enough. If you attach to inspiration, when you get fed up with Buddhism you'll go off and find some new thing to inspire you. It's like attaching to romance; when it disappears from the relationship you start looking for someone else to feel romantic towards. Years ago in America I met a woman who'd been married six times, and she was only about thirty-three. I said, 'You'd think you would have learned after the third or fourth time. Why do you keep getting married?' She said, 'It's the romance. I don't like the other side but I love the romance.' At least she was honest, but not terribly wise. Romance is a condition that leads to disillusionment.

Romance, inspiration, excitement, adventure: all these things rise to a peak and then condition their opposites, just as an inhalation conditions an exhalation. Just think of inhaling all the time. It's like having one romance after another, isn't it? How long can you inhale? The inhalation conditions the exhalation, both are necessary. Birth conditions death, hope conditions despair and inspiration conditions disillusionment. So when we attach to hope we're going to feel despair. When we attach to excitement it's going to take us to boredom. When we attach to romance it will take us to

disillusionment and divorce. When we attach to life it takes us to death. So recognize that it's the attachment that causes the suffering, attaching to conditions and expecting them to be more than what they are.

So much of life for so many people seems to be waiting and hoping for something to happen – expecting and anticipating some success or pleasure – or maybe worrying and fearing that some painful, unpleasant thing is just lying in wait. You may hope that you will meet somebody you'll really love, or have some great experience, but attaching to hope takes you to despair.

By wise reflection we begin to understand the things that create misery in our lives. We see that actually we are the creators of that misery. Through our ignorance, through not having wisely understood the sensory world and its limitations, we have identified with all that is unsatisfactory and impermanent, the things that can only take us to despair and death. No wonder life is so depressing! It's dreary because of the attachment, because we identify and seek ourselves in all that is by nature *dukkha*: unsatisfactory and imperfect. Now, when we stop doing that, when we let go, that is enlightenment. We are enlightened beings, no longer attached, no longer identified with anything, no longer deluded by the sensory world. We understand the sensory world, we know how to co-exist with it. We know how to use the sensory world for compassionate action, for joyous giving. We don't demand that it be here to satisfy us any more, to make us feel secure and safe or to give us anything, because as soon

as we demand that it should satisfy us, it takes us to despair.

When we no longer identify with the sensory world as 'me' or 'mine', and see it as *anattā*, we can enjoy the senses without seeking sense-impingement or depending on it. We no longer expect conditions to be anything other than what they are, so that when they change we can patiently and peacefully endure the unpleasant side of existence. We can humbly endure sickness, pain, cold, hunger, failures and criticisms. If we're not attached to the world we can adapt to change, whatever that change may be, whether it's for the better or for the worse. If we're still attached we can't adapt very well; we're always struggling, resisting, trying to control and manipulate everything, and then feeling frustrated, frightened or depressed at what a delusive, frightening place the world is. If you've never really contemplated the world, never taken the time to understand and know it, it becomes a frightening place for you. It becomes like a jungle: you don't know what's around the next tree, bush or cliff – a wild animal, a ferocious man-eating tiger, a terrible dragon or a poisonous snake.

Nibbāna means getting away from the jungle. When we're inclining towards Nibbāna we're moving towards the peace of the mind. Although the conditions of the mind may not be peaceful at all, the mind itself is a peaceful place. Here we are making a distinction between the mind and the conditions of mind. The conditions of mind can be happy, miserable, elated, depressed, loving or hating, worrying or fear-ridden,

doubting or bored. They come and go in the mind, but the mind itself, like the space in this room, stays just at it is. The space in this room has no quality to elate or depress, does it? It is just at it is. To concentrate on the space in the room we have to withdraw our attention from the things in it. If we concentrate on the things in the room we become happy or unhappy. We say, 'Look at that beautiful Buddha image', or if we see something we find ugly we say, 'Oh, what a terrible, disgusting thing.' We can spend our time looking at the people in the room, thinking whether we like this person or dislike that person. We can form opinions about people being this way or that way, remember what they did in the past, speculate about what they will do in the future, seeing others as possible sources of pain or gratification to ourselves. However, if we withdraw our attention it doesn't mean that we have to push everyone else out of the room. If we don't concentrate on or absorb into any of the conditions, then we have a perspective, because the space in the room has no quality to depress or elate. The space can contain us all, all conditions can come and go within it.

Moving inwards, we can apply this to the mind. The mind is like space, there's room in it for everything or nothing. It doesn't really matter whether it is filled or has nothing in it, because we always have a perspective once we know the space of the mind, its emptiness. Armies can come into the mind and leave, butterflies, rainclouds or nothing. All things can come and go through, without our being caught in blind reaction, struggling resistance, control or manipulation.

So when we abide in the emptiness of our minds we're moving away – we're not getting rid of things, but no longer absorbing into conditions that exist in the present or creating any new ones. This is our practice of letting go. We let go of our identification with conditions by seeing that they are all impermanent and not-self. This is what we mean by *vipassanā* meditation. It's really looking at, witnessing, listening, observing that whatever comes must go. Whether it's coarse or refined, good or bad, whatever comes and goes is not what we are. We're not good, we're not bad, we're not male or female, beautiful or ugly. These are changing conditions in nature, which are not-self. This is the Buddhist way to enlightenment: going towards Nibbāna, inclining towards the spaciousness or emptiness of mind rather than being born and caught up in the conditions.

Now you may ask, 'Well if I'm not the conditions of mind, if I'm not a man or a woman, this or that, then what am I'? Do you want me to tell you who you are? Would you believe me if I did? What would you think if I ran out and started asking you who I am? It's like trying to see your own eyes: you can't know yourself, because you are yourself. You can only know what is not yourself – and so that solves the problem, doesn't it? If you know what is not yourself, then there is no question about what you are. If I said, 'Who am I? I'm trying to find myself,' and I started looking under the shrine, under the carpet, under the curtain, you'd think, 'Venerable Sumedho has really flipped out, he's gone crazy, he's looking for himself.' 'I'm looking for me, where am I?' is the most

stupid question in the world. The problem is not who we are, but our belief and identification with what we are not. That's where the suffering is, that's where we feel misery and depression and despair. It's our identity with everything that is not ourselves that is *dukkha*. When you identify with that which is unsatisfactory, you're going to be dissatisfied and discontented – it's obvious, isn't it?

So the path of the Buddhist is a letting go rather than trying to find anything. The problem is the blind attachment, the blind identification with the appearance of the sensory world. You needn't get rid of the sensory world, but learn from it, watch it, no longer allow yourselves to be deluded by it. Keep penetrating it with Buddha-wisdom, keep using this Buddha-wisdom so that you become more at ease with being wise, rather than making yourself become wise. Just by listening, observing, being awake, being aware, the wisdom will become clear. You'll be using wisdom with regard to your body, with regard to your thoughts, feelings, memories, emotion, all of these things. You'll see and witness, allowing them to pass by and let them go.

So at this time you have nothing else to do except be wise from one moment to the next.

Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jinati

The gift of Dhamma is greater than all other gifts.