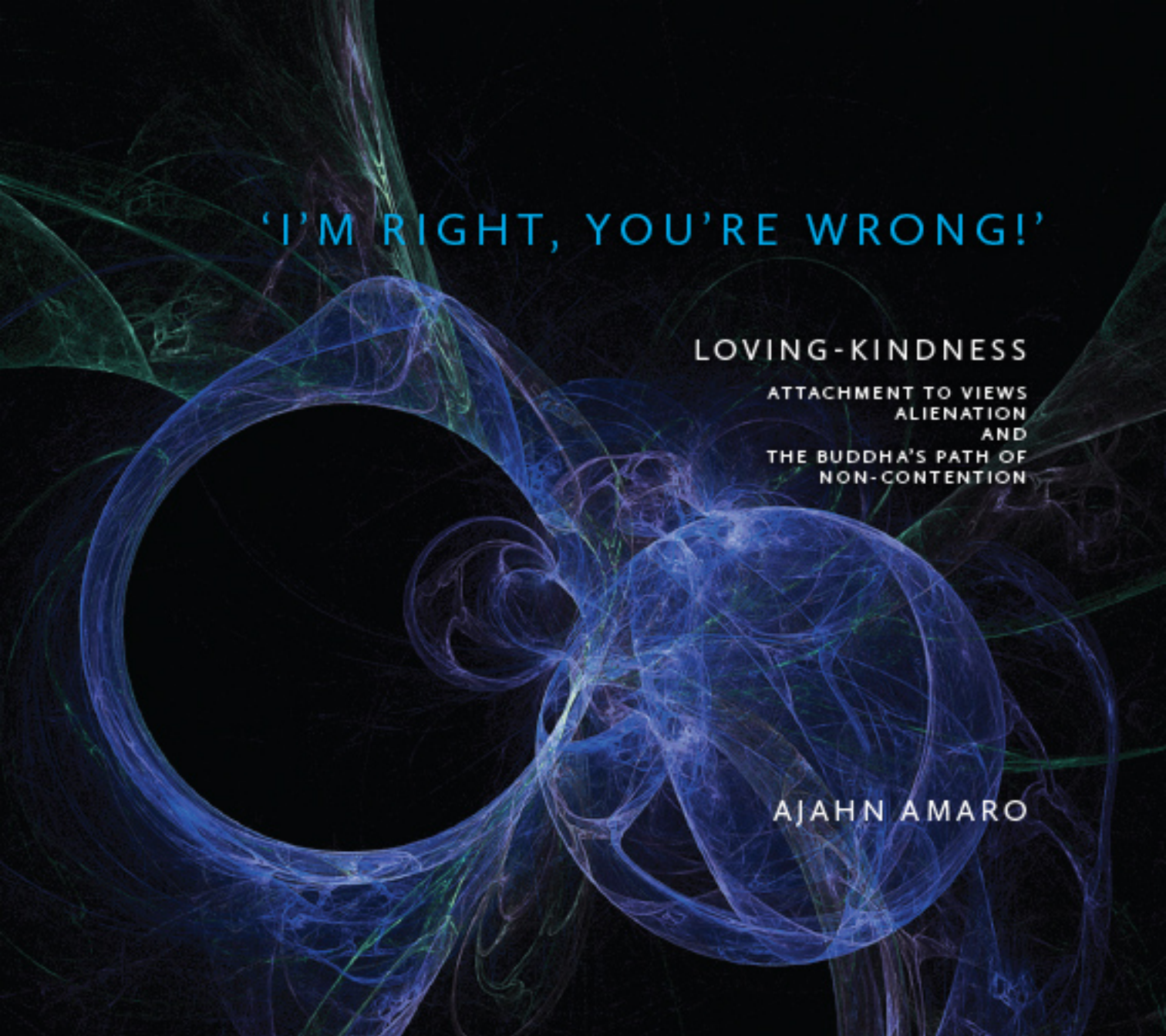




'I'M RIGHT, YOU'RE WRONG!'

LOVING-KINDNESS

ATTACHMENT TO VIEWS
ALIENATION
AND
THE BUDDHA'S PATH OF
NON-CONTENTION

AJAHN AMARO

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PREFACE

This small book is the first in a series of four, consisting of reflections and practices related to the ‘sublime abiding places for the heart’ – the four *brahma-vihāras*, in Buddhist parlance. They are also known as ‘the four immeasurables’ on account of the boundless quality of their nature.

The vision for the series is to explore these sublime abidings via the somewhat oblique approach of looking at their opposites. The four *brahma-vihāras* are listed, in the Buddhist scriptures, as:

Mettā – loving-kindness, benevolence, radical acceptance, non-aversion.

Karuṇā – compassion, empathy, appreciation of the suffering of others.

Muditā – sympathetic or altruistic joy, gladness at the good fortune of others.

Upekkhā – equanimity, caring even-mindedness, serenity amid all turbulence.

In this first book we will be investigating *mettā* through the lens of contention and self-righteousness; the declaration: ‘I’m right, you’re wrong!’ being an archetypical expression of these caustic qualities. The other three books in the series will, similarly, explore the remaining *brahma-vihāras* through aspects of mind and behaviour that oppose or confuse them.

The material published in this book is mostly based on some workshops that were given in the USA in the spring of 2010, at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, California, and at New York Insight, New York City.

As they were on those daylong workshops, and as with all teachings offered in the Buddhist tradition, the words here

are presented for the reader's contemplation rather than being intended to be taken as absolute truths. Those who pick this book up and read it are therefore encouraged to consider whether these principles and practices feel true to life and, if they do, to try them out and see if they bring benefit. Do they help you to deal with conflict, both inner and outer, more easily? Do they lead you to a recognition of the balance of the Middle Way? Do they help you to be a force of concord rather than one of polarization and antagonism? If so, that is to be rejoiced.

If, however, these words don't help you, then may you discover other wholesome ways of finding peace with the struggles and contentions that are such a stressful part of our lives.

RIGHT IN FACT, WRONG IN DHAMMA

‘I proclaim such a teaching that espouses non-contention with
anyone in the world.’

Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (‘The Honeyball’) M 18.4

The phrase ‘I’m right, you’re wrong’ is the archetypal expression of our tendency to attach to views and opinions: ‘If I think it, it must be true, and if you think differently, sorry, but you’re wrong. You might be a good person, but you’re just wrong.’ This is the very opposite of the attitude expressed in the last four lines of the *Mettā Sutta* (SN 1.8):

By not holding to fixed views,
the pure hearted one, having clarity of vision,
being freed from all sense desire,
is not born again into this world.

‘Not holding to fixed views’ means letting go, not clinging. In a number of his teachings the Buddha talked about four different kinds of clinging, four different zones of attachment. The first kind is clinging to sense-desire, sense-pleasure (*kām-upādāna*). The second kind is clinging to precepts and practices: rules, observances, conventions (*sīlabbat-upādāna*); the blind belief in conventional structures. This can include rules of religious behaviour, but also be things like the value of money. The next kind of clinging is clinging to the feeling of self, *attavād-upādāna*, the ‘I, me and my’ feeling. But the kind of clinging examined here is clinging to views and opinions, as in the line from the *Mettā Sutta*: ‘not holding to fixed views’, *diṭṭhiñca anupagamma* in Pali. This final type of clinging is called *diṭṭh-upādāna*.

In our culture we tend to hold opinions in very high regard. The tendency to take our opinion or view as an ultimate reality is a strong habit for all of us; if I see something in a particular way, what I think is right, and so I'm right! But if we attach to that way of thinking, if we take it to be absolutely valid, we will find ourselves in conflict with those who think differently: 'If you think differently from me, you must be wrong.' This can lead to friction, contention and all kinds of quarrels at the family, social or political level, even to the point of leading to warfare over a view, or a simple difference in understanding. This is an important issue in our lives and if we don't understand its core, how it works in our own minds, there's no real hope of solving it on a broader scale. So we need to explore that quality of contention, that divisiveness, that polarity. Where does it come from and what can we do about it?"

One problem that may arise is that if I'm right and you're wrong, I might feel it's my duty to set you straight: 'I'm pure,

you're impure, and it's my sacred duty to fix you so that we have purity.' On a social level this led to the terrible depredations of Nazi Germany or the Rwandan genocide, 'ethnic cleansing' in the Balkans, or those 'religiously' inspired militias who feel it's their duty to defend the word of their lord by wiping out those who think or act differently. Similar evils have been frequently committed in the name of democracy. This kind of attachment and clinging, of getting lost in our own viewpoint, creates very real difficulties, tensions, suffering and harmful experiences in the lives of many people.

The more we believe in our opinions, the greater our investment in the rational mind. Indeed, the more logical our thoughts may be, the more tidy our rationale, the more perfectly valid it may seem to be to straighten somebody else out because they're 'wrong'. And even if we don't think of setting someone straight as a sacred duty, we can still have a strong attitude of righteousness.

It might be the case that we have been praised for that quality during our childhood and upbringing, taught that righteous indignation is a good quality. On one level we can make a tight logical case for thinking that way, and say it's absolutely true by our own judgement and reasoning. But then we won't recognize what it does to our own heart and the way that we relate to others. The issue is further complicated by the fact that sometimes stepping up and taking action may be exactly the appropriate thing to do, irrespective of our feelings of righteous indignation.

The basis on which we take action is the element that makes the difference, as illustrated by the following story. In the early days in Ajahn Chah's monastery, Ajahn Sumedho was the only Westerner living there. He was a very ardent, idealistic monk who took the monastic training extremely seriously and was very committed, as all good monastics should be. But he had grown up in an atmosphere of righteous American conditioning,

and had a different way of going about things from some of the other monks in the monastery. A Thai monk who was also living there was very loud-mouthed and outspoken, incautious about his speech. This was extremely unusual in Thailand, where people tend to be much more restrained, non-confrontational or outspoken in average social interactions. The young Bhikkhu Sumedho took great offence at this monk's behaviour and thought: 'This is totally out of order, and why isn't Ajahn Chah saying anything? He lets this guy just carry on and make a fool of himself and upset everybody, and everyone can see he's out of order but no one is saying anything! This is ridiculous! Somebody ought to get up and... even though I'm a junior monk I really ought to... if somebody doesn't say something, I will!'

This went on for some months and he grew more and more indignant. Eventually Ajahn Chah went off to visit a branch monastery for a few days, and it happened that at the same time

there was the fortnightly recitation of the monastic rule, after which the teacher gives an instructional talk and then asks: 'Is there any business that the Sangha wants to bring up?' With Ajahn Chah away it was thus one of the senior monks leading the meeting and who said: 'Has anyone got any business to discuss?' Even though Ajahn Sumedho had only been a monk for two or three years and the loud-mouthed bhikkhu was a bit senior to him, he said: 'Yes. I've got something I'd like to bring up. I'm very concerned about the conduct of Bhikkhu X, and...' He had a whole list of different occasions, he had witnesses, he had the evidence, he had all his criteria; everything was lined up. And he was 'right': all the things for which he criticized the monk were factually valid – you could see that other people had been upset or they took offence and walked away, and so on. While Ajahn Sumedho was saying this, the offending monk was looking at the floor and everyone else was listening, taking

it all in. Finally he got to the end of his Dhammic diatribe and the senior monk said: ‘We’ll just wait till Luang Por Chah gets back and then we’ll bring this matter to his attention.’

A few days later Ajahn Chah returned, and word reached him pretty quickly about this outrageous confrontation by the foreign monk. He took note of that. But before Ajahn Chah came back, the monk who’d been criticized and shamed in this way left the monastery and wasn’t seen again. After a few days Ajahn Chah found a moment to chat with Ajahn Sumedho and said: ‘You know, Tan Sumedho, what you said about the loud-mouth monk, you did something very harmful there. You meant well, but what you did was harmful because even though...’ the expression he used in Thai was *bahk bahp, daer jai di*, which means: ‘His mouth is evil, but his heart is good.’ ‘He’s got bad verbal habits. I knew that. Of course, everyone knows that. But how many monasteries do you think the fellow had to leave before he came here? This was the one place where

he could stay and practise, because I made space for him. But now you've closed the door on him and you have to take responsibility for that; he can't stay here anymore because you shamed him publicly. And so you have to acknowledge that that was poorly done on your part. You were right in fact, but wrong in Dhamma.'

That to me is an extremely precise and helpful teaching. In our minds the two ideas are often meshed together: 'If I'm right, then however I act on that rightness is good.' But that's not necessarily so, because there's a principle whereby it's not just a matter of what we do, but the way that we do it. It's not just the opinion we have or the way we see things, but how we express them that makes the difference. That's the crucial element, and that's what the young Ajahn Sumedho had missed. It was a very powerful lesson for him; he has remembered it ever since.

So how do we respond when someone says: 'I know I'm right'?

I was at a meeting of the community some years ago where

there were some differences of opinion. Twenty or so people saw things one way, but one person in the group saw it very differently – they claimed that in a certain crisis ‘100% of the problems in the situation were X’s fault; I was not to blame at all.’ At first no one else in the group could take that seriously, some knowing from direct experience that what this person said was inaccurate. So it was gently pointed out to them:

‘Here we are – there are twenty of your peers saying “We see it like this”, and you’re saying “No, you’re all wrong.” Does that seem reasonable? Do you really mean to say you believe you contributed 0% to the difficulties of the issue?’ To which the person replied with complete conviction: ‘That’s right. None of it was my fault.’ ‘And if all of us see it differently?’ ‘Then you’re wrong’ – and said with a sweet smile.

In this case it was very helpful to be able to see that person’s absolute and non-reflective attachment to their view; the fact that they had such an irrational certainty in their own rightness

demonstrated that: ‘We’re not working with an adult mentality here; this is a person lost in a childish reaction,’ and so the group was able to take the issue on from there. Often, like this individual, we don’t have a reflective approach. We don’t see how tightly we’re holding something, or have any kind of perspective on it. We need therefore to learn how to recognize that feeling of rightness and explore it, so that even if we feel we’re a 100% certain, we can reflect on that feeling before we decide how to handle the situation.

There’s a principle called ‘practising Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma’, *dhammānudhamma paṭipatti* (S 55.5), which is one of the essential elements, the final factor for stream entry. If we really want to be free, it’s absolutely essential to understand and embody this principle, to truly see the difference between just having a sense of rightness, and recognizing that the way we act needs to be in accordance with Dhamma, with fundamental reality. The challenge is to

find how to bring about that accordance with reality. One problem is that our attention becomes caught by the issue itself. Something offends our ideals, goes against our spiritual principles or is strongly loaded emotionally, and we become so taken by it that we don't see the emotion with which we're handling it.

I read an article a number of years ago about two sets of astronomers who were both trying to carry out the same kind of measurements to decide whether the universe was likely to keep on expanding or not, and the exact rate at which it was expanding. They had two big telescopes to help make those measurements, and they were competing over who would be first have the final proof about this question. On one level there were very refined and intellectual high-tech astrophysical issues, ostensibly to find out the truth about the nature of the universe; but on the emotional level it was more like a scrap between eight-year-olds in the playground. One of the project

heads commented: ‘Some people say that gravity is the most powerful force in the universe; I disagree, I think professional jealousy is stronger.’ I thought that was very astute. What the scientists really cared about was who would end up on top. But at least he had noticed that kind of dynamic was operating.

One approach to meditation is understanding how the mind becomes caught in these contentious states, where the reptile brain, the sense of conflict and contention, quarrel, competition, takes over our field of experience, and how we get into situations where we’re clinging to our ‘rightness’ but it’s not making us any happier.

Once¹ a brahmin scholar called Daṇḍapani, whose name means literally ‘stick in hand’, i.e. ‘the man with the walking-stick’, came to the place where the Buddha was sitting meditating. He was a professional debater who’d heard of the Buddha’s reputation and came to ask him: ‘What’s your philosophy?’

1 *Madhupīṇḍika Sutta* (‘The Sweet Morsel’ or ‘The Honeyball’) M 18

What kind of teaching do you proclaim? What kind of views do you assert?’ The Buddha, being a very quick judge of human character, said: ‘I proclaim such a teaching that espouses non-contention with anyone in the world.’ The account says that Daṇḍapāṇi then clicked his tongue, his brow puckered into three furrows and, wagging his head from side to side with nothing to say, he went away and left the Buddha by himself.

Later the Buddha described this encounter briefly to the monks and said:

‘When the mind doesn’t grab hold of things, when you don’t find any “thing”, any opinion, any fixed position to delight in, then that is what brings about the end of quarrels, the end of disputes, malicious speech, the taking up of weapons and of argument – that’s where contention comes to an end, where the mind doesn’t relish taking hold of “this is my position!”.’

This very brief statement left the monks a bit perplexed, so they went to Ven. Mahā-Kaccāna, who was expert at explaining in detail the Buddha's brief or cryptic statements. Mahā-Kaccāna gave a wonderful description of how the qualities of contention arise.

‘Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is sense-contact. With sense-contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives...’

This is perception, *saññā*, giving the perceived object a name.

‘What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates.’

So the chattering mind takes that perception and launches off with it.

‘With such conceptual proliferation (*papañca*) as the source, the heart is beset by mental perceptions and notions

characterized by the prolific tendency, with respect to the past, the future and present forms cognizable through the eye.

But then, if nothing is found there to delight in, to welcome and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendencies to lust, aversion, views, doubt, conceit, desire for being and ignorance. This is the end of resorting to weapons, quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice and false speech. Here these harmful, unwholesome states cease without remainder.'

This process begins with a sense-contact. Something impacts on one of the senses; there's a contact, and then there's a feeling of attraction or aversion, or a neutral feeling. That feeling leads to perception. So we might give a sound that we hear a name, or it might cause a trigger in the mind of interest or enthusiasm, or have an emotional impact, and that recognition is *saññā*; not just the sense perception but the tone that goes with it.

The words ‘sign’ and ‘designation’ are related to the Pali word *saññā*. That naming action brings up thought, *vitakka*. And from thought comes *papañca*, the strings of conceptual proliferation. That is when the chattering mind really launches off, and that’s what eventually leads to a feeling of ‘me oppressed by the world’, ‘me pressured by this thing I’m stuck with that I don’t want’, ‘me pursuing this thing that I haven’t got’, ‘me being burdened by this painful experience’ or ‘me caught up in this particular quality’. It leads to the array of perceptions and notions that beset the heart and create a feeling of alienation, of a ‘me’ in a state of tension with ‘the world’.

So, states of conflict and contention develop because we take a thought or a perception, and then the mind runs with it. The guided meditation which follows this chapter looks more closely at how that process works, and how we can follow it back to the source; the simple, straightforward sight, sound, feeling, smell,

taste or thought; the innocence, the simplicity of the raw sense perception. The *saññā*, the *vitakka* and the *papañca* all develop from something straightforward: a feeling, a sound, a sight. In meditation we can train ourselves to go back to the source of an individual perception or idea, or just a memory floating up, and then stay with the simplicity of that. In the Korean tradition there is a beautiful collection of teachings which talks about this practice; there it's known as 'tracing back the radiance'.² In meditation we'll find that ninety-nine times out of a hundred, if we follow the conflicts the mind gets into and the tensions it creates back to what triggered them, we'll have left behind that experience of tension and alienation, that conflicted state, we'll have let go of it.

² Robert E. Buswell, Jr.: 'Tracing Back the Radiance: Chinul's Korean Way of Zen' (University of Hawaii Press, 1991).

2

GUIDED MEDITATION

Settle down and sit in a comfortable posture for meditation: cross-legged, kneeling or on a chair, however you choose.

First of all, take a moment to notice how you feel. It always helps to briefly take stock of what the mood is. Do you feel inspired? Tired? Happy? Depressed? Whatever it might be, just take a moment to notice what that tone, the mood of this moment is.

Feel the presence of the body. How is it? Does it feel light? Heavy? Comfortable? Uncomfortable? Hot? Cool? How is it? Notice what you brought here with you. What's your starting point? By recognizing that this is the material you're working

with, this body, this mind, you can let your actions, your attitude, guide the body and mind towards what will be useful, beneficial for you.

Now feel the presence of the spine. Bring attention to your backbone. Invite the body to sit upright. Let the spine lengthen, stretch to its full natural extension.

Bring the quality of alertness and attentiveness to what you're doing, helping to brighten and energize the body, the mind.

And then, around the spine as the central column, the axis of your physical world, take a few moments to let the body relax in a full and complete way. Relax the muscles of the face, neck and shoulders.

Relax the arms and the hands.

Relax the trunk of the body. Let the chest be a little more open, the abdomen soft and relaxed, free from tension.

The hips, the legs: let them soften and loosen. Invite the whole body to be at ease, to settle at this particular time, this particular place. Give yourself permission to let go of all tension, to be alert, attending to the present moment.

To sustain or establish that attention in the present, we take a simple meditation object like the feeling of the breath. Without changing or modulating the breath in any deliberate way, let the natural rhythm of the breathing be the centre of attention for the next little while, feeling each inhalation, each exhalation. Invite the mind, the attention, to rest and to settle in this present moment; the weight of the body, the breath entering and leaving – the simplicity of this moment.

When you find the attention has drifted away, let go of what the mind has latched onto; come back to the present moment, letting the breath be like a central point, a flag marking this very moment. You set the intention to follow the breath,

but then you find the mind is becoming distracted. The next thing you know, you're planning next week, recollecting a conversation early this morning, a film you watched last night, your grandmother's cottage in a foreign country.

Whenever you notice that your mind has drifted off in that way, see if you can follow it back. See if you can trace the chain of thought that led up to that association.

Follow the string of thoughts and associations to see where the association came from. Did it come from a sound? A feeling in your knee? A random memory of a fragrance?

Whenever you find some kind of string of associations, of conceptual proliferation, see if you can follow it back, theme by theme, thought by thought, to see where it came from.

And once you get to the root, when you recognize: 'It was just that sound! It was that feeling in my knee!' stay with that

perception for a moment. Stay with that simple recognition. Feel its tone, its ordinariness. Then after a moment, let go. Go back to the breath. Re-establish attention in the present.

You can extend this practice one step further to explore the quality of conflict by deliberately bringing to mind an occasion that had a powerful impact on you, someone with whom you've argued, an ex-partner, parent, child, co-worker, co-monastic. Bring to mind some occasion of conflict, of a difference of opinion. You don't need a whole story, just the very briefest of thoughts, a word or a couple of words: 'That argument'. Then see, note, sense the chain of thoughts and feelings that is triggered when you deliberately launch the *papañca* stream. When the mind is drawn into this stream – this flood of associations so that you're lost in it – stop! Then follow it back through each chain, each link, to where it began with perhaps a single word. How unremarkable, ordinary that original word is, and yet it can give rise to such a flood, an ocean of associations,

with their qualities of pressure, tension, stress. When we follow it back to that single simple word, that one idea, how does it feel? What's the tone? What's the quality at the root, before all the thoughts and associations are launched from it?

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: Ajahn, how would you handle that dilemma with the ‘problem’ monk?

Answer: If it was me? Well, in a perfect world I would have found one of the other senior monks prior to the meeting, and taken a few minutes to say: ‘I feel pretty critical of this monk’s behaviour, and he seems to be out of order and upsetting many people. This looks really inappropriate to me, but Luang Por doesn’t seem to be saying anything about it. Is there some sort of reason? Could you throw some light on that?’ I’d seek a bit more background. Or I’d even have found time to talk to Ajahn Chah when there weren’t many other people around, so it didn’t

become a public display. It was hard to catch Luang Por Chah alone though; there was no such thing as a private interview with him. He would receive people under his hut, and anybody and everybody who wanted to show up did. So it was hard to find a time alone with him, but occasionally if you were patient you could. Then I could have said: 'Luang Por, I find a lot of my defilements are coming up around this monk. I'm noticing a lot of aversion and indignation, and I really feel I'm right to criticize him, but I notice that you're not saying anything. Can I ask you to let me know why that is? What's your perspective?'

Question: I was noticing when thoughts began and trying to track them back. They were just coming out of nowhere, not necessarily from a body sensation or anything like that. It was just like a little bubble and I couldn't really catch the moment when the story arose. And it wasn't just one word, it was a whole sentence.

Answer: Well that in itself is revealing, I find. Sometimes it's quite tricky to try to do this as a particular exercise, because when you're alert and watching, the chemistry doesn't work in quite the same way. Sometimes we all can find that the mind is lost in a big story which began with some random bubble, not associated with anything of any significance. But you still find yourself really excited about this or irritated about that, or frightened by the other. It seems very real and you're caught in the story, but it began with some random firing of the memory process and so it's based on nothing very much.

Question: So it doesn't have to be based on a sense-contact?

Answer: Not particularly. Well, 'thought' is a sense-contact; that's the sixth sense, the mind. And *dhammā*, mental phenomena, are the objects. So that is an arising of a sense object. But I always find it very revealing when it's *à propos*

of absolutely nothing; when it comes out of nowhere, merely the random firing of a human body and mind, and yet it turns into a long chain of proliferation. There wasn't even a story, it was an almost completely random event. There was only a tiny spark, but it still caught some fuel, and took off and came alive on its own.

The more we recognize that process of conceptual proliferation and realize how insubstantial it is, the more we can create a clear context for it: 'This is based on nothing very much. It doesn't really have a root or a source. It's just the mind's fabrication.'

Question: Going back to the story about the monk, if someone is harming others, when, how and where is the red line? How long do you let them do what they're doing?

Answer: That's the big issue, isn't it? I'm not saying that every action is inappropriate. What matters is how we handle a situation. We learn how to respond appropriately. If someone is harming others, instead of jumping in with an immediate reaction you establish a breadth of vision. This an important distinction that I like to make: 'to react' I take as meaning to blindly and impulsively follow the immediate effect of something seen or heard, sensed or thought – chasing the liked and rejecting the disliked; 'to respond' I take to mean consciously attending to the same sensory stimulus and then mindfully reflecting on the feeling of like, dislike or neutral feeling. You open your mind to the situation: 'This seems to be really wrong. Now, what can be done to help?' This is a quality called *sati-sampajañña*, which means 'mindfulness and clear comprehension' or 'clear awareness'. You pay attention to both the object and the context within which it appears, 'practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma'. 'I can see

it's appropriate to take some action here. Now, what is going to be effective?' And then you bring in qualities of perception: you see how things are, you use your experience of what has happened in the past, other people's characters, their personality traits and so on. This practice I am describing is not about encouraging a passivity that is stupid; that would be grasping the Dhamma wrongly.

In addition, don't forget what I said earlier about how: 'The issue is complicated by the fact that sometimes stepping up and taking action may be exactly the appropriate thing to do, *even though* you are feeling righteously indignant.' In those cases you have to quietly park your own feelings and consider the situation more broadly, then act based upon that. To not act because you're feeling angry can be almost as big a mistake as to act because you are.

Question: So it's more 'how'?

Answer: It's all to do with 'how', and that comes out of real attunement, mindfulness of a situation.

It's not 'taking action' that's the problem. It's not even 'opinions' that are the problem. It's clinging to them and taking the feeling of rightness to be an absolute truth, and therefore that anything we do based on it is good.

In Christianity an extreme version of this is called the antinomian heresy, i.e. thinking that anything done in the name of Jesus is thereby good. Nor is it confined to Christian theological thinking; it's also the basis of going to war: 'We're the good guys, so we must be right, so anything we do to the bad guys is justified.' But if we take a circumspect view, being mindful of the whole situation and letting ourselves be guided by that, and if our action and intentions come from our own sense of what's appropriate, there can be a good result.

Question: The big-mouthed monk could have followed the same process. Instead of reacting by leaving the monastery, he could have stayed. So doesn't it work both ways in any situation?

Answer: But I can't control what you do, I can only have control over what I do.

Question: If he had been skilful, he would have seen his reaction and realized that maybe it started from a physical sensation of fear, and therefore that he should not buy into the whole story.

Answer: But culturally in Thailand, being shamed in front of people, someone confronting you and shaming you, is absolutely the worst thing.

Question: I've been exploring the question, 'Is there a skilful

use of anger?', as I've heard that there's a skilful use of fear. Fear can be skilful.

Answer: Yes, it stops us getting run over by traffic.

Question: So I was wondering if it's the same with anger. I remember reading that Dipa Ma says:³ 'No! Absolutely not. There is no room for anger.' So we should neutralize our anger at the point where we act, and thus there would not be room for anger in our action.

Answer: Exactly. There's a well-known exchange in one of Ram Dass's books where he comes to his teacher with the same question. He says something like: 'Is there any place for anger in spiritual life?' His teacher answers: 'Absolutely not. Anger is

³ Dipa Ma (1911–1989) was a Bangladeshi meditation teacher of Theravada Buddhism. She also taught in the United States, influencing the Vipassana movement there.

completely incompatible with any kind of genuine spirituality. However, sometimes certain teachings are best delivered at high volume and with great precision, and with an emphatic impact on the listener.’ And Sharon Salzberg asked Dipa Ma what a Western woman travelling in India should do if she was harassed in the street. Dipa Ma said, ‘You establish loving-kindness firmly in your heart, and then you take your umbrella and you strike! Firmly – right on the top of the head!’

So there’s no room for anger, but to be fierce is something different. And most experienced and accomplished Buddhist teachers will manifest fierceness from time to time. But there’s no anger there.

Ajahn Chah was well known for having had a very hot temper when he was a younger monk; he could be very angry. Once a monk had broken some serious rules at the monastery and was going through a formal penance. Another monk was giving Ajahn Chah a foot massage when the monk who had

misbehaved came along. Ajahn Chah spoke to him in a really abrupt way, tersely and harshly: ‘Do this! Go over there! Don’t do that! That’s all wrong! Get out of here!’ This went on for five minutes or so and the other monk went scurrying off. When he’d gone Ajahn Chah carried on with his conversation with the monk who was giving the foot massage. That monk later said that not for a second during the whole incident was there any extra tension in Ajahn Chah’s body. His body was totally relaxed and at ease throughout. It was appropriate for him to be fierce with the other monk, but he had no hurtful intent, and there was no tension, no attitude of harming within him, as evidenced in his body. He was completely at ease, there was no tightening.

Question: So fierceness and anger are very close, but their outcome is very different. I need to know the difference, and it

sounds as if it's the tension. If I felt tension in my body, it would be unskillful.

Answer: Well that's more of a symptom rather than a cause. The main issue more to do with the attitude. Fierceness is applied with no intention of harming. When you're angry you want to harm, and there's a divisiveness. When there's fierceness founded on *mettā*, it's based on a wholesome attitude. But it is extremely difficult to be clear about this.

With fierceness there's no hate in your mind, no harming intent there. That's the attitude to clarify and establish. And that's why this process of 'tracing back the radiance' is so helpful, because it helps us to see our attitude really closely. We're not only establishing a good reason, having a good rationale; it's something much deeper. It's a genuine attitude of caring, well-wishing, and it can be expressed by a fierce delivery if that's what is appropriate and useful at that time.

Question: So based on what you're saying, Arahants do not get angry?

Answer: I would say so. Though they might look very fierce.

Question: But books about Mahā-Boowa seem to show him as very angry.

Answer: He acts that way too.⁴

Question: But he's not angry, though?

Answer: No. Ajahn Mahā-Boowa is one of the most highly respected monks in Thailand, believed to be an Arahant, but he's a real old curmudgeon. Many years ago the Buddhist group in London which originally invited our community to

⁴ These teachings were given before Ajahn Mahā-Boowa's death January 2011.

come from Thailand and establish a branch there had a close connection with Ajahn Mahā-Boowa, whose senior Western monk, Ajahn Pañnavaddho, was one of the original monks at the Hampstead Vihara London. George Sharp, the head of the London Buddhist group, went to his monastery in Thailand, Wat Pa Baan Taad, to invite him to come to England to teach, but he was given a very cold reception. Ajahn Mahā-Boowa was very curt and blunt with him. Several encounters over George's first few days there had the same kind of tone; he seemed to be very grumpy and irritated.

After a few days George decided to ask him through the translator why he seemed to be so rude, impatient and dismissive. But Ajahn Mahā-Boowa just started laughing and laughing, and answered: 'Oh, that's just my personality. Don't make anything out of that. That's nothing. I'm just a coarse, rude guy. Sorry.'

That's how he appears on the surface, and people who know him well are familiar with that. But there's a difference between personality traits and purity of heart. Someone can be totally enlightened, but like Ajahn Mahā-Boowa have a character type that's quite off-putting or aggressive. But there's no harming attitude, no cruelty, no unkindness in his heart. It's just the way things would come out. He'd say: 'I was a boxer! I'm an aggressive guy. That's how it comes out. I don't mean any harm.' In his Dhamma talks there are a lot of boxing analogies. You get into the ring with the *kilesas*, the defilements, and you keep hitting them and hitting them; and if they knock you down you get up and hit them again until you get that killer punch in, and the *kilesas* go down and they never get up! That's his conditioning; his personality type is that punchy, coarse type. But that's just the skin, the surface.

GUIDED MEDITATION

Take a moment to notice how you feel, the effects of your day so far: what you thought, what you felt, what you've heard and seen, the feelings of the body.

Take a moment to simply attend, to look at them, to feel and notice them.

Are you excited? Bored? Warm? Cool? Depressed? Inspired? Full of mixed feelings? Whatever it might be, notice that right now it's like this. The body feels like this. The mind feels like this.

Then let the body settle and the spine straighten. Invite the body to sit in an energized, upright way. Allow the spine to grow to its full natural extension.

Let the body settle and then centre the attention once more upon the breathing.

Allow the attention to settle on the feeling of the breath. Use that rhythm, that pattern of feeling, as a centre point, a focal point for attention. When the mind wanders, follow it back; come back to the central point, the simplicity of this moment.

When you feel the mind is settled and there's a quality of poise and some ease, deliberately bring to mind a memory of some encounter, some occasion when you were blamed, threatened, misunderstood. You can choose your own least favourite encounter if you wish. Bring to mind the memory of an occasion that has that type of emotional charge to it. Try not to go into a big story, but just bring the attention back to that event, that exchange, that engagement. Bring it to mind. Let that emotion be triggered, fully born into your consciousness.

As the memory of that emotion, when you were attacked,

threatened or criticized is triggered, see if you can find it in the body. What's the physical counterpart to that emotion? Where do you feel that?

If you're able to find such a feeling, in the belly, the throat, the shoulders, wherever it might be, bring the attention to that feeling. Let the attention settle there, hold that feeling as fully as you can in awareness. Don't try to get rid of it, change it, buy into it or push it away. Know the feeling – that it's like this.

As you let the feeling be fully known, bringing awareness to it, then with the rhythm of the breath let yourself relax your attitude toward that feeling, let go of it, particularly using the out-breath to help carry it away. So the feeling is naturally eroding, it's washing through you, not by trying to 'get rid of' it, but just like the waves of the sea slowly washing away a sandcastle, lapping in with each breath, washing around that feeling and slowly carrying it away, back to the ocean.

Let the attention rest with that feeling in the body. If the mind gets lost in stories, replaying dialogues, getting verbal about all the ‘this and thats’, again let the out-breath carry that away and come back to that feeling: the tightness in the belly, the tension in the shoulder, wherever you might feel it. Very consciously leave the words aside. Keep the attention with the simplicity, the directness of the physical feeling; stay with that, being open, patient, relaxed with it, letting it slowly, gently fade away, however long it takes. Stay with it.

Keep letting the out-breath have its effects, gently, steadily supporting the quality of release, relinquishment, relaxation. Stay with this until the body is fully relaxed, until you’ve completely let go of that sensation, that emotion, its effects washed utterly away. Once it’s gone, sustain the attention on that absence. How does it feel with that tension gone, the body in a state of ease, relaxation?

We've watched that mood, that emotion born from nothing, born from the arousal of a memory, burst into being, rise up, flower and fade away; the flowers bloom and fade, the fruits fall, the leaves drop, sink back into the earth, and then it's all gone. It comes out of nothing and returns to nothing.

We've watched that whole cycle of experience come into being, do its thing and fade away. And, throughout the whole process there's been this quality of knowing, caring, careful attention, and noticing, feeling this quality of spaciousness.

In the open space of the mind we can once again invite that same cycle of feeling, bring up another occasion or the same one, the same memory of when we were threatened or hurt. Again, keep it as non-conceptual, as non-verbal as possible. Just remember: *'That day, that letter, that conversation'*; you don't need any more of a trigger than that. You know all the details already. And then let the whole process run again, bringing

that to mind and immediately going to the feeling in the body: fear, self-defensiveness, insecurity, whatever it might be. Notice where you feel it. Train the mind to stay with it in its simplicity. Feel it, know it and be with it throughout its cycle.

Sometimes the cycle of feeling can go through its turnings very swiftly. A thought gets triggered and there's a flush of emotion: 'They all hate me!' And then there's recognition: 'Stop! Look! Feel that one!'

And in a couple of breaths it's gone. Completely finished.

See how this pattern works, become familiar with it and learn the skill of non-entanglement, not clinging, letting go, releasing.

WALKING MEDITATION

You can use walking meditation to explore the same area of reactivity, but aim to keep the feeling of the feet as the primary focal point – the rhythm of the feet touching the ground as you walk. I would also encourage not walking at a particularly slow pace. Walk as if on an ordinary gentle stroll, using the feeling of the feet touching the ground as a focal point for attention. When you notice the mind has picked up some kind of emotional reaction or thought, bring attention to the body and again let yourself feel it, know it and relax with it. Do that for the first few minutes, maybe the first five or ten minutes or so, to settle into the walking practice. Then continue to develop this body awareness and the way that emotional states sit in the body

After you've done that for five or ten minutes or so, use the same kind of theme as you did during sitting meditation. Take some particular memory or attitude, say: 'They all hate me!' – 'they', the mysterious, undefined 'they' who have such strong feelings about our lives. Take up that sense of emotional threat, of being misunderstood, by consciously bringing a particular incident or habitual attitude that you have to mind, and as you walk, notice how it sits in the body in a mobile state as you're moving and engaged in physical activity.

Again, see if you can attend to that, be aware of it and then let it go as you walk along. Sometimes the action of walking is like stirring the pot, so it makes the non-entanglement a little harder to realize, but it's a good exercise to see if you can relax into the walking and let go of the state, rather than letting the action of walking crank things up and inflate the negative reaction.

IT'S NOT MAGIC

To reiterate: the main teaching on conceptual proliferation or *papañca*, the process where the mind runs away and how that happens, is in *Sutta* 18 of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*. The sequence begins with a sense-contact: there's a physical sensation or a thought floats into the mind. That contact leads to feeling, *vedanā*, which in Buddhism is not an emotion, but more like the raw attraction of the pleasant, the repulsion of the painful or a neutral feeling. Feeling leads to *saññā*, perception, the designation or naming of the sense object, such as the cognizing of a colour as 'red'. Then *saññā* leads to *vitakka*, thinking. There's an initial thought, a brief conceptual framing of the experience: 'That's a really ugly red.'

And *vitakka* leads to conceptual proliferation: ‘Why did they use that ghastly red? I don’t like it. They should consult proper people before they ... blah blah blah ...’ This is *papañca*; the mind starts to run and get carried away with itself. In Gujarati *papañca* also means a contortion or cunning, the way in which things become distorted. That’s a very helpful way of describing it: distorted thinking, that kind of on-flowing, on-going chattering.

As *papañca* blossoms it strengthens into a sense of ‘me’ here, in a separate state from ‘the world out there’, which may be the world of a conceptual past, an abstracted present or an imagined future. But it entails a subject here and a separate object there, and a sense of stress or tension or pressure between them, such as longing for something you haven’t got or irritation with something that’s painful. When it’s at its full strength, it’s called in Pali *papañca-saññā-sankhā*, ‘the full range of conceptions and notions characterized by proliferation that

beset and pressurize the heart'; in other words, 'me' in a state of tension with 'the world'.

The more familiar you become with those different stages: contact, feeling, perception, thinking, conceptual proliferation and then the quality of pressurized alienation, with the mind obsessed and burdened by conceptions and notions, the more easily you can trace them back to their source. You can trace the mind's outgoing energy back to its origin, or trace back the emotion in the body to see where it comes from, and how it blows up and can also fade away. The meditation exercises given here aim to create a sense of spaciousness around an emotion, an environment of non-entanglement, so that there's a context for it. When an emotional state in or around you is surrounded by spaciousness, you see the state within that context. That's the essence of responsiveness, the spaciousness that says: 'That's a strong feeling! What do

I do with it?’ or ‘I don’t know what to do with this person who is having a breakdown in my company.’ This is the uncomfortable ‘I don’t know what to do with this’ feeling. It’s not a matter of shutting your heart down, of building a wall between ‘you’ and ‘the other’; it’s an openness to what’s here but a non-entanglement with it. It’s an unentangled participation in that experience, an engagement, but not with any entangled or distorted, contorted quality.

The question that comes up then is how to decide what is the right thing to do. In my humble opinion, ‘the right thing’ is a dangerous concept. The very phrase carries the presumption that there is a single perfect ‘right thing’ to do, a path in life that you’re supposed to be following; the ‘it’s meant to be’ delusion. I would like to suggest that there is no one ‘right thing to do’; it changes second by second, moment by moment, and is entirely dependent on mindful attunement to the present moment.

Sometimes the steps on the Noble Eightfold Path (customarily translated, for example as: *Sammā-ditṭhi* = Right View, *Sammā-sankappa* = Right Intention, *Sammā-vācā* = Right Speech) are called Wise View, Wise Intention, Wise Speech, etc. because translating *Sammā* as ‘right’ may feel politically incorrect. In essence *Sammā* doesn’t mean ‘wise’, but we don’t like to talk about ‘right and wrong’ because we don’t want to judge, to divide things or people into right and wrong.

But the *Sammā* of the Eightfold Path is not the ‘right’ that is opposed to ‘wrong’. *Sammā* doesn’t really mean that kind of rightness. It means ‘right’ as in ‘upright’; it means ‘balanced’. As it says in one of Ven. Thanissaro’s books, *‘Wings to Awakening’*:

[A]ny path of practice deviating from these systems [the 37 *bodhipakkhiya-dhammas*, or ‘conditions pertaining to enlightenment’] would be like an instrument tuned to a

discordant scale, and would not be in harmony with the way of the contemplative (**samaṇa**) who aims at a life in tune (**sama**) with the Dhamma.

‘Wings to Awakening’, p 32

A second point is that the musical analogy makes vivid the need for balance in meditative practice, a lesson that appears repeatedly in the texts:

Just as a musical instrument should neither be too sharp nor too flat, the mind on the path has to find a balance between excessive energy and excessive stillness. At the same time, it must constantly watch out for the tendency for its energy to slacken in the same way that stringed instruments tend to go flat. The ‘rightness’ of right view and other factors of the path thus carries the connotation not only of being correct, but also of being ‘just right’.

‘Wings to Awakening’, p 37

If we pick up on this association we can say that the rightness of Right View also means Attuned View, so too Attuned Intention, Attuned Speech etc., which tells a different story. Doing the ‘right’ thing is not doing what is correct rather than what’s incorrect; it’s doing that which is ‘righted’, that which is in tune with the present moment. It is being attuned to the situation, to what is needed in any one particular moment, what is most beneficial for us and those we live with, and for handling emotional conflicts, or judgements or opinions. This understanding of attunement is really the essence of *mettā*, that loving-kindness which manifests as a radical acceptance, and also of *sati-sampajañña*, mindfulness and clear comprehension; *mettā*, *sati* and *paññā* – kindness, mindfulness and wisdom – are the heart of that benevolent attuning. It depends a lot on listening, on being open to what we are experiencing, the feelings within ourselves or from outside, and making space for them.

Thus the guide for action in terms of how we adapt, how we know we're attuned, depends largely on mindfulness and paying attention. But we also need to let go of the idea of 'the right thing', some special thing like the path we 'should' be following or the 'right' meditation method. The essential element of this kind of attunement is to recognize that at any one moment we have an infinity of choices. Some choices we make lead to a painful result, some lead to a neutral result, some lead to a pleasant result. If we make a choice that leads to a painful result, even though it's painful we may learn a lot from it – or it may be just painful. Similarly, we can have a pleasant result, but depending on how we handle that success or goodness we may make it into something monstrous, so that it may just bring a lot more difficulty for us. Thus the relishing of a beautiful state of meditation may become a cause of deep depression and disappointment for the next ten years while you try to get back the beautiful, blissful experience of that sitting, because you're wrongly grasping that pleasant result.

Rather than thinking in terms of the right thing and the wrong thing, then, we make our choices as best we can, based on attunement instead of thinking there's some sort of mysterious path already laid out for us – like a golden wire buried in the ground that we only have to find and then we can follow it to our destined happily-ever-after. Rather we make the choice that seems likely to lead to the most favourable result and then we see what happens. If there's a pleasant result, we consider how to take this goodness, and use it well, without causing trouble for ourselves or others. If things go badly, we consider what we can learn from that: 'What can this painful result teach me? What can I learn from it? What does it say about where to go in the future?' So when someone is attacking us or we are critical of someone's behaviour, but we stay quiet, we see and know the result of that for ourselves. Or we react fiercely and see how that works. Whatever the results are, we watch, we learn, we plough them back into our experience and they guide us for the future.

More specific help on what to do or how to choose is found in the Five Precepts, the basic format for human conduct: not to take life; not to steal or misappropriate things that don't belong to you; not to engage in sexual misconduct, but to be respectful towards your own relationships and those of others; not to lie, deceive or use harsh or false speech in any way; and to avoid intoxicants that cause confusion. This is the format for a peaceful and contented life. The Five Precepts set out clear parameters; they give you a broad framework within which to use this kind of exploratory approach and ways of handling our perspectives, the opinions and views that arise within us, the way we see human situations. And when we look at the consequences of our actions, over and over again we find that the more we respond reflectively it leads to positive results, and when we react impulsively it yields negative ones. We use this comparing process like a tuning fork to measure our pitch and with the resultant attunement we feel more at ease and content. The people around us tend to be happier and more

comfortable too, and we find that life has a very fluid and open quality to it.

I once met a Wall Street lawyer who had started practising meditation some half a dozen years previously. She said: 'Until I started to meditate it was one conflict after another, and life was one ongoing struggle. But since I began meditating my relationships have become much more easeful, and my working situation is more relaxed, though I'm still working with the same company and I live with the same people.' It was as if she thought: 'This magical visitation has come into my life and taken all my troubles away!' I said: 'This isn't really very magical. It's more like: you used to get from one room to another by smashing yourself against the wall until you broke through it, and then suddenly you noticed that it's much easier to go through the doorway. It's not magic, it's noticing where the gaps are and aiming for them, rather than just putting your head down and pounding with it until the wall breaks or you fall down unconscious.' I think she was a little startled, perhaps

because she had some internal story about how the devas were helping her and how magical things were. But often when we apply plain ol' mindfulness and activate this capacity to be spacious, to see things in context, they open up. Life becomes a lot more easeful and we can find ways to deal with the conflicts, difficulties and apparently intractable situations that we face. We find ways to work with them that surprise us. It can seem to be miraculous but it's often merely a matter of *mettā* – allowing more spaciousness, a radical acceptance based upon a quality of listening, into the mixture.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: I was curious about the ‘pressurized alienation’ that you talked about and the pressurizing of the heart. I understood the alienation part, the separateness, but I wanted to hear more about what you meant by it and how it pressurizes the heart, or how the process of conceptual proliferation leads to that.

Answer: It’s essentially to do with strengthening the sense of ‘I’; inflating the feeling of ‘I’ and ‘me’ and ‘mine’. As that sense of self becomes stronger and more inflated, more real, that creates a feeling of alienation. The more the sense of self is let go of, the less there is that quality of separation and alienation. This reduces the causes of conflict, because the less of a fixed and

solid 'me' there is, the less the feeling of a world 'out there' and 'the other' is created. So the tension of longing to get something from 'the other' or being in conflict with 'the other' dissolves. There isn't really a subject/object separation, but when the mind hangs on to this fabricated perception which doesn't match the reality, it creates a feeling of tension. There isn't really a separate 'me' that's completely independent from the rest of the world; that's not the reality. Therefore, when the mind hangs on to that which is not real, it's trying to hold an illusion together in the face of a different set of facts. It's a non-sustainable picture of the world; it simply doesn't apply, the world doesn't work in that way. Two plus two does not equal five. But when we hang on to a sense of self and feel it as solid, the inflation of the feeling of 'I' creates alienation and loneliness. Seeing the ego and the sense of self as just a convenient fiction that we use to get through life takes away this rift between self and other, and the sense of stress or tension between them.

As it says in the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*:

With such conceptual proliferation as the source, the heart is beset with mental perceptions and notions characterized by the prolific tendency in respect to past, present, and future forms.

And when that comes to an end:

Then this is the end of resorting to weapons, quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice and false speech. Here these harmful unwholesome states cease without remainder.

‘Beset’ is not a word we use often, but it conveys the quality of being surrounded by aggressive and unwelcome forces. When we invest in the sense of self and think we need to be stronger, we react to that feeling of pressure or being beset by the world and its problems by trying to tighten up, to protect

ourselves more. We become more anxious; we get closed circuit TV cameras to protect our home and more insurance, and we become more miserable. We seek protection because of the feeling of fear. We don't realize that we can get to the very source of the fear and see what there is to be afraid of. When we see the reactions happening within us that create the causes of that fear, we can let go of that sense of self, of self-concern, and then we recognize clearly that there's no one who's afraid and nothing to be afraid of: *Sabbe dhammā anattā*: all dhammas, all things, are 'not-self'.

Question: So the real object of the whole practice is to have no identification with self? Is that basically the bottom line?

Answer: Ideally. It's to do with seeing through the feeling of self; like saying: 'I am Ajahn Amaro,' as long as I know that's a convenient fiction, I'm fine. To my sisters I am not Ajahn Amaro, I'm their little brother. They know what to write on the

envelope when they send me a card, but I'm not Ajahn Amaro to them. They're my big sisters. They knew a different me. But for most of the world that's a convenient handle to use. It's a convenient way to get through life, but the more clearly we see through it, the more free we are from suffering. As the Buddha said:

'I am' is a conceiving. Conceiving is a disease. Conceiving is a tumour, a barb, a sharpened arrow. By overcoming all conceivings, bhikkhu, one is called a sage at peace. And the sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die. They are not shaken and are not agitated. For there is nothing present in them by which they might be born. Not born, how could they age? Not ageing, how could they die? Not dying, how could they be shaken? Not being shaken, how could they be agitated?

Dhātuvibhanga Sutta

(‘The Exposition on the Elements’) M 140.31

Question: But how do we find a way of not believing in that picture of ‘me’ – how we present ourselves and how we’re seen?

Answer: The Buddha said that what one is trying to do in this kind of spiritual practice, to truly liberate the heart, is the most difficult thing a human being can undertake. But it’s also the only real thing you can do. That’s a sweeping statement, but I believe it’s true. It’s also interesting that after his enlightenment the Buddha first thought there was no point trying to explain it to anybody. Not saying ‘yes’ to everything, but not saying ‘no’ to everything either: no entanglement with anything; how do you talk about that? What’s the language for it? It’s amazing that not only could the Buddha teach it to people in his own lifetime, but two and a half thousand years later we’re still fruitfully using the teachings he put together to try to explain the inexplicable.

The conundrum of ‘self’ is particularly tricky because it’s such an assumed reality. For four hundred years Western

philosophy has been struggling to decide whether things are predetermined or if we have free will. But the Buddha's approach was completely different. He asked: 'Who is there to have free will or not? Who is deciding?' Thus he turned the attention to our presumptions about the agent. Rather than trying to figure out whether I can truly decide anything, from first principles, we look at what this 'I' is. Is it genuinely a separate individual entity? We use meditation to direct attention onto the 'self-feeling' and explore it, and we see there is no 'thing' there. It's like a conjuring trick. These different elements collected together create an illusion. It's like seeing a few lines on a piece of paper and suddenly recognizing a horse. We say: 'Oh, look, it's a horse!' in the same way we should say, 'Oh, look, it's a person,' and not forget that this person is a fabricated reality. The word 'person' comes from the Latin *persona*, which means 'mask'. *Per* means 'through', *sona* means 'sound'. The *persona* is what sound goes through, so our *persona* is our mask to the world, and we see

individual identity as a mask, a convenient fiction. But we still need to be able to function in the world, and that's a difficult manoeuvre, because we need to keep track of both pleasant experiences and also unpleasant experiences, such as conflict.

When something happens that really pleases you, you need to be able to recognize that it's just 'liking'. In essence it's no different from a pain in your knee. It's just a feeling, just an endorphin flash. It's a pleasure centre going off rather than a pain centre. You learn to develop perspective and space around your instinctive nature, the reptile brain areas of territoriality, procreation, aggression, feeding. These are all things to which the Precepts relate, they're about violence, property, sexuality, communication, food, territory. The Precepts create space around those instinctive, non-verbal reactions by the amygdala and the reptile brain. Some of the most violent activities in nature are those of a mother protecting her offspring. The *Mettā Sutta* says:

Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child...

As I understand it, when males in the animal world fight they're usually competing for hierarchy, and they generally just leave a few scars before backing off. But when a female is protecting her cubs, she'll kill the attacker. These are powerful forces, and the kind of practice I've been describing gives a perspective on the activity of these root instinctive processes, where the feeling of self very quickly becomes embedded: 'I' am angry, 'I' want, 'I' am lustful, 'I' must have. Seeing through the sense of self and being able to experience those qualities directly means realizing: 'This is just defensiveness', 'This is just aggression', or 'This is just fear.' It's not a personal problem. It's not 'mine'. It's just a pattern of nature. This allows for an expansiveness, a spaciousness, around those reactions. A lot of what it allows is letting go of the sense of self. There's space around 'mine', 'me' and 'what I am'.

Question: How does an activist who wants justice and wants to fight for justice step back from the reptile brain reactions into the ‘response’ place?

Answer: Mindfully. It’s recognizing the feeling: ‘We need justice here. Now, where am I coming from in that attitude?’ Then we turn that reflective quality inwards and say: ‘Okay, this seems unfair and not right. Now, how am I holding that? Where is it in my heart? Where is that feeling coming from? Is it coming from a sense of wanting to benefit the “other” as well as myself? Is there an urge to punish? What’s there? What’s here?’ We try to be as clear and honest as we can. If you feel that you want the ‘other’ to suffer, you can’t just switch that feeling off. You note: ‘That’s the feeling that’s arisen and that’s where it’s coming from.’ And when you see where it’s coming from, don’t trust it. However, you can’t just decide: ‘From today onward I won’t feel angry’ or ‘I’ll stop being afraid. I’ve had it with fear.’ The one who does the deciding is not working for

the same company as the one who is doing the fearing. The systems analyst is not in discussion with the tyrannosaurus: it's a different language. Instead you acknowledge your reaction: 'I recognize that I want that person to suffer. That's what I'm feeling. Okay.' And know that's what's there.

Bringing that quality of awareness to the feeling of the body is exactly the same thing, as in when bringing up a painful childhood memory, or a memory of being attacked or criticized. Maybe a memory is so painful and intense that you can't really get anywhere near it, but that very awareness in itself is part of the balancing; it's part of the righting process, of bringing things into attunement. You can ask your friends for help: 'I think we need to do something about this situation, but I can't get clear enough in my mind because I hate the person concerned, so can you give me some advice about what would be a good way forward? I don't trust my own judgement.' Doing that is not a weakness. It's wisdom to call

on your friends who haven't got such a loaded view or biased perspective, and ask what they think. So you're recognizing your own deludedness, but you're not being passive or letting things run because of not wanting to act on your fear or anger, rather you're drawing upon your reliable friends who can help.

Question: If I'm criticized once by someone, I don't react but just try to stay clear. But when there's criticism every time I am with that person, that means I'm exposing myself to this process. So I've followed some advice I was given, which was: if someone criticizes you and it resonates as true, you can bless the person because they gave you a jewel to learn from, a flaw that you need to improve on. But if it doesn't resonate as true, you learn about that person, not about yourself. But when I see unskilful actions I just flick them away, I say: 'I hear the advice:

“Be with what is, stay open”,’ but it’s not working. I have a hard time with that.

Answer: The very fact that you have to flick those actions away means that you’ve taken hold of them. I’m not saying you should be passive and go along with what everyone says or just agree with them, but if someone is, say, making some criticism and you want to push them away, that very sense of wanting to do so means you’ve already picked it up. So it’s a refinement of practice to say: ‘This person has a problem. Every time they see me they complain about such-and-such.’ If we really mean that, the person’s complaining is not bothersome to us. Instead it arouses a quality of compassion: ‘Poor guy. He can’t drop this thing, and when I come through the door it gets pasted onto me. But he’s carrying a difficult issue around. Poor fellow.’ So you develop a quality of compassion for the other person’s tight, miserable state, and rather than feeling that you’ve got to push them away, what arises is a quality of caring. You’re

not just seeing them in terms of their behaviour to you, but receiving them in a broader way.

Another aspect is the need, firstly, to make friends with your own 'I don't want that!' feelings. Once you have accepted those fully, then the compassion for the other comes more easily. Does that help?

Question: It does. It's just that I have in mind the concept of noble friendship, and it seems noble friends are very hard to find. But I keep looking.

Answer: If someone is being very critical, you may eventually recognize that it's the right time and place to respond: 'He's in such a miserable state. He just criticizes and complains. How painful for him.' So you find the right words and say: 'Do you realize that every time you see me you're complaining about

this and that? Doesn't that amount of negativity seem painful to you?' Maybe such a moment of giving direct feedback never arises, but once in a while it can happen, and then that quality of compassion encourages us to communicate our perception of their complaining. You're not trying to get even with the complainer, or punish them or push them away. You're saying:

'I care about you. What an uncomfortable place your mind must be in, that you see all these things to criticize and that's what you choose to speak about. How painful!' If no moment opens up to say that, you leave it alone. If a suitable moment does come, however, it's a kindness to offer that kind of a reflection.

'Do you realize that whenever you see me, this is what you say?'

If you wait until it's genuinely for their benefit the message will get through, even if initially they become defensive or brush you off. If you're acting from genuine kindness, at some unguarded moment they'll realize you were right. That's my experience. Sometimes it can be years later. Every so often I get

a card from someone saying: ‘You probably don’t remember this, but seven years ago during a retreat I said this to you and your response made me very angry and upset, and I left the retreat, but I didn’t forget. And now I want to say thank you for saying that.’ If we are patient, and we wait for the right moment and see that we’re genuinely acting for the benefit of the other, that’s the best that we can do with a situation like that.

Question: I enjoy the teachings of Buddhism and try to practise it, but I come to a kind of wall. We say that the ending of desire is enlightenment, that we shouldn’t live in the world of duality, of opposites and we should look at ‘good and evil’ in a different way. How do we apply that to the real world? How can I utilize those teachings in my job or somewhere in the real world, not just in nature where it’s a little easier?

Answer: It’s a matter of recognizing the structures and conventions of our lives. For example, driving on the right-

hand side is not an absolute good, it's just the convention in most countries. The more you believe in a desire, the more clearly you'll recognize when it doesn't make you happy, and you'll see that the disappointment is directly proportional to the expectation. So you don't try to be totally desireless or just switch yourself off as a personality. You see that if you believe in those things as absolute truths, you create problems for yourself. You might feel angry towards someone and say: 'If that person didn't exist I would be happy!' But you don't have to think that very long before realizing that if the person didn't exist, you might find something else to get upset about. So functioning in the so-called 'real world' is recognizing those different perceptions and opinions, the conventions that we use. Driving on the left or the right, what something's worth: those are just society's fictions that we use to get through a day and to function as a human group. And if we hold them lightly in that way, if we loosen our grip on the world, rather than it becoming 'less real', we mysteriously find ourselves more

totally at home with it. If you love the world completely, you let go of it. The more tightly you hold on to it and want to keep and own it, the more alienation you create between yourself and it.

That's the principle of letting go or non-attachment; you're not trying to nullify your life and your feelings out of a dismissal of the world. Rather, ironically and mysteriously, when you let go of the world you find yourself at home in it. That's the human drama. You still have all your desires and ambitions, but you don't grasp them. I've just been told that two hundred and thirty three people have signed up for my next meditation day. That's a lot! On one level I don't care. I'd be happy to teach just six people. But in my habitual thinking patterns around making teachings available for the public, if a couple of hundred people show up, something says, 'I scored a point!' It's ridiculous on one level, but we get conditioned to these ways of functioning,

even though they don't mean anything really. If the football team I used to support scores seven goals against a rival, in the great scheme of things it doesn't matter. But something in me remembers my childhood allegiance to that team and thinks: 'Seven goals to one – that was great!' If you're promoted there's a flush of success, if you're laid off there's heartbreak or resentment. There's the feeling of happiness when everyone shows up for a teaching, or the feeling of pain when people start leaving or falling asleep. It's ridiculous. But that's the flow of the human tragi-comedy and, when we see that this is the pattern of our lives, we learn what we can from that flow of events and feelings.

WHY AM I DOING THIS TO MYSELF?

We all have a tendency to take sides and to leap to conclusions, which manifests in different ways in our lives. There was a recent example of this in the Thai Forest tradition, concerning bhikkhuni ordination. Our authorities in Thailand don't recognize the validity of full ordination for women. They argue that the bhikkhuni ordination died out in Sri Lanka with the last recorded nuns of the classical era about a thousand years ago, while Buddhism only came to Thailand about eight hundred years ago. According to the monastic rule, nuns must be ordained by other nuns, so the view of the Thai authorities is that as the bhikkhuni lineage had died out before Buddhism came to Thailand, therefore it 'can't be reinstituted'.

In fact the Theravada lineage of nuns was taken to China in the fifth century. In 432 CE a group of nuns were invited from Sri Lanka by the Chinese emperor on account of Chinese women who were interested in being ordained as nuns. They landed at Nanking and ordinations were carried out. Thus the lineage of nuns in China, *bhikshunis*, sprang from a Sri Lankan root. Their history through the centuries has been recorded in detail: from the names of the nuns who came from Sri Lanka, where and when their ship landed and the name of its captain, and the full lineage of nuns, the preceptors, and so forth from that time on. So, many women in the Theravada world who want to become bhikkhunis take ordination in the Chinese or Korean lineages, whose origins are the same, and then establish themselves under the Theravadan flag. They argue that although they took their ordination from China, it originally came from Sri Lanka. It just did a little detour for 1500 years. That lineage through China is not recognized as valid in Thailand, but one of the four

different *nikāyas* or lineages in Sri Lanka does recognize it, so Sri Lankan women, and also women from Thailand, Burma and Western women, have received full ordination as bhikkhunis, those in Sri Lanka mostly at a place called Dambulla, the Caves of Light. There are now several hundred bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka, all as I understand it in just one of those four lineages.

In Australia there was a lot of interest in full ordination for women, and Ajahn Brahmavarṃso, the abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery in Western Australia (who originally trained with Ajahn Chah and is a popular teacher) decided to go ahead with an ordination of four women. Our community functions very much as a global family, so this decision amounted to taking a big step outside our group agreements. There are different opinions as to whether our other branch monasteries were or weren't asked about the matter, but many people in many different places felt they hadn't been consulted. (There are some 300 branch monasteries, about twenty in the West and

the rest in Thailand, so a lot of different people were involved). So there seemed to have been very little consultation and very little advance warning of the ordination but, nevertheless, it went ahead. Ajahn Brahm oversaw it, and Ayya Tathāloka, who had been a fully ordained nun in the Korean tradition for many years but had recently switched to being Theravadan, acted as the preceptor for the nuns who were being ordained. It was all very well intentioned. Ajahn Brahm felt that things were stuck in the Thai tradition and this was a good way to move them forward. He thought that offering equal opportunity for women in ordination was completely appropriate and suitable.

Unfortunately the results of going ahead with the ordination aroused a huge amount conflict in and around our monastic community, including vast amounts of traffic over the internet, blogs, emails, petitions and so forth. And to cite the theme of this teaching, there was a tremendous amount of ‘I’m

right, you're wrong'. All those who supported the ordination had their reasons for believing they were right, and all those who opposed it, or said it was not valid or shouldn't have been done in that way, also had their reasons for doing so. This was extremely disheartening. These were all good, well-intentioned people, but on all sides, across all shades of the spectrum, people tended to adopt their position, make a case for it and then set up an opposition against 'the other'. The Theravada monastic world is really a very small part of the grander scheme of things, but within our own sphere and for those interested in Buddhist practice, this event has affected many of our lives very strongly.

So it seems worthwhile to examine how, when we take hold of a fixed view, a fixed position, our opposition to 'the other' who disagrees with that position can become a force which obscures the real issues, making us unable to see them in a broad, helpful or effective way. It's very hard to see the other

person's point of view if we're convinced of our 'rightness'. Words like 'right', 'rightness' and 'actually' are loaded. They have great power. Notice how many times in a day you use the words: 'Well, actually ...', meaning: 'This is the real truth, the real real truth'.

But what's more important is to learn to work with our own points of view and see them in a context, rather than just arguing about who's right and who's wrong, or supporting one side and creating a sense of alienation from the other. In the controversy over the ordinations in Australia, the male members of Ajahn Chah's lineage who were not enthusiastic about the ceremony suddenly found themselves viewed by some people as evil patriarchal misogynists. But all of us find ourselves in these polarized positions sometimes – for example, which partner of a divorcing couple do you side with when both are dear to you? – though, in a sense, whether we're polarized or not is ultimately up to us. By learning to understand how

the mind relates to opinions, we learn how to relate skilfully to these difficult situations, moral conundrums and struggles throughout our lives.

How does it feel to be criticized, attacked, misunderstood, misrepresented?

There's a well-known teaching in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Connected Discourses, about Akkosaka Bharadvāja (S 7.2), whose name means 'Bharadvāja the Abusive'. He had heard that another member of the Bharadvāja brahmin clan had been ordained as a monk and joined the Buddha's community:

'Angry and displeased, he approached the Blessed One and abused and reviled him with rude, harsh words.' The Buddha listened to this verbal attack and then said:

'Bharadvāja, may I ask you a question?'

'Yes!'

‘Is it the case that sometimes friends or relatives come and visit you?’

‘Yes, of course! I’m a householder, I have an ordinary family life. Of course people come and visit me! Why?’

‘Well, if you have people come and visit you, family or friends, is it your custom to offer them some refreshments, something to drink, some food or a snack when they come to see you?’

‘Well, of course it is! It’s a normal, civilized, polite thing to do!’

‘When you offer them this refreshment, if they decline to accept it, to whom does it belong?’

‘Well if they haven’t accepted it, it’s still mine, of course! Why do you ask?’

‘Well, brahmin, you offer me your anger. I don’t accept it. It still belongs to you, brahmin. It still belongs to you.’

Akkosaka Bharadvāja wasn’t pleased with this reply at first, but

then the Buddha added the following spontaneous verses:

One who repays an angry person with anger
thereby makes things worse for themselves.
Not repaying an angry person with anger,
One wins a battle hard to win.

One practises for the welfare of both,
One's own and the other's
When, knowing that the other is angry,
One mindfully maintains one's peace.

At that Bharadvāja the Abusive not only apologized but asked for ordination, and eventually he became an Arahant. It's important to remember that one can be, as Ajahn Chah said to Ajahn Sumedho: 'Right in fact, but wrong in Dhamma'. That's a very helpful principle to take in: we can be right in fact, have any number of good reasons, but be wrong in Dhamma.

Similarly, when someone attacks us as Bharadvāja the Abusive attacked the Buddha, we feel defensive and the mind comes up with things to protect itself with, such as the ‘yes, but’ list. We prepare our retaliation and the reasons why *they* are wrong. When someone attacks us, we instinctively pick up that person’s mood and react by trying to defend ourselves, push them away or we shut down. Differently, in this exchange between the Buddha and Akkosaka, when Akkosaka verbally attacks the Buddha, the Buddha doesn’t react in that way. It’s as if someone offered you a dish of food but you just said: ‘Fine, but I am not hungry, I have no need of anything. And that’s a nice dish you’ve got there,’ recognizing that it’s theirs and that you have no obligation to receive it.

Or perhaps you’re very excited about something and try to share it with someone else who has absolutely no interest in the matter, and who is not swept up in your enthusiasm. What happens then is that your emotion, your excitement,

is deflated. Similarly, the Buddha's reaction to Bharadvāja the Abusive's angry attack is just to say: 'That's your state. You're excited. You're upset about this. I don't have to pick that up.'

To manifest care and kindness you don't have to pick up the other person's state. Sometime we can feel that: 'I will be being rude if I don't confirm my friend in their joy/sorrow/indignation etc.' So we end up adopting their mood even though we had no strong feeling beforehand. Alternatively, it might be the other person who puts out the same unspoken message: 'You don't care about me! If you did you would be as angry as I am.'

To practise deep kindness and radical acceptance, you acknowledge, at least internally, that this is the state they are in and that you are not obliged to feel that too. You don't shut them out. You're not saying: 'I don't care.' Rather you recognize that don't have to take part in that state of mind. You

can choose whether to join in another person's state of mind or not. Normally we don't realize this; for some peculiar reason we feel as if we're obliged to join in someone else's excitement, outrage or anger. Somehow it's what we're 'supposed' to do. But I suggest there isn't really a 'supposed to'. It's more a question of recognizing the state the other person is in and deciding whether we want to join in or not: 'Would that be helpful, beautiful, useful?' Or do I want to join their state on the terms in which it's being offered?

In terms of my own character I'm the sort of person who would immediately empathize with another person's mood and join in. Then a while later I would think: 'Why am I so excited about this? I don't really care,' or 'Why am I defending myself? What this person's upset about really isn't anything to do with me.' I would only recognize later that I didn't have to react in that way, but had done so out of a wish to empathize or a misguided sense of wanting to be supportive, to be connected to or not

reject the person. That's a very common feeling, a common chemistry. We join in with someone else's mood because we feel that we have to, or solely out of habit.

Thus in learning to work with grasping – taking hold of opinions and views – we can learn to receive, accept and acknowledge another person's mood, to know and be aware of it, but recognize in addition that we have a choice, a bridge we may or may not cross: 'Do we choose to join in with that person's mood or to leave it alone?' It's very helpful in these situations to develop body awareness, using our physical sensations. It's the same when someone upsets you or you're irritated by someone, or when you're being attacked, criticized, misunderstood, misrepresented. These are prime opportunities for practice.

It takes a lot to be mindfully misunderstood or misrepresented, because you want to jump in and say: 'No! It wasn't like that! That's not what I think. I'm not that way. I didn't do that. It

wasn't me. No! You don't understand!' But as I believe Confucius put it: 'Those who justify themselves do not convince.' The very energy of self-justification feeds that same kind of contention.

We can use physical awareness when we're attacked, when we are being mistreated or misunderstood. Rather than letting the mind go into verbal reactions or some kind of escape strategy, we can instead bring the attention into the body and feel: 'What's it like, this sense that I'm being attacked?' The attacker doesn't need to be present; you can do this when reading an email in which someone attacks you, or criticism of you or your community, or when you hear criticism through a third party. Rather than letting the mind buy into that self-justification, that spluttering, self-affirming habit, come back into the body and ask: 'Where do I feel that? What's it like? What's its texture? What's its position? What's the place in the body where I feel that sense of indignation, fear or threat?' It's very helpful to explore where in the body we feel these

different emotional states and then to develop mindfulness of the body, bringing the attention to that part of the body and fully knowing that feeling of being frightened, under pressure or criticized. I should stress that when we look at the physical sensation of this kind of emotion, when we allow ourselves to feel it, it's not pleasant, so we habitually try to get away from it by telling a story or burning off the energy somehow. But when we focus the attention on it and let ourselves feel that fear in the belly, the breathlessness, the choking in the throat or the dagger between the shoulder blades, my experience has been that it isn't that bad.

It's not as painful as a migraine headache or a toothache. It's uncomfortable, but it's only like being out in a cold wind or having a small discomfort like a twinge in the knee. The urgency with which we try to get away from that feeling far outweighs the felt experience of the discomfort. So working with a painful feeling has a lot to do with engendering loving-

kindness towards it. That doesn't mean trying to like it, but recognizing that this is what it's like when we're outraged, upset or feeling grief. We bring the attention to it and have loving-kindness for it, a clear, open-hearted acceptance of the feeling of grief, threat, falling apart.

But then... to stay with it is really difficult.

The most difficult thing is not to do anything with it, because we immediately jump into thinking: 'It's an unpleasant feeling. How do I get rid of it?' That's the immediate reaction, and that urgency to 'get rid of' creates the causes for the feeling to be intensified, and made stronger and more real. This is because the mind is saying: 'This is a real thing that is in the way. If I got rid of it I would be happy.' Reasonable enough, in theory, but when we act on that reaction we intensify the causes of the feeling. Instead, we can go to the feeling and let it be known: 'This is the cramp in the belly, this is the tightness in the throat, this is the knife between the shoulder blades. It feels like this.'

That very open acceptance of it as it is, without trying to ‘do’ anything with it, that very act of awareness, is the transforming agent. When those feelings, those painful sensations are held with a genuine, open, unbiased awareness, that’s when letting go, genuine relaxation can begin. It’s a relaxation based not on trying to get rid of, but on recognizing: ‘Why am I doing this to myself? Why do I hate this? Why do I fear this? Why am I tensing up against this? This is hard work.’ It’s a non-conceptual realization. A little intuition murmurs: ‘Why am I doing this to myself? I don’t have to do this. Lighten up.’ And the system softens on its own. The quality of awareness itself is like a heat lamp on a knotted muscle. After a while there’s a sense of ease which is hard to put into words but I think we all know that quality of softening. We learn to trust that quality of awareness, letting it rest on the place of tension, the place of discomfort, and we stay with it, letting the presence

of loving, attentive awareness loosen the tension. Then we see for ourselves that this is another way of tracing back the radiance; it's a way of coming back to the source and realizing: 'It's really not that big a thing. It's just a feeling. Why do I do this to myself?' And then we relax.

NON-CONTENTION WITH MARA

The scriptures often show how the Buddha encountered Māra, the force of denial and death. Under the Bodhi tree his response to Māra's threats, cajolings, temptations and attempts to cause doubts was not life-affirmation; nor did he go into deep *jhāna* and evade Māra, blast him with a *vajra* bolt, try to be reasonable and negotiate on Māra's terms or justify himself. Instead his response was a fearless wakefulness. Almost invariably in the accounts of their meetings, as soon as he is aware of the malefactor's presence, he just says: 'I know you, Māra.' And the

5 This chapter has been previously published, in various forms and in a variety of publications, including in 'Buddhadharma', Spring, 2003.

game is over. These are myths, but they maintain their power because they correspond to truth as we experience it. When Māra knows that the Buddha has seen the trick, the hook inside the bait, he knows his intended victim is not going to bite. In that declaration of knowing, Māra is defeated. This suggests that the opposite to death is not birth, life-affirmation or even the destruction of death, but wakefulness.

Perhaps the most meaningful way of considering the encounters between the Buddha and Māra is to regard them as depicting the arising of unwholesome ego-based states in the mind of the Buddha, the instinctive fears, doubts and desires which arise in his mind but find no place to land there. Using the myth as a map of our own psyches, Māra also represents our own ego-death experiences (loneliness, anger, obsessiveness, greed, doubt, etc.). The Buddha's example points to the most skilful way for the wisdom of our hearts to respond to them: by wakeful and radical non-contention. For as soon as we

contend against death, we've bought into the value system and swallowed the hook. When we hate and fear death or want to swamp it with what we take to be life, Māra has won: 'Such a one has gone over to Māra's side and the Evil One can do with him as he likes' (S 35.115).

Non-contention is not passivity, denial or switching off, dumbly suffering the slings and arrows as they thump into us, but a full awareness. The Buddha doesn't say: 'It's all yours, Māra.' Defeating Māra is the point, but he is defeated by not contending against him. One of the most often quoted passages of the Dhammapada states:

Hatred is never conquered by hatred.

Only by love is it conquered.

This is a law

ancient and inexhaustible.

(Dhp 5)

Also in such passages as:

Whatever states of being there are,
of any kind, anywhere,
all are impermanent, pain-haunted
and subject to change.

One who sees this as it is
thus abandons craving for existence,
without relishing non-existence.

The remainderless fading, cessation,
Nibbāna, comes with the utter ending of all craving.
When a bhikkhu reaches Nibbāna thus, through
not clinging,

Then he will have no renewal of being;
Māra has been vanquished and the battle gained,
Since one such as he has outstripped all being.

(Ud 3.10, Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans.)

So there is a conundrum: how can conquest be the aim if the fundamental attitude is non-contentious?

The Buddha was a warrior noble, a *khattiya*, by birth, but like Gandhi he sought victory by non-argument. Martial language and symbolism are often used in relationship to the Buddha, including such epithets for him as *Jina* ('Conqueror'), but it is important to recognize that 'conquest' here does not entail a fight; more accurately, it means that ultimately reality has to outweigh illusion. As Māra once expressed himself after another frustrating encounter: 'You might as well poke a rock with lily stems' (S 4.25). Māra is frustrated even though the rock is not doing any contending.

This approach is of crucial importance and provides clear moral guidance, both in our day-to-day relations and interpersonal disputes, and in the context of international conflicts and wars. The Buddha was no stranger to war and politics, and his wise

advice relates to those domains as much as to our internal worlds. Whether it's 'a reasonable hatred' of the chattering mind, restlessness, doubts and sordid passions (backed up by quoting the Dhamma book that says: 'Destroy greed, hatred and delusion') or 'a warranted hatred' of ex-partners who have betrayed us, wielders of painful influence in our world about whom we are absolutely justified to be negative, or political leaders we love to decry – when there is commitment to any such urges, the hook has sunk right in.

In his famous 'Simile of the Saw' (M 21.20) the Buddha states: 'Even if bandits were severing you limb from limb with a two-handled saw, if you gave rise to an attitude of hatred towards them, you would not be following my teaching.' Instead he advocates being compassionate and wishing for the welfare of the abusers. The bar is thus set dauntingly high, but perhaps he used this extreme example deliberately to indicate that all hatred is intrinsically non-Dhammic, and that loving-kindness,

mettā, is always possible. It's important to recognize that *mettā* does not mean liking everything, but accepting that everything has its place in nature; it all belongs, the beautiful and the ugly. True benevolence is not dwelling in aversion, it is radical non-contention with all nature. It is natural enough to confuse the two, but mistakenly taking 'loving' to also mean 'liking' can cause a lot of problems.

An ancient Indian tale speaks of a cobra who becomes the disciple of a forest-dwelling *rishi*. Newly sworn to vegetarianism and pacifism, she had a rough time, especially when the village boys realized she would no longer strike or fight back when tormented. One day, with ruffled scales and broken fang, she went to see the holy one: 'I have tried my very best to follow your teachings faithfully, but this is too much – one of those boys just picked me up by the tail, swung me round and tossed me up in a tree. This is the last straw. I take your teachings on non-violence very seriously, but one more incident like this and there's going to be trouble.'

The holy man replied: 'I deeply admire your commitment to the Path, dear one, and it's true that I require non-violence of all my disciples, but I never told you that you couldn't hiss.'

Thus fierceness, as mentioned above, is not necessarily equivalent to anger, likewise civil disobedience is not the same as being enraged. Similarly, we can have true kindness, acceptance of the way things are, without condoning a certain attitude, as if to say: 'I love you completely, but your opinions are poisonous and deranged.' In the cultural language of the West, 'not hating' often implies tacit approval. The eminent professor of linguistics at MIT, Noam Chomsky, once vigorously defended the right of a fascist politician to speak on campus. Though he had no sympathy for the man's views, he also saw that to ban him from speaking was to show the same quality of prejudice as that attributed to fascists. To 'serve truth, defy the lie', as is proclaimed on the hooded sweatshirts of the Dharma Punx, is to allow the Dhamma to speak, not to start a fight.

As soon as we swallow Māra's hook, even our efforts at practising the spiritual life can pull the heart away in the opposite direction. We want to do good, but we just seem to create more trouble. As Ajahn Mun's 'Ballad of Liberation from the Five Khandhas' says:

Wanting what's good, without stop:
That's the cause of suffering.
It's a great fault: the strong fear of bad.
'Good' and 'bad' are poisons to the mind,
like foods that inflame a high fever.
The Dhamma isn't clear
because of our basic desire for good.
Desire for good, when it's great,
drags the mind into turbulent thought
until the mind gets inflated with evil,
and all its defilements proliferate.
The greater the error, the more they flourish,

taking one further and further away
from the genuine Dhamma.

(Ven. Thanissaro, trans.)

Also, in the Verses of the Third Zen Patriarch:

When you try to stop activity to achieve passivity
your very effort fills you with activity.

(Richard B. Clarke, trans.)

The tragedy is that we make all these noble efforts: going on retreats, keeping Precepts, serving the Dhamma and so forth, but those efforts themselves can become an obstruction if handled wrongly, just as in the history of the Buddhist tradition, where over time the elder bhikkhus became the corpulent religious aristocracy and privileged priesthood the Buddha was so determinedly trying to counter. This initial drift, which occurred some 2,000 years ago, contributed to the

Mahayana revolution and later to the cascade of other reforms and renewals that have occurred in the Buddhist world.

Our eagerness to destroy the ‘wrong’ in our minds creates more of the same pain and darkness. Like the attitude of wanting to destroy evil in the world, that righteous indignation which says: ‘I’m right, you’re wrong’ results in the aberrations illustrated in George Orwell’s ‘Animal Farm’; we become the very thing we are opposing. Another example is found in the story of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky’s ‘The Brothers Karamazov’; when the Messiah visits mediaeval Spain, the Inquisitor ends by condemning him so that he won’t disturb the progress of the Christian religion. We can eventually suppress the very thing we’re trying to further. The Inquisitor thought he was doing the right thing. That’s the painful irony: there are good intentions and fidelity to a system, but that contention against ‘bad, wrong, shouldn’t be’ is tragically destructive to the system’s originating spirit.

Solzhenitsyn once mused that it would be so easy if evil was an absolute and we could just isolate it and wipe it out, unfortunately: 'The battleline between good and evil runs through the heart of every man.' The Buddha's teachings also indicate that there is no such thing as an absolute evil. According to Buddhist myth, Mahā-Moggallāna was Māra in at least one of his previous lives (M 50.8); that great saint, both fully enlightened and a chief disciple of the Buddha, had at one point been Satan, the Lord of Lies. Or there is the example of Aṅgulimāla, a mass murderer who became a disciple of the Buddha and an Arahant; and not only an Arahant, but also protector of expectant mothers and their babies. It is a beautiful irony that 2,500 years later, his verses are still chanted to impart blessings to pregnant women.

All this shows that we can never be irremediably lost. Even if we think these examples are just fairy stories, their symbolism alone is immensely powerful. It suggests that not only is any situation resolvable, but that anyone may end up as a

saint, a benevolent, radiant presence in the universe, helping to liberate many other beings. When we line up our concerns about ‘my mind with its fears, insecurities and lusts’ against being Māra, and thus the embodiment of unwholesomeness in the universe, the degree of unskillfulness is incomparable. It therefore implies that no karmic entanglement is inescapable – so there’s hope for all of us!

But what are we to do when things are wrong? At any time many wars are being fought around the world. In many countries hundreds of thousands of people take to the streets in protest against oppressive regimes. Non-violent protest, civil disobedience and other kinds of useful mischief are fully valid means of expressing one’s commitment to Truth. Non-contention is not submissiveness, capitulation or passivity; remember that the Buddha is famous for having taken the initiative to forestall a war between the Koliyans and the Sākyaans over water rights to the Rohiṇī River (SN 4.15; Jāt 475).

So how to encounter Māra without being swept along by those forces or fighting against them? Firstly, we can use the principle of non-contention as a flag to indicate the arising of habits of contention ('It shouldn't be this way...') and, feeling it in the body, reflect instead: 'Oh, contention, look at that.' Thus we respond by waking up, knowing and transcending. It is as if we invite the Buddha into the picture. And when Buddha-wisdom knows that state, what do we do? Move forwards? Back away? Be still? In each moment intuitive wisdom guides the heart: 'Act now'; 'Be quiet'; 'Do not enter, wrong way'. The heart knows what to do. Sometimes Māra screams, demands reaction; the bait is very tasty, compelling, but with that same cool ease the Buddha never picks it up. There is utter poise: 'I know what this is. I know you, Māra.' Passion is there, but we're not sucked in; the motive to be mindful is there but we don't identify with it. This means a complete acceptance of

the way things are, while in the same breath making efforts to cultivate wholesomeness and restrain unwholesomeness; i.e. right efforts are being made, but not with a dualistic attitude based on self-view. Our initiative to act compassionately is part of the way things are. Thus we work to establish wholesome objects of concentration, let go of anger, cultivate *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā* but all embraced in an environment of non-grasping and non-contention.

The gesture of waking up is all it takes; when we respond to the death clamp on the heart, to ego-death, with wakefulness, the heart is freed. This is the Buddha's response. When we encounter unwholesomeness, we don't let the heart see it as an otherness which then needs to be destroyed. Furthermore, rather than merely tolerating negative qualities by observing them from a would-be remote, pseudo-supramundane vantage point, the Buddha advocates sharing blessings with the evil as well as the good:

‘May those who are friendly, indifferent or hostile,
May all beings receive the blessings of my life,
May they soon attain the threefold bliss
And realize the Deathless.’

That includes all abhorred world leaders and public figures, not to mention our miscreant ex-partners and poisonous mind-states; piling so-called ‘reasonable hatred’ upon them only multiplies the causes of pain and confusion.

The Buddha’s fundamental gesture is to be faithful to Reality: pure presence and absolute non-contention. The action or stillness which springs forth from that gesture will intrinsically embody the very best that can be.

'I'M RIGHT, YOU'RE WRONG!'

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