

The background of the entire page is a dense pattern of golden fireworks and stars. The fireworks are depicted as radiating lines of varying lengths, some with small circles at their centers, creating a starburst effect. The stars are small, four-pointed or six-pointed shapes scattered throughout the white space. The overall color palette is monochromatic, using shades of gold and brown against a white background.

**BENEATH**

**THE**

**BODHI**

**TREE**

**Pasanno Bhikku**

# BENEATH THE BODHI TREE

Pasanno Bhikkhu

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*Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti.*  
The gift of Dhamma excels all gifts.

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## *Foreword*

The “Big Ceremony” of 2018 marks the completion of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery’s Reception Hall building and surrounding grounds. The ceremony is a grand opportunity to celebrate our current abbot, Ajahn Pasanno, who will be stepping down as the main administrator and leaving Abhayagiri for a year away. Luang Por has been a solid presence at Abhayagiri since his arrival on New Year’s eve in 1996, joining Ajahn Amaro in a shared abbotship. After Ajahn Amaro’s departure for Amaravati in 2010 to assume the abbot role there, Luang Por continued at Abhayagiri as the sole abbot. A one year sabbatical for solitary retreat time in 2006 has been Luang Por’s only extended period away. Luang Por has tirelessly guided the growing monastic community,

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offered endless teachings at the monastery and in outside engagements, and acted in the multifaceted role of administrator with great generosity, patience and compassion. Under his continued guidance the community of Abhayagiri has set down healthy roots and grown into the mature community that it is today.

It is with deep gratitude to Luang Por that this small booklet has been assembled—a community effort.

## *Abbreviations*

D	Dīgha Nikāya
M	Majjhima Nikāya
S	Samyutta Nikāya
A	Anguttara Nikāya
Ud	Udāna
Th	Theragātha



## *Gradual Instruction*

While speaking this morning about the Buddha's path of gradual training, what also came to mind is a whole other set of teachings around gradual instruction, which probably comes up more often in the *suttas*. The Pāli is *anupubbikathā*: *kathā* are verses or teachings, and *anupubbikathā* are teachings that follow on from each other. When the Buddha would teach and give instruction, he would often lay it out in a gradual way, because, given the nature of the human mind, you have to build on your understanding and ability to actually comprehend something clearly and deeply. It's helpful to have a set of stairs or an elevator to get up to the top floor of a building, instead of being told: "Just get up there. You're here. There's the top of that building, thirty feet

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away, just . . . What are you waiting for? Get up there.” The reality is there has to be a structure or a network to be able to do that. Just because we can conceive of the top of the building doesn’t necessarily mean we can get there.

In his graduated teaching, the Buddha would talk and give instruction on generosity, on virtue, on heaven, on drawbacks and the bane of things, on renunciation, and then on the Four Noble Truths. This is a helpful structure to reflect on for our own practice. Often, we don’t want to mess with the rinky-dink stuff and just want to get on with it: “Just give me the straight scoop.” And then, of course, when one does get the straight scoop, one feels bewildered. What do we do?

The graduated teaching and a gradual approach are really appropriate for us and our human condition. We lay a foundation of different aspects of goodness, virtue, right view, right practice. It isn’t as if this is a linear thing: that you have to get this bit—the generosity bit—down, then you can go on to virtue. It’s something that you’re doing all the time: constantly filling in the

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gaps and layering your practice. One image I have is a lock in a shipping lane. You've got a section of the river filled with rapids. A ship or a boat goes into the lock, then the water comes in and lifts the boat up to the level of the water, and then it can go on. It's like that with our hearts.

Being able to pay attention to a quality like generosity: it's not as if generosity is just a beginning aspect of traditional Buddhism. It's a quality of mind and heart, a mindset that allows one really to just give of oneself. When we do, if that's our perspective, then in practice there's a certain delight and joy that comes from giving and generosity. Then generosity isn't isolated. Especially when generosity connects us with good people, we have all sorts of opportunities for reflection, teachings, or perspectives that we might not have considered otherwise. In giving of oneself, it isn't just material giving that is important. It's the attitude behind it. The heart leaps forward at being able to give and be generous.

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If you think in terms of meditation: when does your meditation become successful and when does it not become successful? It's successful when you're able to take an object of meditation, whatever it is, and just give yourself to it. The mind really settles very quickly. As opposed to picking up the meditation object and asking, "Well, what am I gonna get out of this? How much do I have to do to get the goal?" There isn't a generosity of spirit there. So, then one ends up frustrated and not very peaceful in one's meditation.

In generosity, there is obviously an aspect of material giving, but it's also an avenue for cultivating qualities of mind. *Dāna* is not just something one is doing through material things: it's that quality of heart that is ready to give, to share, to help, to be of benefit. That has a real, positive effect on this gradual path and training. We're able to really grow in the Dhamma when we give ourselves to it.

Virtue is very similar. I talked about virtue this morning as being a part of a gradual path. As we establish ourselves in virtuous qualities, the effect, in terms

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of relationships with other people, is of establishing bonds of trust. That's extremely important, and not just for social well-being. The strength of a society or culture really has to be established on bonds of trust, as does internal strength, as we become more confident in our own intention.

One of the things that Ajahn Chah used to point out is that one of the values of keeping precepts, paying attention to a moral training, is that you start to understand volition, the movement of mind behind action, speech, and our mental states. That's the essence of *kamma*. The Buddha was very explicit in this: *kamma* is volition. There are actions, how volition is displayed, but *kamma* and its results are based on the volition behind action. Being able to understand volition, we can start to understand *kamma* and how it affects us.

This is one of the many different ways the Buddha expressed his enlightenment. The most common way we hear about is, for instance, in the *Dhammacakka Sutta* (S 56.11), where the Buddha says, "It wasn't until I understand these Four Noble Truths and their twelve aspects

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that I was able to declare my full and unexcelled enlightenment and awakening.” But there are also *suttas* where the Buddha says, “It wasn’t until I was able to understand *kamma* and its results.” *Kamma* is just the verb “to do,” action, and then there’s the result of that action: *kamma-vipāka*.

Of course, we reap the fruits of our actions all the time. Sometimes we feel like helpless bystanders. In reality, we need to take responsibility for the whole process. Understanding *kamma*, understanding volition: it isn’t just because one studies it in a book or has read a good essay on *kamma* that one is able to understand. It’s because one really starts to investigate one’s actions, one’s speech, one’s movement of mind, that one can start to see and understand it more clearly. It’s through that understanding that we’re able to take responsibility. So, the knock-on benefit of virtue, of keeping precepts, is you start seeing that all these different practices that the Buddha lays out at the beginning of the path have huge effects for the conditioning, the

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result, and the fruition of the path. Again, it's not a linear, gradual path. It's an integrated path of training and understanding, being able to instruct ourselves and to learn how to teach and train ourselves: taking on generosity, virtue, heaven, the drawbacks, renunciation, and the Four Noble Truths; picking that up and reviewing, reflecting, and practicing with it; and teaching ourselves.

Toward the end of the discourse I mentioned this morning, of the Buddha teaching an accountant about the gradual path (M 107), the accountant asks, "There is this teaching that you have, and it's for the realization of *nibbāna*. Does everybody realize *nibbāna*?" The Buddha says, "Well, some do, and some don't." The person asks, "Why is that? Because *nibbāna* is there; the teaching is there." Then the Buddha says, "Let me put it this way . . ." They were in Sāvattthi at the time, and the accountant is a minister in service to the king. The capital of the large adjacent kingdom was in Rājagaha, quite a distance. The Buddha asks the accountant, "Do you know the way to Rājagaha?" He answers, "Yes, certainly.

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I've been many times." The Buddha asks, "If somebody asked you to how to get there, could you explain it to them?" "Yes, certainly." "And do you think everybody would get there?" "Oh, no. Some would make it there. Some would lose their way." "Why is that? You gave clear instructions. It's exactly the same way with *nibbāna*." The goal is there. The teachings are there, and we have to learn how to put those teachings into practice and not lose our way, to learn how to put that gradual path into practice, into our life.

The next aspect of this graduated teaching that the Buddha gives is heaven, or perhaps it could be expressed as heavenly states. This might be a bit more accessible to most Westerners: the recognition that there's actually more to our experience than just mundane, ho-hum, dreary life, and getting on with its practical aspects—a bit of respite now and again. The human heart is capable of heavenly states. If one extrapolates from that, there are probably realms where those are manifested, but this is not an essential or necessary piece of dogma. However, we can recognize that there are qualities of

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mind that are refined and beautiful, and that they're possible.

That's when the mind experiences the divine abidings: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity. These are called divine abidings because, when we dwell in, say, loving-kindness and our wish is for our own and all other beings' happiness and well-being, we view the world in a radically different way. When we view the world and ourselves through the lens of compassion, really attuned to that wish to alleviate suffering in the human condition, and our own, we view and experience the world in a very different way. It isn't as if one doesn't recognize or see the flaws or difficulties. But it's a way to direct attention that is deeply gratifying: to be able to respond to the world with bright states of mind.

One of the monks in our tradition has been translating the divine abidings, the *brahmavihāras*, as "mature emotions." That's a really, really skillful way of putting it. The emotions of irritation, fear, and gratification are not so mature. You can see that in just about any infant.

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But as practitioners, we have access to teachings and practices that allow us to lift up the heart to something that is heavenly, divine. It's possible. It's not that it's not possible. It's that we don't choose to direct our attention in that way. There is the feeling of being a helpless victim of either internal moods or external things around us. But it's important to realize, as a gradual and graduated instruction, that what is heavenly is a part of our human experience, and we can choose to cultivate that.

The next step in that graduated instruction is on the drawbacks, *ādīnava*. There is the heavenly, there is the divine, and there are definitely drawbacks. There's the painful side of experience, and we have to recognize that: the painful and difficult side of having a human body. One can see advertisements for a health product of some sort where everybody is just vibrant and young. One might think, "But that isn't what I'm experiencing!" We recently changed doctors to one at a new clinic in Ukiah, so I had to get registered there. I had to fill out forms asking, "What's your history and have you ever had any surgery?" It took a while to answer, and I didn't

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even get into some of the different illnesses! It's just a drawback of having a human body. They're subject to aging, sickness, and death. It's not all doom and gloom; it's just part of the picture.

In order to be able to really awaken, it's important to see the whole picture. There is the possibility of experiencing heavenly states of being—that doesn't exclude the fact that there are drawbacks. There are. There is that painful side of human existence. That's just in terms of the body. Then there's the mind, which we all want to be pleasant. Where do the dark thoughts and difficult moods come from? But we can be aware of and recognize them. We don't have to believe or be prey to them. The world around us is fraught with the difficult and problematic. Looking at the drawbacks doesn't mean that one is pushing this away. It's just recognizing that looking ties in with the next quality: *nekkhamma*, which is renunciation.

*Nekkhamma* is a *pāramī*, one of the extremely wholesome qualities foundational to liberation. It provides a strength of heart. An almost literal translation of the

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word *pāramī* is “qualities that allow the heart to cross over.” Movement is implied in the word. For the heart to cross over from *saṃsāra* to *nibbāna*, from *dukkha* to peace, to cross over from defilement to the wholesome, one relies on certain qualities—the *pāramīs*. *Nekkhamma* is one of the ten *pāramīs*: renunciation, which, in the English language, doesn’t get good press. It didn’t, even in the Buddha’s time.

There’s a really interesting discourse where a layperson is talking to Ānanda, and states basically the same kind of perception or problem we have now (A 9.41). He’s speaking as a layperson who delights in sensuality and pleasure. This whole idea of renunciation is just really the ultimate bummer. The heart isn’t confident and can’t rise up to it. How is it, he asks, that these young monks are taking on renunciation? Ānanda says, “Well, let’s go and see the Buddha.” The Buddha says, “When I was still unawakened, still beginning my practice, I didn’t get excited about renunciation. That’s quite normal in the human mind. But as one starts to investigate it one sees that, through this

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renunciation—relinquishment, pulling back, putting down, releasing—the mind became more peaceful and brighter.” Then he goes into a whole process, beginning with physical seclusion and stepping back from a lot of engagement. That just feels really good.

I’m sure that many people on retreat, having gotten there, say, “Ah, okay, I can settle.” That’s renunciation, relinquishment, stepping back from a lot of engagement. As we start stepping back more and more, it gets a bit more refined, where we first experience the physical and then also the different mental aspects of simplicity and the effect that simplicity has. Putting down different compelling distractions: it isn’t as if they’re bad or evil in some way, but it’s just that, by relinquishing and renunciation, the mind starts to settle more. The mind becomes brighter. The Buddha goes on and says, “As I’m practicing my mind becomes more peaceful, but then there’s an obstacle. I realize that I now need to renounce and relinquish the *vitakka-vicāra*, initial and sustained thought (or directed thought and evaluation),

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in order for the mind to become more peaceful and settled. The settling comes by being able to unify, rather than having to figure it out and analyze it. Just absorb and unify.”

This continues. You start realizing it’s not a path of attainment but of relinquishing. Again, the word renunciation does kind of strike fear in our hearts. But as we start to pay attention and get over the conceptual, what does it actually feel like? It just feels good. It really feels satisfying. As we go through this ten-day period of retreat, reflect on this gradual path, and also on areas like renunciation. You may think, “Ah, well, that’s only what monks do.” But all of us are interested in experiencing the fruits of peace, and there’s an element of relinquishment and renunciation essential to that.

There’s a beautiful story in the *Udāna* of a ruler of the Sakyan clan (Ud 2.10). He went off, gave up his kingship, and took ordination under the Buddha. Sometime after his ordination, he’s out in the forest, exclaiming, “Ah! What bliss! Ah! What bliss!” The other monks notice

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this: “Wow. I think he’s lost the plot here. He’s dissatisfied and he’s thinking about all the good things that he used to have.” They reported this to the Buddha. The Buddha takes the opportunity to question him and says, “What is it that you’re referring to when people hear you exclaiming, ‘Ah! What bliss!’” He answered, “Oh. It’s not about anything from the past. If anything, it’s that when I think of the past, of how entangled and how fearful and how burdened I was, and now being able to live practicing Dhamma and having no support for the mind other than Dhamma, it’s so incredibly blissful that I can’t not say anything about it.” So, it’s really that sense of when we really do put things down, when we are able to relinquish, then we do experience bliss.

This doesn’t preclude actually doing anything, really. It’s more about attitude. The Buddha had many duties and responsibilities: teaching, leading the community. But when it was time to do that, he did it, and when it was time to put it down, he put it down. Someone said, “The bliss of happiness that somebody like King Bimbisāra of Magadha experiences must be far

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superior because it involves the worldly avenues of gratification.” The Buddha asked, “Do you think King Bimbisāra could experience unremitting bliss for seven days and seven nights? I don’t think so. But I can.” (MN 14)

Seeing clearly always involves coming back, in the sense of gradual instruction, to the investigation and practice of the Four Noble Truths: seeing *dukkha*, suffering, dissatisfaction, stress; its cause; its cessation; and the path leading to cessation. But as I was saying, it’s not a linear path. Our generosity, giving, virtue, keeping moral precepts, the view of what is heavenly and what is a drawback, and how to accomplish this are all informed by our understanding of the Four Noble Truths. You realize that, in understanding *dukkha*, its cessation strengthens. It isn’t that we have to build up to and finally get to the Four Noble Truths. Instead, we keep bringing in the Four Noble Truths, reflecting, “Where do I experience *dukkha*? Where do I experience stress? How do I experience discontent? What’s seeding that? What’s the cause there? Why is that coming into being?

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And how does this come to cessation? How do I experience cessation? What do I do to bring it to a place of cessation?”

Take the Four Noble Truths and use them. For Ajahn Chah, everything would come back to the Four Noble Truths, not in a formulaic way, but in an experiential way. I remember one monk who was close to Ajahn Chah. He disrobed and went back to America. When Ajahn Chah came to visit America, that former monk came to spend time and travel with him. He helped him and followed Ajahn Chah through the whole trip. He'd been practicing in different places and had been exposed to different ideas, mostly in the Bay Area. He had a lot of questions for Ajahn Chah, including a question about the statement: “The path is all about mindfulness, being mindful, being aware, being fully aware. When we're completely and fully aware, mindful, then we will fulfill the path.” Ajahn Chah answered in an idiom he would sometimes use: “That's true. But it's not right.” Or, “It's right, but it's not true.” “Yes, but it's only a part of the picture.” The layman said, “This close friend of mine

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doesn't like formal meditation very much. His path is rock climbing. When he's rock climbing, he's completely mindful. He's really present." Ajahn Chah said, "Only Westerners would think they could be enlightened by rock climbing. Do you think he's contemplating the Four Noble Truths when he's rock climbing?"

How do we contemplate, investigate, and bring those Four Noble Truths in so that they're informing all the things that we're doing? That's where we start integrating all these different qualities: generosity, virtue, heaven, the drawbacks and dangers, renunciation. The whole path of the Four Noble Truths.

So, I offer that for reflection this afternoon.

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I encourage people to continue reflecting on the different aspects of this gradual path. So often, Buddhist practice can end up very technique-oriented. I think it's important to recognize how much the basic principles not only lay a foundation for, but carry one through the practice.

Thinking back on my time with Ajahn Chah, the vast majority of the teachings would end up being around very simple themes: eat little, sleep little, speak little, practice a lot. That was enough. That certainly kept us busy, just trying to figure out how to deal with those basic pulls in the mind to desire—some kind of stimulation or excitement, anything in the mind—or the tendencies to aversion. We get tired of that, so then we

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try to annihilate it in some way, shape, or form: “Just let me go to sleep and forget about it.”

Or we distract ourselves with conversation and stir ourselves up. Speak little, but then that extends to all the different ways that we communicate or receive communication, all the different forms of media we’re plugged into. We wonder why we’re agitated, restless, and disturbed a lot of the time. That simple “Eat little, sleep little, speak little, practice a lot” is really a crucial part of laying a solid foundation for ourselves in practice.

This reminds me of a story that I heard—it might have been second-, third-, or fourth-hand by then—about Master Hsuan Hua, the abbot of City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. It took place at his Gold Mountain Monastery in San Francisco. A well-known professor of Buddhist philosophy and studies came to visit Master Hua. He had asked if he would be able to question Master Hua about some of the refined details of the *Avataṃsaka Sutta* (“The Flower Ornament Sūtra,” a very important text in the Mahāyāna tradition).

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The professor started speaking with Master Hua, explaining where his questions come from: his doubts, his uncertainties, his wanting to gain more understanding of the *sutta*. He began asking various questions, many of them about quite abstruse aspects of philosophical speculation. After a short time, Master Hua asked, “Why are you so overweight? How many times a day are you eating?” The professor got kind of rattled but charged on and started asking more philosophical questions.

Master Hua then asked, “What time do you get up in the morning? How much do you sleep at night?” The intrepid professor charged on for a bit more. And Master Hua said, “You’re married, aren’t you? Do you still look at other women with sexual desire?” All this was really important. You can discuss philosophy and have all sorts of knowledge of the different schools of Buddhism, but it comes back to: “Eat little, sleep little, speak little, practice a lot.”

How do we come back to these basics? We can’t do it just as an issue of control: “Okay, I’m just going to force myself to be controlled and mindful.” We really have

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to investigate, pay attention to what the obstacles are. Of course, we lift up the practices of mindfulness and clear comprehension, develop the four foundations of mindfulness, and use that as a structure. But we can't just force the mind into some ideal of what we think it should be. We have to be alert to what obstacles arise.

This is where paying attention to the five hindrances is important. The five hindrances are sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and skeptical doubt. Those are fundamental ways the mind creates suffering or agitation within the mind. They're the expression of *dukkha*. Often, we say, "*Dukkha . . . what dukkha?*" But that's because we're either restless or worried about something, or we're trying to distract ourselves in some way.

On a certain level, the hindrances are also a strategy in response to our *dukkha*. We experience some kind of *dukkha* that we don't understand or see clearly. Identifying the hindrances is a strategy to get out of a particular *dukkha* that might be unnamed, unformed, and unclear. Then the *dukkha* is identified as sense desire, irritation,

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ill will, or whatever. It's a strategy. To the mind, it seems quite rational to get really irritated by some idiot. But that's not really a useful strategy. Instead, if we recognize, "Oh, these are hindrances," we are able to see how they're coming up, how they're forming, what's fueling them, and what the results are.

In the Buddha's formulation of dependent origination, most of the *suttas* seem to start with *avijjā*, ignorance, and progress to mental formations and consciousness as causal formations of dependently-arisen phenomena, which of course lead to *dukkha*. It always seems to start with *avijjā*. Then, of course, the feeling or the assumption might be that we just are in this sort of primal swamp of *avijjā*, and there's no alternative.

But then there are discourses such as one in the *Anguttara Nikāya* (A 10.61) where the Buddha points to the fact that not only are there all these sequences of conditionality—but that *avijjā* is also conditioned. And what is the underlying condition for *avijjā*? The five hindrances. So, you realize, "Okay, this is how we're actually feeding and supporting *avijjā*." Then, of course,

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the Buddha draws it back to different ways that give rise to the hindrances, such as not hearing true Dhamma. There is a direct link between the hindrances and the nourishing and nurturing of the underlying roots of ignorance.

So, the lifting of the five hindrances into an object of contemplation is not a small thing. It's not just something you do for the first five or ten minutes of your meditation: get those hindrances out of the way so that you can just dive into deep *samādhi*. There is a real learning process of how the mind works. What is it that feeds the roots of the process of *dukkha*? And what is it that helps to feed and nourish the way out of *dukkha*? The cultivation of contemplation or attending to these hindrances is like you're tagging them, recognizing what's coming up in the mind. It doesn't mean you have to obsess over it: "Me and my sloth and torpor." Instead, you recognize, "Okay, that's what's arising. How do I work with it? What skillful means can I bring to this to nourish really wholesome qualities?"

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The mind will settle when we are able to relinquish unwholesome, unskillful qualities and there's a continuity of the skillful, of the wholesome. That's the natural order of things, in the same way that if you walk outside and it's raining, chances are you're going to get wet. It's in the natural order of things. So in the natural order of things, if you relinquish the unwholesome and unskillful, and pay attention to, nourish, and nurture the wholesome and skillful, the mind becomes peaceful and settled, clearer and brighter. It's a natural result.

So, in paying attention to these hindrances, just recognize, "Okay, there's sensual or sensory desire." The mind is looking for some object of interest and stimulation. It's not that it is interested in what its characteristics are and "How can I be liberated from it?" Rather: "Oh, what can I get out of this?" or "How can I get my hit of pleasure out of this somehow?"

Here's one of the images that the Buddha gives of sensual desire (Ud 6.9). There are oil lamps lit in the hall, and then insects come in in the evening-time and fly into the flame. The Buddha makes a comparison: "Well,

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that's the same thing human beings do with sensual desire." It's like that insect, attracted to the light, but then it's burned by it. It's a very similar dynamic when we are pulled to something and we think, "That's where my happiness is going to be. That's where I'm going to be satisfied. That's what I really want." And later we end up saying, "What the heck was I even thinking about?" when we feel the repercussions of that.

Pay attention to sense desire and recognize that the feeling with desire is: "If I don't get it, I'm going to be missing something." You don't want to miss something, miss out on that. So, then you go for it. But then if you start contemplating it, "Well, actually, before that desire arose, I wasn't missing anything anyway." We've conjured it up in the mind and run after it, and then we run around following it. It's not a satisfying strategy. Instead, we need to be attentive to that process. This doesn't mean you can't ever have or experience anything pleasurable. But do we have to be driven by desire? Can we approach our senses and sense experience, our experience in the world, with some clarity

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and some steadiness and stability? Often times, people worry that they'll never be able to experience anything beautiful again. What about beauty in nature?

There's a very beautiful description of the Buddha in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (D 16), which is about the last months of the Buddha's life. He's taught the monastic and lay communities in Vesālī, and he and Ānanda are just leaving. There's a little rise just outside the city. He turns around and looks back at Vesālī and says, "You know, Vesālī is a really beautiful place, with its parks and its fountains and all that." Then he says, "And that's the last time I'll see it." And then he turns around and goes. He's acknowledging the beauty and also acknowledging the fact that, yes, whatever beauty there is, it has to be relinquished. He knew he wasn't going to be coming back. Quite poignant.

Also, many verses of the poems and songs of the elder monks and nuns in the *Theraḡātha* and *Therīgātha* speak to the beauty of the natural surroundings they were living in. Curiously, one of the gushiest poems is from Mahākassapa, who is viewed as the most austere

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ascetic in the Theravāda tradition. But his reflections on the nature around him are really very beautiful. (Th 1051–90)

So, that is the recognition of how the hindrance of sense desire, sensual desire, the need for gratification and stimulation, put the mind on edge and increase suffering. Ill will is similar. As many good reasons as we can have to be upset about something, the feeling is one of agitation and *dukkha*. There's no clarity when we're invested in being averse and upset at something. This puts us at a huge disadvantage both in terms of day-to-day life as well as settling and making the mind peaceful for meditation.

When we come into a retreat or we're doing our daily meditation, sometimes the things that were mildly irritating during the day come back to haunt us. If we don't deal with it skillfully, then the mind settles down and can home in on that irritation, getting more and more upset. So, recognize: "Oh. This is a hindrance. This is an obstacle. It obscures awareness and weakens discernment, weakens wisdom. It needs to be dealt with in

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some way, shape, or form.” Sometimes, the strategy of replacing that train of thought in the mind with lifting up and generating loving-kindness is a skillful way of just not giving attention to the irritation. This is not just a glossing over. It’s a conscious strategy and conscious recognition: “Been there. Done that. I know where this is going. Let’s try something different.” Lifting up the cultivation of a brighter state of mind.

Often times, the reason we experience ill will is because something of ours has been thwarted, whether it’s desire, a preference, an idea, or an opinion. When it’s been thwarted or challenged, we respond with ill will. So, pay attention: “What’s being thwarted? Where am I? Where is the resistance?” Rather than going to the object of our aversion, coming back, and saying, “Where is this coming from in my own mind? What is it? What would I need to relinquish or give up if I don’t want to be pickled in my ill will?” That’s a skillful way of relinquishing.

Sloth and torpor: these are just the way that the mind goes into dullness and lassitude, drifts, and gets

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amorphous, especially in meditation. It's really important, especially on a retreat, to recognize this as a hindrance, because there's a certain pleasantness as one is sitting there and drifting. At least it's not extreme suffering. But it's not a really good mental space for understanding. So, be alert to: when does the mind start to drift? "What am I actually paying attention to?" Or, "What am I trying to pay attention to? What was the object in my mind before I started drifting?" Sometimes, with sloth and torpor, we keep doing the same thing over and over again, and it keeps bringing us to the same place.

Sometimes with our meditation, we want and try to be peaceful. We want to simplify the mind. So, something relaxing, like the breath coming in and going out, really soothes us to sleep or, if not overt sleep, to just kind of drifting. This doesn't mean we have to relinquish the breath completely, but it's important that we give the mind enough work to do that it can engage with the object of meditation. That's really important.

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Sometimes one can modulate the object. Even if one stays with the breath, one can add counting or “*bud-dho*”: on the in-breath thinking “*bud-*” and on the out-breath “*-dho*,” just to give the mind some work to do; paying attention rather than just settling in to the rhythm of the breath. Paying attention to that initial sensation as the breath comes in. Making clear what it feels like as it comes in to the chest. What it feels like as it comes down to the abdomen. Really making that clear. That initial feeling as the breath goes out: what’s that initial contact as the breath goes out? One has to sharpen one’s awareness in order to stay with the object by adding a task that helps the mind be present. Adding a bit more work for it to do, because if there’s not enough work for the mind, it wants to go on vacation.

You need to engage the mind in a balanced way, just enough. Sometimes we try to do too much, and it just agitates the mind, which is where restlessness comes in. In a teaching that the Buddha gives on the seven factors of awakening and what to do when the mind is restless, the Buddha says to not direct attention

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to the more active aspects of those factors of awakening. *Dhammavicaya*, investigation of Dhamma, as well as effort, energy, rapture, and joy stir up the mind even more. You have to direct attention to the more settling side of the equation: tranquility, the settling of the mind, and equanimity. When the mind is restless, we need to direct more conscious attention to that aspect of the path, and it helps to balance and settle that restlessness.

Skeptical doubt is another hindrance. One is wavering, uncertain. Then one should try to direct one's attention to something that gives one some confidence, a feeling of a bit more certainty.

Learning how to direct attention to a pleasing, satisfying, or inspiring object is really important, particularly with doubt, but this applies to all the hindrances. When the mind starts to get agitated or stirred up in some way, shape, or form, then lift up a pleasing object.

There's a discourse in the *Samyutta Nikāya* (S 47.10) where Ānanda is visiting the nuns' quarters and speaking with them. The nuns are intent on their cultivation

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of the four foundations of mindfulness, and they're gaining understanding and progress in practice. Ānanda gives encouragement. He goes back and relates this to the Buddha. The Buddha says, "Great. That's how it works. When you do the practice, cultivate the four foundations of mindfulness, and then the hindrances, the objects that tend to do a disservice to the mind, will dissipate." He continues, "Sometimes in practice, when the object of mind is something that stimulates desire, or there is some kind of bodily distress that stirs up the mind, or there's a mental obsession of some kind, then direct attention to a pleasing object." The word that he uses is *pasādaniya-nimitta*. *Nimitta* is a sign or image, and *pasādaniya* is something that inspires confidence. (One of the reasons that the word caught my attention is because it has the same root as my own name: *pasanno*.) *Pasādaniya*: faith and joy together, something that encourages confidence and well-being.

So, similar to the way the Buddha instructed, lift up an image in the mind, an object of attention, that encourages that sense of confidence, faith, and well-being.

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When one does that, one will feel a sense of physical ease. Once there's physical ease, there will be a sense of well-being. Well-being will give a sense of joy. In joy, there's going to be pleasure, contentment. And then the mind tends to become easily concentrated and settled. As the mind becomes settled, then there's a reflection and acknowledgment, an understanding: "Oh. Mindfulness is present, and I am content." It's really beautiful.

You're consciously paying attention to the hindrances, but then also lifting up things that settle, soothe, and encourage the mind. This has an effect. Pay attention to and nurture that process. It's something that we engage in, as opposed to thinking, "If I just sit here long enough, something good is gonna happen." We need to be proactive, but be balanced in that. You just need to recognize that the mind responds to input on both sides of the equation. The hindrances have a certain effect, but then directing attention to something that is pleasing and settling has an effect as well. And to be able to own it, take responsibility for it, realize that this is not rocket science. This is paying attention to

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your own experience and looking out for what is really in your best interest. So we can work with that, pay attention to that, and see where it goes.

So, we can just sit quietly for a little bit longer and then go do some walking.



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As we settle into the retreat and keep bringing our attention and intention inwards, using the breath as an anchor, remember that our meditation is something we have to engage with. Just the physical act of sitting in one posture is not necessarily going to make the mind peaceful. Ajahn Chah used to say that he's seen chickens sit on their nest for a long time and doesn't see them get either wise or peaceful. As we engage the mind with our meditation object and are attentive to that which is wholesome and skillful, the mind will naturally settle.

There's a stock phrase in the *suttas* that comes up over and over again, when the Buddha is describing the movement of the mind towards peacefulness: "Secluded (or withdrawn) from sensual pleasures, secluded

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(or withdrawn) from unwholesome mental states.” We have to withdraw or pull the mind back from its impulses towards that which stirs it up or gets it entangled in negativity. We need to yank it back and withdraw, recognizing that there’s a different result when the mind is engaged in its fantasies of gratifications of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, or is caught up in the various kinds of negativity—worry, fear, irritation, or dullness.

It’s impossible for our ordinary mind to be clear, but we can direct our attention through the very nature of having a mind. We can formulate an intention and then direct thought and attention to that which is skillful and wholesome, that which brightens and allows the mind to feel a sense of ease. A lifting up of mind and attention, directing thought and evaluating result.

Ask yourselves: “Is this helpful? Is it working? Is it not working? Am I getting entangled? Am I feeling at ease?” There’s an evaluation, but not a proliferation; a recognition of the effect of directing thought. What’s the effect of that thought stream, that impression within the mind? Because it has an effect, both

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in a positive, wholesome, skillful way, and its opposite. We need to be alert to what the result is. Using the thought process is using attention to be able to direct the mind. Otherwise, meditation ends up being passive, like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: nothing ever happens. But the Buddha is encouraging us to recognize that we have the ability and responsibility to take care of our minds and hearts, to cultivate that which is peaceful and leads to wisdom. It's helpful to have that foundation of peacefulness, a certain stillness.

It's also important to recognize the function of desire in how we measure experience. On the material level, of course, there's never enough to fulfill desire, but it's similar on an internal level. If you're driven by unskillful desire, grasping, and attachment, then you're always going to feel you're coming up short: "Just a little bit more peaceful!" You have to be alert and formulate an intention to apply the mind, and also learn how to recognize your own temperament. Some people have a discursive temperament; some people settle easily; some people reflect.

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The nature of desire is that it's always going to feel like it's not enough. Just direct attention to: "Do I feel at ease? Can I release, relinquish, and become settled enough to contemplate the experience of peace and the limitations of impermanent, unsatisfactory, not-self phenomena?" One keeps directing thought and then letting go, without getting too obsessed. As Ajahn Chah said: "There are only two things a practitioner has to do: just know and let go." There's knowing, awareness, alertness, and presence, and then there's also releasing, letting go, and dropping, so that one's building a momentum of well-being and clarity.

Use the structure of mindfulness of breathing to develop this quality of knowing. There are sixteen steps in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (M 118) on mindfulness of breathing. The first two steps are: "Breathing in long, one knows one is breathing in long; breathing out long, one knows one is breathing out long. Breathing in short, one knows one is breathing in short; breathing out short, one knows one is breathing out short." The verb in Pāli is *pajānāti*: knowing, discerning, understanding. It is

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the root of the word *paññā*: wisdom, discernment. So, there is a certain discernment and reflection happening even when breathing in long, breathing out long, breathing in short, and breathing out short. There's a clarity, understanding, a knowing that has an element of discernment. What's the effect? Is it useful? Is it beneficial? Sustaining that quality of knowing involves a base of coming back to and supporting the quality of knowing.

All the rest of the steps of mindfulness of breathing have the verb that means “training”: “training myself” or “I train thus.” “Experiencing the whole body, I breathe in; experiencing the whole body, I breathe out.” It's a training and undertaking. Part of training is experimenting: “How do I make this work? How can I make this useful? How can I turn my attention in a way that helps the continuity of awareness?” The verb in the Pāli is *sikkhati*: training, which also has the connotation of learning, educating oneself.

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We're using the breath as a basis of studying, learning, training, and cultivating knowledge and understanding. "Experiencing or sensitive to the whole body, I breathe in; experiencing the whole body, I breathe out." Make it useful. Sometimes we get trapped: "Okay, the Buddha says I've got to be experiencing the whole body. Okay, what's that? I breathe in, but I've got all these arms and legs and fingers and other things. How do I do this?" Don't make it complicated or get tied up. This is an encouragement to bring more attention to bear: the Buddha is broadening the scope of what you can rely on for your continuity of awareness. You've got the whole body, there's lots to work with and explore. Enjoy it. Make it useful and interesting.

Sometimes, our practice gets bogged down when we forget to enjoy and make it interesting. We do the practice by applying a method, taking a methodological approach: "If I just follow the technique, I'm going to get peaceful somehow." Actually, practice relies on the quality of awareness. The results we experience depend on the quality of our awareness and mindfulness:

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calming the bodily formation, which can be both the physical body and the breath body.

There was a question about relying on the breath body last night. The breath is another type of body because it conditions. The scriptural term is *kāya-saṅkhāra*, which is body formation. It can also mean “body conditioner,” as the breath is constantly conditioning the body. We can condition the body and work with that condition, that breath body, and relax, settle, and calm our experience of the body. Of course, this has an effect on the mind and the heart. Also, when the physical body starts to settle, there’s the presence of alertness. That’s where we start to narrow things down a little bit, rein in the scope of our attention, although not in an overbearing way. It’s the natural wish of the heart not to have to deal with too much. We can bring that quality of clarity to something a bit more refined: just the sensation of the breath and how we experience the breath.

Don’t get too literal as the mind starts to settle. Allow the experience to speak for itself. Sometimes we

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can breathe, and the mind starts to get peaceful, and you could be experiencing a sensation of the breath that might not correspond to the anatomical picture you have of your nose, trachea, and lungs. It's an experience of the breath body.

I can remember one time, I was getting really peaceful and settled, and the feeling of the breath came in, and it was about three feet in front of where I was sitting. That's what it felt like. That's not a problem, because it is all part of your experience of the breath body. It doesn't have to correspond to any kind of preconception. Just: "Is it peaceful, is it settling, is it clear, is there mindfulness or alertness there, am I reflecting or investigating?" Pay attention to that, calming the body conditioner, the breath body.

This ties in with the next encouragement that the Buddha gives us: to consciously direct attention to feelings of joy and rapture. Sometimes it's hard to say, because the English occasionally limits what we think we should be experiencing. There's a feeling of lightness, a certain sort of verve or coming alive to the present

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moment, a well-being, maybe a certain exhilaration, but not one that's distracting. The mind brightens. There's a feeling the body isn't burdensome or painful. The word is *pīti*: "Sensitive to *pīti*, I breathe in; sensitive to *pīti*, I breathe out." It can be just very minor. Direct the mind and thought to: "How can I make this pleasurable? How can I breathe in and not turn it into a burden, something that is tense, tight, worrisome, competitive, or complicated? How can I just enjoy this?" Breathing in, breathing out, just bringing that possibility of *pīti* up in the mind. This is where the sense of fullness can be easily generated, creating a sense of ease.

The Buddha next talks about *sukha*, pleasure: "Experiencing or sensitive to pleasure, I breathe in; experiencing pleasure, I breathe out." If you lift that up in the mind as a possibility, it's a more attractive possibility than "breathing in, I feel miserable; breathing out, I feel miserable," which we can do. You're encouraging the mind: lifting it up is a possibility. It's interesting that when still anchored and rooted in the experience

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of the breath and the body, the body starts to feel comfortable. As the mind becomes more settled, the idiom that the Buddha uses in his instructions is: “suffuses and fills, permeates and pervades this body with *pīti* and *sukha*, delight and pleasure.” Again, you’re not a passive recipient, you’re engaging: suffusing and filling, permeating and pervading the experience of the body and breath with well-being and pleasure. Those are the Buddha’s instructions. It’s not illegal.

In the teachings, the Buddha is very explicit about the cultivation of happiness and well-being. We’re learning how to be happy. Of course, this has many, many different layers, beginning with our conduct of virtue and integrity. This brings happiness. Our generosity and kindness, compassion, and caring are things that bring happiness. Similarly, as we develop our mindfulness and meditation, be attentive to how to make this a pleasurable experience. Again, don’t just wait for this to happen, as if it’s some sort of expected reward for ten days of difficulty and pain, because we do that: “How

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was your retreat? It was really tough but it was great.” We tend to set ourselves up like that.

The Buddha says right from the get-go: enjoy yourself and delight in practice. Allow yourself to suffuse and fill, permeate and pervade this body. It’s interesting that the Buddha was very explicit, in all the instructions on the developing of refined states of meditative stillness, that there’s no dissociation from the body. They’re integrated as a body-mind experience. Throughout the instructions on and illustrations of the four *jhānas*, the images are all grounded in the experience of the body: suffusing, filling, permeating, and pervading the body with a delight and pleasure coming from seclusion. That’s the description of the first *jhāna*.

We’re withdrawing from the entanglement and complication of our normal external, as well as internal, lives. Suffusing, filling, permeating, and pervading this body with the joy and well-being of: “I don’t have to do that. I can step back from that.” The heart can actually dwell in well-being with each in-breath and each out-breath. It’s a way of connecting with that feeling

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of suffusing and filling, paying attention to that quality of fullness. Of course, the effect of this is that the mind starts to get very clear. There isn't a whole lot of pondering and proliferating that's needed to see things clearly. It's a suitable tool for understanding things in their true nature.

We can be lifting those themes up for reflection: "Is this permanent, is this stable, is this constant?" Of course, nothing is. It's a rhetorical question. But what it does is encourage the mind to relinquishment, reflecting: "Is this where I'm going to find complete freedom from suffering?" Ajahn Chah would always encourage us to just look at this. Sometimes it's difficult in English, because the word *dukkha* translates as "suffering." "Stress" is actually a good word to use, especially in a meditative sense. Look at the stress that recollecting something, expecting something, trying to get something out of the meditation, causes. There's stress there and I can relinquish it. There's *dukkha* and the reflection: "This is not self." What is not yours, abandon. What is

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not yours includes body, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness.

As soon as you get a nice little label, “mine,” and stick it on, there’s nowhere for it to stick. It’s not yours. It’s nothing. That doesn’t mean you’re not experiencing it or that it doesn’t have an effect. But to identify—“This is who I am, this is mine, this is what I will always be”—is folly. It’s a recipe for *dukkha*.

Lifting up and reflecting: this is where the practice of *samatha* and *vipassanā*, the development of tranquility and insight, should always work together. They should always be supportive of each other. Sometimes you’ll incline more to reflecting and investigating, and sometimes you’ll incline more to settling and stilling. They work together; they support each other.

This path that the Buddha has laid out for us is dependent on these aspects of the mind that we rely on for peace. It’s not just the peace of tranquility and meditative stillness, and it’s not just cogent thought and understanding. Ajahn Chah gives an image: It’s like having a match and a candle. You’ve got a match and strike

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it. It flares up and it goes out very quickly. It's not bright for very long. That's like insight. You might have a true understanding of something, but it's hard to sustain. Similarly, the candle is not lit yet, but there's potential. It's the potential of the peaceful mind, which is steady, but has to do something. You bring the match and the candle together, and you have a light that radiates out for a long period of time. The joining of tranquility and insight: they work together and they rely on each other.

Coming back to the construction of the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, there's a pattern: you have four sets of four instructions. They line up with the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The first four steps are related to the body. The second set of four instructions has to do with feeling. *Pīti* and *sukha* are in the realm of feeling. Then the Buddha brings us to experiencing the *citta-sankhāra*, the mind conditioner, which is another aspect of feeling. Feeling and perception condition the mind. *Vedanā* (feeling) and *saññā* (perception and memory) condition the mind. All the different thoughts arise out of feeling and

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perception. Feeling and perception generate those impulses, those movements of mind, and the whole train of thought that we get dragged along behind.

The last step or instruction in this second section on feeling is calming the mind conditioners, paying attention to calming. That's where it's helpful to suffuse and fill, permeate and pervade the body with feelings of well-being, because that helps slow the train down. Then you can start to recognize more clearly the conditioning process and look at where those impulses come from, where they arise. As they're pulling out of the station, you start seeing more clearly.

We're learning about the mind. We're learning how to work with the mind. But do it in a way that you're enjoying it, delighting in it, and learning. As I said, the primary verb the Buddha uses with all the rest of the aspects of mindfulness of breathing, including mindfulness of feeling, is *sikkhati*: training, learning, and educating yourself, figuring it out.

That should keep us busy for the morning.



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We've been in retreat now for just a little over five weeks. We've been having readings from the *suttas*. I've certainly been enjoying looking them up and doing the readings, and I think, from the feedback, there seems to be a general appreciation. I think it's really wonderful and essential that we get ourselves steeped in the words of the Buddha and understand the fundamental teachings.

There's another element or dimension to this. I think it's easy to hold out hope that if I just get these teachings, the intellectual structure, or the techniques down pat, then I'll be able to free myself from suffering. Maybe it's not articulated as baldly as that, but it's easy

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to internalize this and forget that there's another really crucial element.

I remember one time when a group of Western meditation teachers went to pay respects to Ajahn Chah. Of course, they asked many, many things, but one of the questions was: What was it that Ajahn Chah saw in himself, what particular quality, that set him apart from others, in that he seems to have penetrated the Dhamma and realized the goal of the teachings? Ajahn Chah generally had a ready answer at the tip of his tongue for most things, but he stopped and pondered for a minute. He answered that it was probably a quality of courage or daring, being willing to really live the teachings and put everything into it—not to hold back. It was completely giving himself to the practice, to the teachings, to the holy life.

It's worth reflecting on and recognizing what our habits are. For Ajahn Chah, his recognition of dissatisfaction and holding an aspiration for peace were channeled into giving himself to the practice, rousing a certain daring and willingness to do it. When we're faced with

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suffering or difficulty, or stress, discontent, dissatisfaction, the habit, culturally, is to seek some kind of pleasure as an escape or distraction. There's a discourse where the Buddha says that, for the ordinary, unenlightened person, the only escape from *dukkha-vedanā* is to try to immerse themselves in *sukha-vedanā* in some way: some kind of pleasure or gratification to take the edge off the dissatisfaction. (S 36.6)

It's important to recognize and reflect on this in terms of the culture we have, which conditions all of us: the amount of debt in the culture, different kinds of drug and alcohol addictions, rampant obesity, the movement towards anything that is viewed as somehow pleasurable—anything that takes one away from discomfort, insecurity, and uncertainty, in order to get some feeling of comfort.

I remember one time going to visit a neighbor down on West Road who had cats. They were in the barn, because the owners weren't around all the time. They could get food whenever they wanted or needed it. One

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particular cat was extremely nervous and uncomfortable. We came in to look at the cats to see how they were doing. The anxious cat would immediately feel nervous and go over and try to get more food and eat away. It was just ballooning out. It's the same mechanism in humans. We encounter some kind of discomfort and look for something pleasurable, distracting, interesting, or exciting—anything but actually having to be present with discomfort.

One of the realities of our existence is that we actually *are* exposed to all sorts of uncertainties, discomforts, and difficulties, just by virtue of being alive and having a human body and mind that feel and experience. There's a certain necessity to be able to recognize and be willing to be present for that feeling of being vulnerable, whether it's on the physical or emotional level. We *are* in a very vulnerable position. We're subject to illness, death, and separation from the things that we like, and we are of necessity put into situations where we're confronted with what we dislike. As long as we don't have the tools, or the courage and daring, to be present

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for this, we'll try to find some way out. We distract ourselves in different ways, and of course those tend to be not very useful strategies. Or we project negativity externally, looking for somebody or something to blame, even blaming ourselves. We end up in cycles of negativity that the Buddha characterized as unwholesome actions of body, speech, and mind.

Sometimes the teachings can be a bit formulaic, so it's important to investigate their nuances. It's easy to say, in a pat phrase, that these are just unwholesome mental states arising out of unwholesome actions and speech. But we're real people, and the feelings are very real. The habits we entrench ourselves in are very real. It's also too easy, too pat, just to use some of the teachings to put labels on things. So, you say: "It's all *dukkha*. Get used to it. What did you expect? Life sucks, anyway." Or, "It's all *anicca, dukkha, anattā*."\* Even though that's true, it's not performing its function. The Buddha's insights into those universal characteristics are insights

\*The three characteristics of all conditioned experience: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self.

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that lead to a penetration, a realization that allows one to be at complete peace with the way things are.

In contemplating the teachings and way of practice, we start realizing how important it is that there also needs to be a recognition of vulnerability to *dukkha*, discomfort, dis-ease. The response that is needed is really one of rising up to this with a sense of mindfulness, patience, and equanimity. When they're just words, you can put an intellectual framework around them, but the willingness to be present with experience that patience implies is very different. In terms of equanimity, it's the willingness to be steady, unmoving, and unshaken by experience. One has to be there for it; one can't just push something down or cover it over with a concept or idea. It's not just the *idea* of equanimity or even the *idea* of wisdom, even if you have all the right answers. "It's all *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. It's this cause, that cause." What is the feeling? What is the experience? Again, it's the need to recognize the vulnerability we have in the human condition.

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It's also how we relate to each other as human beings. This is where the qualities of generosity and giving, gratitude and reciprocation out of gratitude, enter. The discomfort that we experience is often times in how we interact and live with each other, having to live in the human condition with other people. Ajahn Chah was somebody who was always present for other people. He was always there. It wasn't always comfortable for him, but the example he set was one of being in the experience of living a human life and living it in a truly wise way. That entails a certain willingness to give of oneself, to share, and to be on the receiving end of some of the less beautiful aspects of human emotion.

Because of that willingness to be present and give, one's own discomfort is transformed. Ease, clarity, and peace don't come just because we can put a label on our experience, cover it over with the phrases of a wise discourse from the *suttas*, or go back and meditate. These are obviously all things that we need to be developing and cultivating, but there has to be the element of courage to look at and live our experience, the courage

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to be in a position of being vulnerable. It's hard to get that in a textbook or a book of Buddhist philosophy. It's the lived experience that is crucial.

When the Buddha gives instructions on the relinquishing of attachment to form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness, it all sounds so easy. But what does it mean? What does it entail? One of the visions or insights that I had was when I was considering the Buddha meditating beneath the Bodhi Tree. In essence, what the Buddha had to do was to give up everything, even his attachment to his own life. Everything that he conceived of as his, any kind of hope, needed to be given up. That willingness to die beneath the Bodhi Tree: that's incredible courage and daring.

Think of the interactions we have and the petty irritations that come up when somebody says something, and we worry what they think of us: "Are they going to dislike me because of this?" Or: "I hope they like me!" Our minds keep going to that. When we think of relinquishing attachment, it seems so clinical and sterile. But, in reality, it is giving up the impulse of distracting

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ourselves with something pleasurable when we're feeling a bit uncomfortable, bored, or uneasy, and of the attachment to trying to find the right method, the right technique. Our mind goes, "If I just do it like this, then it'll be right, and everything will be okay. If I just have this view, this idea, this concept, this phrase of this wise teacher, the Buddha or whomever, to be able to label this as *anicca, dukkha, anattā*, it will be alright."

The attachment to the sense of I, me, and mine, is *huge*. All our experience keeps revolving around the perception of I, me, and mine. Relinquishing attachment has to rely on something more than just having the right idea, thought, concept, or view. The qualities that *do* require a kind of relinquishing are important: the qualities of generosity and giving. Within those qualities is the necessity of being willing to give up something of oneself—the experience, time, and perception of one's own space and possessions and being willing to give, help, and share. This tends to be joyful in and of itself, but it also opens a doorway to be able to relinquish attachment.

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We see this in the training of monastics in the areas of service and looking after each other and our different duties. Looking after the teacher, looking after the preceptor, looking after sick monks: these are things where we inevitably have to put ourselves forward to be of service or help somebody else. Again, one is making oneself vulnerable, and it's very useful. Ajahn Chah used that a lot in the training, and these are ways we can really start to rely on the qualities of generosity and giving that brighten the mind, as well as aspects of gratitude and sharing of blessings.

These are ways of wearing away the things that tie us to our attachments. It's not just the hours that you sit on your meditation cushion or the number of books on Buddhism that you read. As Ajahn Chah said, it's that courage or daring to really give oneself to the training. Sometimes that can be uncomfortable, but the discomfort of seeing a way through, seeing a way out, seeing ways to relinquish, is a really skillful strategy, as opposed to the conditioned responses to the insecurity and discomfort of the human condition by which we

## *Beneath the Bodhi Tree*

keep repeating different ways of entangling ourselves in our attachments. Those qualities in our practice that enable us to bring up the sense of delighting in the opportunity to give ourselves to the teachings are incredibly invigorating.

Especially in a period of retreat, it's really helpful to be investigating some of these nuances and implications of our practice. What's going on underneath the practice, what are we doing, and what is the way out? What is the way of freedom that the Buddha symbolizes? What is the way out that the whole lineage of practitioners has experienced? So, it isn't just trying to get the intellectual concepts or outer form down, even though those things are a part of the training. It's seeing how it works, how it affects us. How do we make it work? How do we use these teachings, so they really allow us to savor the flavor of understanding and peace?



## *About the Author*

Ajahn Pasanno took ordination in Thailand in 1974 with Venerable Phra Khru Ñāṇasirivatana as preceptor. During his first year as a monk he was taken by his teacher to meet Ajahn Chah, with whom he asked to be allowed to stay and train. One of the early residents of Wat Pah Nanachat, Ajahn Pasanno became its abbot in his ninth year. During his incumbency, Wat Pah Nanachat developed considerably, both in physical size and reputation. Spending twenty-four years living in Thailand, Ajahn Pasanno became a well-known and highly respected monk and Dhamma teacher. He moved to California on New Year's Eve of 1996 to share the abbotship of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery with Ajahn Amaro. In 2010 Ajahn Amaro accepted an invitation to serve as abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England. Ajahn Pasanno is now the sole abbot of Abhayagiri.



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