Sitting in the Buddha's Waiting Room

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Buddhist contemplations on: 5 spiritual faculties, faith, energy, mindfulness, collectedness, discernment, going forth, ignorance, saying 'no', confidence, sickness, joy, security, meaninglessness, patience, waiting, and other things...

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The timely company of friends is goodness.
Fewness of needs is goodness.
Having accumulated virtue at life's end is goodness.
Having dispensed with all suffering is goodness.

Dhammapada v.331

There is a story traditionally associated with *Dhammapada verse 331* above, in which *Mara* tries to entice the Buddha to take on the powers of a king and become a worldly ruler. There was no way that was going to happen; the Buddha was not interested in having power over others. He was interested in showing people how they could have dominion over their own lives. All of his teachings point to the true source of

inner strength and security: selfless just-knowing awareness. Most of our practice is about learning how to make that just-right kind of effort so we are gradually more aligned with this inner refuge.

We all like to feel reassured that we are making progress in practice and that our efforts are not wasted. However, there comes a time when we need to let go of requiring such reassurance and choose instead to trust. We should not see this as abdication or resignation. When it is trusting in a wise way, it is based on an understanding that persistently checking up on ourselves undermines us. Tan Ajahn Chah illustrated this habit of always seeking proof of progress: he said it was like planting a sapling and every few days pulling it out of the ground to see whether it was still growing. Obviously, to do so is unhelpful. As with equanimity and patience, trust is not assertive, and from the outside it can appear weak. In truth, trust is potentially a very powerful source of support.

A visitor to our monastery who was clearly committed to

the spiritual life once asked me if I would explain the correct approach to practice. The image that came to my mind and which I shared with her was one of our sitting in the Buddha's waiting room. I suggested that our trust in the possibility of awakening is like having an appointment to meet the Buddha. In such a situation, while we were waiting to be called, what would we be doing? Would we be complaining to the Buddha's secretary, Venerable Ananda, about how long we were having to wait? I don't think so. Would we be pacing up and down fuming with impatience? I doubt it. Would we indulge in getting upset when we saw someone else go in ahead of us? Unlikely. I didn't elaborate to that extent in the conversation with the visitor, but I had the impression that the image helped her clarify how she should be approaching her practice. Her approach and my approach would not be the same; we are not coming from exactly the same place. What we do share, though, is faith that there is an end to

suffering and that the Buddha realized it.

When I think about how I personally would conduct myself were I waiting for an appointment to see the Buddha, I am sure I would be careful and try to not indulge in heedless mind states. Probably the thing I would focus on would be the five spiritual faculties. During his lifetime the Buddha gave many different teachings to different types of people. Some who came to listen to his teachings were suffering a great deal, and others not so much; some needed a lot of explanation before they got the message, and others needed only a few words. It is not necessary that we study and understand everything that has ever been recorded about what the Buddha taught. What is necessary is that we reach a point where we can let go of doubting the validity of the path and surrender ourselves – whole-bodily, wholeheartedly – into the spiritual training. For me, surrendering into the training means working on the five spiritual faculties: *saddha,*

viriya, sati, samadhi, paññā – faith, energy, mindfulness, collectedness and wisdom – coming back, over and over again, and refining my relationship with them.

(Some readers might find it unhelpful that I so frequently use the Pali words instead of the English equivalents. I take this decision partly because I suspect there is a better chance the Pali words will come less encumbered with assumption. That we don't quite know what the Pali words mean could help us be more open to enquiring.)

One way of approaching these five faculties is to think of them as a pyramid: the four sides of the pyramid have *saddha* and *paññā* facing each other, and *viriya* and *samadhi* facing each other. Then, from the apex of the pyramid to the base, right down through the centre, there is the axis of *sati*, maintaining balance.

SADDHA (FAITH)

The fragrance of flowers or sandalwood
blows only with the prevailing wind,
but the fragrance of virtue
pervades all directions.

Dhammapada v.54

This Dhammapada verse fifty-four is about *sila*, or integrity; I also think of *saddha*, or faith, as being like a beautiful fragrance. To use the example of honeysuckle: it is possible to feel the texture by touching it, and we can capture the shape and colour with a camera, but how do we sense the fragrance? The scent of the honeysuckle has a somewhat amorphous quality to it which we can't quite capture. In the same way, *saddha* or faith (or trust) cannot really be grasped; however, it can affect us if we allow it.

As we contemplate the faculty of faith, it is helpful to appreciate this amorphous quality. Sometimes we make the mistake of only valuing those things that we think will make us feel sure. It is not in the nature of faith for it to make us feel sure; however, and most importantly, it can help us to be more at ease with feeling unsure. We are not sure that every chair we sit on is secure and won't collapse under us; we trust. We are not sure that our car will start next time we need it; we trust. In our heads we have an assumption about what will or will not happen, but that assumption is based on how we feel – in this case, a sense of trust. This ability to trust is a faculty which can be, and needs to be, cultivated. It has the potential to sustain us when we are confronted with intense uncertainty. Having embarked on this journey to awakening, it is guaranteed we will travel through territory that is uncharted, uncertain, unknown. A well-developed sense of *saddha* means we can feel uncertain, we can enter

enter into the unknown better prepared and less likely to sink into the swamp of fear and dread.

Saddha in the context of the Buddha's teachings is not the same as belief. We believe in ideas in our heads. *Saddha* or faith involves our whole body-mind. To use another metaphor: when we are swimming in the ocean and roll over onto our back and float, it is not the fact we believe that floating is possible that prevents us from sinking; it is a whole body-mind effort. It is an embodied sense of trust. We are not sure, but we allow ourselves to trust. It is helpful to find our own word for the feeling we have when we engage with this faculty of *saddha*. For me the key word is 'surrender'.

Because the power of *saddha* is sometimes not as obvious as such qualities as concentration and insight, we risk undervaluing it. *Saddha* is like a reliable secretary who works behind the scenes to make sure the visible aspects of our life function efficiently. Sometimes it inspires us, at other times

it sustains us. *Saddha* can be good at protecting us from taking ourselves too seriously. When we recite the phrase, *Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gacchami* – I go for refuge to the Buddha – we are saying that I trust that awakening from unawareness is possible and that the Buddha was fully awake. When we recite the phrase, *Dhammaṃ saranaṃ gacchami* – I go for refuge to the Dhamma – we are saying that I trust that the teachings of the Buddha lead to awakening. When we recite the phrase, *Sanghaṃ saranaṃ gacchami* – I go for refuge to the Sangha – we are saying that I trust that there is a community of awakened beings who have followed those teachings. *Saddha* encourages us to let go of 'my way' and go for refuge to the Buddha's way, the Triple Gem: to align ourselves with timeless truth and in so doing learn how to hold our views and opinions more lightly.

Besides having trust in the Triple Gem, we also need to have trust in ourselves, which requires learning to be

increasingly honest with ourselves. The more honest we are with ourselves, the more we trust ourselves. The more we trust ourselves, the more inner strength we have. The Triple Gem serves as an outer representation of wisdom and compassion. So long as we are still under the sway of unawareness, we need external supports that protect us from falling into vortices of delusion. Trust in the Triple Gem provides us with a frame of reference that supports trusting in ourselves. Without such a frame of reference there is the risk that we could misperceive self-confidence and cling to it; instead of being freed from the suffering of deluded egoity, we become more identified as it. *Saddha* is precious and as practice progresses we come to see the wisdom of protecting it, of guarding it, of treasuring it. Here is a poem about *saddha* by Kittisaro that he shared with me. He wrote it while he was on a year's retreat in Chithurst forest in 1989.

Faith

Trust is precious
A treasure trove of gold.
Guard it with all your heart
And you'll never grow old.

It's not a question of this or that
Believed or disbelieved,
But rather letting where you're at
Be silently received.

The heart of faith,
The heart that knows,
Leaves no trace,
And neither comes nor goes.

PAÑÑA (WISDOM)

Elsewhere I have mentioned the conversation that the Buddha had with his son, Rahula, in which he asked Rahula what the purpose of a mirror was. Rahula replied that a mirror was for seeing our face in. The Buddha went on to say that when we want to see our heart, we use wise reflection. In Part One, Chapter Four of *In Any Given Moment* [4], where I explained the way Tan Ajahn Thate taught about wisdom, I described *paññā* as being a self-reflective capacity which has the function of revealing the reality of that which appears within awareness. It is *saddha* that gets us started on this journey to awakening, and it is wisdom that shows us where we need to go.

If we have too much *saddha* we can become lost in naivety. The confidence that comes from *saddha* has the potential to make us complacent. That which counters naivety and

complacency is *paññā*, or wisdom. Wisdom functions in relationship to faith; they cooperate. *Paññā* likes to enquire: it asks questions; it is not satisfied with a surface level of understanding: it wants to look deeper. *Paññā* is a disruptor – a constructive disruptor. It dismantles and dissects, but not out of heedless reactivity. True wisdom accords with reality and deconstructs in pursuit of the understanding that liberates us from conceit and confusion. My personal key word that connects with the concept of *paññā* is 'discernment'.

We begin by using the wisdom of those who have taken the journey ahead of us. By paying close attention to their teachings, we make progress and avoid too many serious pitfalls. We don't yet know what they know and we don't see what they see, but we benefit from what they share. Similarly to how we would use a satellite navigator in the car: to begin with we are not sure that it is reliable, but as we travel along we see that indeed there is a bridge where there should be, and

we pass through a village at just the right time. In the process we learn to trust in the instructions that the device gives us. Those instructions are not the journey, and are definitely not the destination, but they can be very helpful. Likewise we can learn to trust in the wise instructions that our spiritual teachers give us. What they offer are approximations – they are not the journey itself and not the goal – but their guidance is beneficial.

For example, wise teachings point out the importance of heedfulness and integrity. On the surface level we might think that so long as nobody else knows that we are being dishonest then we will get away with it. What we don't see is the damage we are doing to our self-respect.

In recent years several of the building projects here at Harnham Monastery have been overseen by an architect friend who lives in London, Rion Willard. When I was first getting to know Rion he shared with me how he reached a

point in his life where drinking alcohol no longer made sense. He had participated several times in meditation retreats at our sister monastery, Amaravati, and had probably heard on a number of occasions the 'precepts talk' given just prior to retreatants leaving the monastery. The talk on the five precepts is aimed at helping those who have been in the supportive environment of a retreat to integrate whatever benefits they have accrued, as they merge back into situations that are less supportive. Without the protection of a commitment to restraint and harmlessness we are exposed to the influence of old habits of resisting reality; in the process, dark shadows of unawareness return and obscure the clarity that perhaps we enjoyed while on retreat.

Rion explained to me how one year he had spent time during the retreat pondering: 'Why do I continue to drink alcohol when it costs so much money, causes me to behave heedlessly, and I end up feeling horrible?' That year, after the

precepts talk was given, he joined in with the group recitation and made a firm resolve to give up all alcohol. He hasn't drunk since. At that time he was working in an architectural firm and, as would be expected, was often invited to attend social gatherings where alcohol was consumed. Having made that resolution at the end of that retreat, he drank juice, water, coffee, or soft drinks. Not only did his mental clarity benefit but often others would notice and were inspired to ask how he managed it. Some of them had made big mistakes in their lives while under the influence of alcohol. Many rewarding conversations occurred as a result. The confidence and energy that was released as a result of making that resolve contributed significantly to his establishing his own architect company. These days Rion runs a consultancy business, and as part of the contract that clients sign, there can be no consumption of alcohol for twenty-four hours prior to their meeting. We could say that it was wisdom that recognized the relevance of

the precept talk and compassion that meant the wisdom was shared. Dhammapada verse 290 says,

It is wisdom that leads to letting go
of a lesser happiness in pursuit
of a happiness which is greater.

It is easy to be inspired by the compassionate example of those who have already taken the journey – who have done their work – but we would be mistaken if we think we can have the wisdom without doing the work.

In 1967 I was fifteen years old, and I can recall sitting in the living room in our house in Morrinsville, watching on our black and white television set a global TV link-up[1] – the first occasion when many countries around the world all simultaneously tuned in to the same program. One of Britain's contributions to that event was the Beatles singing

All You Need is Love. They were backed by a large orchestra and joyously sang out a refrain about love – over and over again. It was a catchy tune and sounded very hopeful. Unfortunately, that global link-up and the Beatles song were not enough to transform the insanity and suffering of the world. In reality, when what is referred to as love is not associated with wisdom, it can be very selfish. A song called *All You Need is Wisdom* is not so catchy, but the message is closer to the truth.

Wisdom understands, for instance, that reality is multidimensional. The waves on the surface of the ocean are only part of the reality of the ocean: there is stillness in the depth. For example, we might think we are acting with good intentions as we try to persuade others that we know what is best for them, but perhaps we don't have the depth of discernment to realize that it is delusion that is driving us. If we look at the results of many of the religious crusades over

the centuries we see how, despite what they thought were good intentions, they left a trail of disaster behind them with far-reaching consequences. Without true wisdom, delusion can be running riot and our actions can be causing a great deal of suffering, for ourselves and others. It takes wisdom to see through self-delusion, and without it the spectre of self-centredness creates a massive amount of trouble.

Paññā doesn't shy away from hard questions. We need to learn how to turn our attention around and truly face *dukkha*, and ask, 'Where does this suffering come from?' This is what the Buddha in his wisdom is encouraging us to do. Because of habits of heedlessness we find it easier to turn away and distract ourselves – to blame external conditions. Even the development of goodness can become a form of distraction. I attended a public talk once in London where the teacher was comparing different Buddhist traditions, and commented that, in his view, the Theravadins focused too

much on suffering. I wouldn't want to comment on all Theravadins, but I would say that it is also possible to focus too much on the aspects of practice that give rise to surface-level good feelings. (See the example of Tan Ajahn Thate who was locked into *samadhi* for several years without progressing towards wisdom.) Indeed, we need to be able to draw on the strength that comes from our storehouse of goodness, but we also need to be careful that we are not merely indulging in pleasant feelings. It is possible to be dwelling on thoughts of kindness and gratitude yet at the same time be completely lost in pleasant feelings. Pleasant feelings that arise from focusing on goodness can be intoxicating. Once again, it is wise to reflect that the Buddha pointed out: *You continue to suffer because you fail to see two things – dukkha and the cause of dukkha*. When wisdom is well-developed it is less likely that we will make the mistake of indulging in agreeable feelings. There is a better chance we will engage the strength

and resilience that goodness gives us, and use it to fearlessly face *dukkha*, to drill down into it and enquire: 'What is this suffering? What is the cause of this suffering?'

Paññā sees through facades – our own and others. We might catch ourselves midway through telling a familiar story about how great we are, then suddenly see our own falsehood. Or when listening to another person talking about the drama of their life – they could be utterly convinced about how unfortunate they are and justified in blaming so-and-so for their unhappiness, but all you hear is somebody totally lost in a dream. With wisdom you won't be pulled into heedlessly believing in, or reacting to, their drama. Without wise reflection we tend to become lost in habits of reactivity, taking sides for and against opposing views and perspectives. Wisdom shows us how to pull back from heedless reactivity and see the situation from a broader perspective, one of expanded awareness: one that has the space to accommodate

the *dukkha* – our own and that of others. Without such a perspective it is not likely that we will be able to really change anything.

So long as we totally believe we are our conditioned personality, our ego, there is very little hope of our finding any happiness other than that which arises from mere gratification of desire. One who is searching for satisfaction and security but still believes their personality is who or what they are, is like someone who is hungry and eats some photographs of food. Those colourful photographs approximate food but they are not the real thing. *Paññā* sees the games we play and sees through the fronts that we erect and hide behind: the powerful one, the entertaining one, the sensitive one, the spiritual one. Wisdom has the potential to lead us in the right direction of dismantling those fronts and learning how to stand firm on our own two feet, without hiding.

We are fortunate to have the benefit of the Buddha's all-

encompassing wisdom, as there are many opportunities on this journey for us to become distracted. Even avenues of apparently profound significance can be a complete waste of time. The classic teaching we have from the Buddha illustrating this point is where he was with a group of monks and scooped up a handful of leaves from the floor of the forest and asked them which was greater: the handful of leaves or all the leaves on all the trees in the forest? The monks replied that the leaves on all the trees were greater. The Buddha then explained that the truths that he had realized were much greater than those which he had taught. However, what he had taught was what mattered to anyone who was interested in awakening to freedom from unawareness.

The traditional presentation of the teachings that lead to the arising of wisdom involves an analysis of phenomena according to the three characteristics: *anicca, dukkha, anatta* (impermanence, suffering, and not-self). We are taught that

investigating experiences – mental, emotional, physical – in terms of these three characteristics gradually leads to our letting go of habits of clinging. The tradition also suggests that we might well find an affinity with one characteristic in particular, in which case we ought to follow that line of enquiry. Essential to that enquiry, however, is that we engage it with an authentic quality of interest; we are not blindly applying a technique because someone said it was good for us. The Buddha's own motivation to turn away from a life of habitual distraction and to pursue liberation began when he truly saw the consequences of his behaviour – when he truly saw that this life is fraught with *dukkha*. It was at that point that disillusionment arose in him. This recognition triggered in him a deep interest in searching for an escape from the terrible tedium of always trying to avoid old age, sickness and death. The great question, 'What truly matters?' arose in his heart and with it the energy to embark on the great journey.

VIRIYA (ENERGY)

Those who are energetically committed to the Way,
who are pure and considerate in effort,
composed and virtuous in conduct,
steadily increase in radiance.

Dhammapada v.24

Let us now turn to the third face of the pyramid, the faculty of *viriya*. The usual translation of '*viriya*' is energy, or sometimes vigour, or effort. The word I find helps form a connection with this Dhamma principle is 'motivation'.

Viriya gets things done. It can help get you out of bed in the morning and motivates you to do your morning exercise before settling into sitting meditation. *Viriya* is needed to endure through difficulties. Even after experiencing significant insights, it can take a lot of effort before feeling able to

fully live from that place of new understanding.

Viriya is needed to overcome inertia and to take initiative; it means we don't settle for the status quo. Without *viriya* the Buddha-to-be wouldn't have embarked on the journey to awakening. Without *viriya* he might have accepted one of the the invitations from his first two teachers to settle in and help them run their communities, and might even have abandoned his aspiration to realize full and final freedom from all suffering.

Without *viriya*, Ajahn Sumedho might have remained at Wat Pah Nanachat and not spent years initiating and supporting the development of many monasteries in the West. Without *viriya*, the abbot I mentioned earlier (see *In Any Given Moment* [4]) who found himself on the receiving end of somebody else's projected pain wouldn't have taken the time he needed to thoroughly attend to how he had been affected.

In the early days of Chithurst there was an occasion when I was tasked with moving Ajahn Sumedho's belongings from a small room in the main house over to the redecorated Granary. There wasn't very much to move, and I paid what I thought was enough attention to boxing things up. I like to think I was particularly careful in packing up his shrine. As it happened I should have been more careful, because somewhere between the main house and the Granary the head of Ajahn Sumedho's carved rose quartz Buddha rupa was broken off. What I particularly remember about that day was Ajahn Sumedho offering a very helpful Dhamma talk in which he described how, instead of on the one hand pretending that he wasn't annoyed, and on the other hand indulging in the annoyance, he made an effort to simply bear with the suffering that arose upon learning his lovely Buddha rupa had been broken, until the suffering faded. It is not necessarily the case that practice will take us to a point of

profound insight and suddenly all our suffering disappears. That might happen for some, but what is more likely is that the arising of insight is a beginning of a new way of relating to suffering. Insight gives us a new perspective. From that point onward *viriya* is required as we endure the burning that is the purification and the integration.

While we are contemplating the spiritual faculty of *viriya* we should look again at the Buddha's teachings on the Four Right Efforts. It is easy to memorise and rattle off the list of the four right efforts, but what does it *actually* mean to make these four kinds of effort?

Let's begin with 'making an effort to protect already arisen wholesomeness'. As an experiment, bring to mind some positive aspect of your character, and then ask yourself, 'what do I need to do to protect this good quality?' For example, perhaps some time ago you decided to take the precepts seriously – not merely repeating them in Pali

without any intention of observing them – and you have managed to honour that resolution. However, now the festive New Year season is approaching and you feel afraid you could end up compromising yourself. One way of making an effort to protect the already arisen wholesomeness is to call on a Dhamma friend to bear witness to your resolve to maintain the five precepts. It doesn't matter whether we really understand why it makes a difference having someone else that we respect know about the effort we are making; we can just try trusting in it and see if it helps. Or, another example, perhaps we have reached a point in our meditation practice where we find the benefit from regular sittings is spilling over into daily life and we are experiencing increased clarity and calm. One way of making an effort to maintain that benefit of practice is to determine to keep to a regular sleeping routine: setting an alarm for ten o'clock at night and being in bed by ten-thirty, for instance. We know that

irregular sleeping patterns are unhelpful, and that staying up late dealing with emails is disruptive; to make a resolve to be in bed by a certain time can be supportive.

Considering now the second right effort: what is involved in 'making an effort to give rise to so far unarisen wholesome states of mind'? Perhaps you are someone who finds it easy to be generous, but finds it very difficult to forgive those who you feel have harmed you. One way of making the effort to develop the virtuous quality of forgiveness could be to focus attention on how much pain we cause ourselves by indulging in resentment – not merely mentally, but feeling the resulting pain and the tension in the body. Only once we realize that we are the ones responsible for making ourselves unhappy will we be motivated to stop doing it. And perhaps upon acknowledging the consequences of indulging in resentment, we will discover that we can enquire more clearly into the mental processes involved. Maybe we

come to see that memories of past hurt are not actually a problem. The suffering of unforgiveness comes with our investing ill will in those memories. The memories and our ill will are not the same thing. We can't necessarily free our mind from unpleasant memories, but we do have the potential to stop compounding the unpleasantness by adding resentment. The ill will is extra. As a result of seeing this, forgiveness grows.

The next right effort is described as 'making an effort to remove already arisen unwholesome states of mind'. It is beneficial to familiarize ourselves with what the Buddha said about the five ways of removing distracting thoughts[2]. Also I would recommend reading what Ajahn Tiradhammo wrote in his book, *Working with the Five Hindrances*[3].

In my own experience I have found it useful to bear in mind that the kind of effort required to deal with an already arisen obstruction depends on the intensity of the

obstruction. It seems to me there are three approaches. When an obstruction is of a low level of intensity we can afford to simply ignore it – to not give it the energy of our attention. Sometimes this is enough for the obstruction to disappear. It is similar to choosing to not answer the phone when it rings. I call this the 'cutting through' approach.

When we encounter an obstruction that is charged with more energy, attempting to ignore it or cut through it could lead to making things worse. It might seem like it disappears, but that doesn't mean it has gone away; it has gone into unawareness and might be more difficult to deal with when it returns. For this level of intensity we need to turn around and face that which is troubling us and use our faculties to investigate. We could call this approach 'seeing through'. We use our mental, emotional and physical faculties to enquire as to the source of this obstruction. How do we feel in our heart as we face this sense of being blocked from progressing?

Where do we feel the tension in the body? In other words we build a relationship with it: the opposite of ignoring it. We might even strike up a conversation with it: 'What do you want? How can I help you? Sorry I have been ignoring you.' As we become more acquainted with the whole body-mind sense of the obstruction, not only will our mental acumen be available to support the investigation, but also our intuition. When we feel confronted with a real conundrum, we need to be listening to all of our being, including our gut. In the process we might find that we grow tired of trying to figure out a solution and head outside for a long walk in the woods, or go swimming. Physical exercise is an important concomitant in this process.

A different kind of effort is required when dealing with the most intense type of obstruction, which I call 'burning through'. In my own case it often feels like physical burning involving a lot of heat. If we find ourselves in such a situation,

there is not much that we can do other than feel the fire, stay present in the body-mind, stay soft and open, and be consciously willing to bear with it, especially when it feels unbearable.

Now to the final of the four right efforts: what is involved in 'making an effort to avoid the arising of so far unarisen unwholesome states of mind'? Let's take the example of witnessing how unpleasant it is to be in the company of someone lacking empathy. Having noticed how much hurt can come from such a lack of emotional development, we decide to make an effort to avoid becoming like that. Just because we happen to meditate regularly does not guarantee that we are protected from falling into the trap of insensitivity. There are many meditators around who become so caught up in trying to solve their own suffering that they become obsessed and short-sighted: while making an effort to attend to their pain they have been pulled down into the vortex of

their pain. This is one of the very real dangers of meditation practice. To avoid this danger we can turn up the volume of compassion.

As an exercise in formal meditation we can imagine the face of another person and think to ourselves, 'Just as my eyes have cried many tears, their eyes also have cried tears. Just as I suffer, they too suffer. May all beings be free from suffering.' We can perform the same exercise in daily life: sitting on a train or waiting in an airport, look at the faces of those around you and imagine tears rolling down their cheeks. It is safe to assume that everyone has cried, and when we feel how we feel when we recognize that fact, the barriers we construct around ourselves can begin to dissolve. Maybe we start to sense that we are all in this together – men and women, young and old, rich and poor – we all suffer and long to be free from suffering. Mindfully empathizing with the suffering of others gives rise to compassion and can protect

our heart from becoming cold and insensitive.

Although there is a great deal more that could usefully be discussed on this topic of *viriya*, there is at least one point in particular that should be mentioned. We have considered the importance of generating energy, and we also must be ready to accord with energy that arises spontaneously. Here I am referring to the intensity we feel when faced with a dilemma.

When we are in the middle of a dilemma and feel frustrated, it is the easiest thing to indulge in wanting the *dukkha* to disappear. The same applies to when we are shocked – when something totally unexpected occurs and our bubble of uninspected assumption bursts, and we experience a great release of energy. If our wanting to be free from *dukkha* is informed by wisdom and restraint it will help motivate us to find the cause of the *dukkha* and the way out of it, but often our wanting is laced with clinging and only serves to stoke the fires of frustration. It is skilful to prepare ourselves in

advance for such occurrences in order to not miss the precious opportunity to make progress on the path. A dilemma or a shock should be seen as free energy that has been made available to fuel the purification of our gold. And we prepare ourselves by wisely reflecting in advance. The perception of intolerable intensity that arises with such experiences is the result of our imposing limitations on awareness. When we decide that we can't handle the intensity, there and then we are imposing limitations on the heart of awareness: we are turning away from our refuge of trusting in the Buddha, and instead believe in the story in our heads that tells us we can't handle it. Wisely reflecting in advance is one way of nurturing the mindfulness and restraint that have the power to prevent us from forgetting the refuge in the Buddha – in edgeless, selfless, just-knowing awareness. If we remember the refuge, then the energetic intensity that manifests upon feeling frustrated or shocked is a gift for which we can feel

grateful. It is our habit of clinging that creates the perception of limited awareness, and it takes energy to free ourselves from that habit. How we view energy when it hits us determines whether or not we benefit from it.

As with gravity, we don't have to know what energy actually is to be able to accord with it. What matters is that we know how to access it and generate it so that when it is needed we are not caught unprepared; and when an unexpected wave of energy does appear, how to meet it without judgment, without the contraction of fear – how to benefit from it.

SAMADHI (COLLECTEDNESS)

On hearing true teachings
the hearts of those who are receptive become serene,
like a lake: deep, clear and still.

Dhammapada v.82

As *saddha* and *paññā* compliment each other, so do *viriya* and *samadhi*. While *viriya*'s speciality is getting things done, *samadhi's* speciality is skilful not doing.

The Dhammapada verse above speaks of a deep, clear stillness that can appear upon receiving true teachings. This image fits well with how we might usefully contemplate the cultivation of *samadhi*. Particularly for those whose native approach to practice is primarily source-oriented (see *In Any Given Moment*, Appendix I)[4], developing *samadhi* is not so much about making the mind peaceful, as about allowing

the mind to resume peacefulness: we are not 'doing *samadhi* meditation', but 'allowing stillness'.

When we first start out in meditation practice, most of us benefit from precise instructions on what to do and what not to do. When I give beginners meditation instruction I usually encourage them to count the out-breaths. We are so used to always doing something to get somewhere, that beginning with 'not-doing' is perhaps asking too much. However, it seems to me particularly important that students of meditation learn early on that the attitude with which they approach practice will determine the result of their effort. If they relate to their practice with an attitude instilled by a culture of consumerism, and they feel entitled to get the results they desire as and when they wish, they may not get very far on the journey. I am not saying that everyone ought to adopt a source-oriented approach, and that goal-oriented practice will not be productive – obviously for some it can

be – just that if our striving to make our mind peaceful is not working, then we should be ready to consider adjusting the kind of effort we are making. Applying focused attention on counting the breaths, for instance, can introduce us to what is possible; it can nurture faith and motivate us. But once we recognize the potential that we have for inner peace, we need to attend closely to the attitude with which we engage the spiritual exercises.

The sort of attitude we need to have when disciplining attention is similar to that of a gardener as he or she trains their runner beans[5] to run along the frame which they have erected. The gardener gently guides the beans to grow in a certain direction so they get maximum sunlight and are easy to pick once they are mature. The gardener is aware that if they are not careful they will damage the tender young shoots. And they understand that, with enough water and warmth and time, the vines will produce beans of their own accord.

They are not trying to squeeze the beans out of the vine – it is not up to the gardener to force the plant to produce beans.

Personally, I have found that when I approached practice with a striving-gaining attitude, my mind became more disturbed, not less. I spent many years trying to make my mind peaceful because that is what I understood the teachers were telling me to do. Eventually, when I came to realize that not everyone was out of balance in the way I was, I was able to accept that I needed to adjust my approach. And upon reflection, it seems that not all the teachers were advocating a goal-oriented kind of effort anyway – just that that is how I interpreted what they were saying.

If I were to compare myself with how I understand some other meditators relate to *samadhi*, I would say that my mind is all over the place – my *samadhi* is hopeless. However, that would be a heedless assessment. It is indeed true that my mind is not as still as I would want it to be, but it is not all

over the place. There is a sense of containment, and with that comes a degree of clarity that I did not use to have. With that increased clarity comes an ability to contemplate life, and that is what really interests me. I am not drawn to 'making the mind peaceful', but I am drawn to stewarding attention in a way that inclines the mind towards stillness, and such stillness invites deepening of enquiry. This approach to the development of *samadhi* is perhaps best described as an effort to stop causing disturbance: to stop taking sides, and to let go of the compulsive judging mind.

Many of the approaches to meditation that have been taught in Buddhist centres in the West originated in monasteries in the East. These teachings emerged out of minds that were conditioned in ways very different to ours. Casually comparing one culture with another is of course unhelpful and disrespectful, but to ignore how different our cultures are, and the effects those differences have, is naive. The effects

of being raised and educated in Judaeo-Christian culture, where there is an emphasis on competing and comparing, are very different from the effects of growing up in a traditional Buddhist culture where the law of kamma and rebirth is accepted, and where guilt and self-loathing are generally unfamiliar concepts.

For many years now in my meditation practice I have used a reflection on the compulsive judging mind: observing the tendency of the conditioned mind to take sides for and against, and observing how a confused sense of self is sustained by that process. Regularly I hear meditators talk in very critical tones about their practice. They might have been practising for many years and making admirable effort, but because they still don't see the undermining effects of the compulsive judging mind – of taking sides for and against the conditions that arise – they don't receive the fruits of their good efforts. They are addicted to 'becoming' – to *bhava*.

Twice a year in our monastery, we meet for a fire risk assessment. One of the major risks that requires regular mention at those meetings is the overloading of extension cables. Extension cables come in various types: some can be used for operating a lamp or a laptop but must never be used for a hot water kettle or a heater. Others are designed to carry a heavier load and can be used for running more power hungry appliances. If the wrong sort of cable is used there is a real risk of starting a fire. In the spiritual life, regular mention is required regarding the immodest efforts of meditators who are hell-bent on attaining elevated states of mind. Without modesty and contentment their heroic efforts can lead to an overload of their nervous systems and, sadly, sometimes cause meltdown. Many people come to this path of spiritual practice with wholesome aspirations but regrettably don't receive adequate instruction in developing the right attitude. Our aspirations are a form of energy and

that energy can take us either in a direction of increased balance and ease, or to increased confusion. We would do well to remember the teaching that the Buddha gave to Bhikkhuni Mahapajapati where he included modesty and contentment as two indicators of right practice.

We are bound to have been affected by the greed-fuelled consumer culture in which we grew up. I recommend posting the words 'contentment' and 'modesty' in places where you will easily see them, or any other words that you feel could serve to counterbalance the effects of rampant consumerism. Approaching the cultivation of *samadhi* with an attitude that is rife with self-centred greed is setting ourselves up for great disappointment, or worse: it can sow seeds of discontentment deep within our hearts.

If you have had a taste of *samadhi* and then get greedy, it is possible you will become hypersensitive and won't want to listen to what anyone else has to say: you become inflated with

self-importance. When practice is proceeding in a balanced way, inevitably you experience an increase in sensitivity – mentally, emotionally, physically. However, contrary to what we might imagine, increased openness and sensitivity does not necessarily immediately make us feel more calm and balanced. It can in fact make us feel more exposed and unstable. The amount of time it takes before we feel comfortable with increased openness and sensitivity will probably depend on how contracted and out-of-balance we were to begin with. The point here being: as tempting as it can appear, it is not always the case that the more *samadhi* the better. *Samadhi* should be viewed as a medication that can be skilfully used in support of increased well-being. It can also be abused in support of habits of addiction. If you notice that you are still entertaining attitudes of untamed greed in the way you hold your meditation, try dwelling on how you would hold a newborn baby – gently, softly and

lovingly.

Another approach to stillness – and one with which we might prepare ourselves by contemplating in advance – can come with sickness. A few years ago a good friend of our monasteries contracted Lyme disease[6]. As can happen, his condition went undiagnosed for a long time. Then it took a great many months before he could say he was back to anything like normal again. When he was somewhat recovered, he shared with me how at one stage during his illness he didn't have enough energy to even lift himself off the bed. And in that debilitated state, there was a period when he was so drained of energy that even the effort required to maintain a sense of personal self was beyond him. He related how when he reached that point, the individual self disappeared, and what was left was a perception of vast expanded awareness and connectedness – there was no fear. He felt that if that was his final breath he was going to take,

that would be OK. This friend had been meditating for many years before falling ill, so we can assume it was not through sheer luck that he stumbled upon this life-changing experience.

SATI (MINDFULNESS)

If the four faculties of *saddha* and *paññā*, and *viriya* and *samadhi* are functioning in an optimum way, they will exist in a state of balanced tension. If there is too much faith we tend to lose our edge in practice and become heedless; if there is too much enquiry we end up questioning absolutely everything and risk becoming possessed by doubt. If there is too much energy we will feel restless, and if there is an over-emphasis on stillness we could become susceptible to delusion. *Sati* serves to oversee balance. *Sati* does many other

things besides, but in the context of this contemplation of the five spiritual faculties this particular function warrants mentioning. Ideally there will be a dynamic tension between the faculties, which strengthens and deepens our effort. *Sati* manages our life. My keyword for *sati* is watchfulness.

Tan Ajahn Chah had an interesting expression: 'kaad *sati* muea rai, bpen baa muea nan' which translates as 'moments when you are without *sati* are moments of insanity'. *Sati* is that central, not only to the Buddha's path of practice, but to life. Sometimes Tan Ajahn Chah made jokes saying that Westerners have 'stupid feet' because we would always be stubbing our toes as we walked through the forest. We might have appeared very clever intellectually since most of us had spent more time in school and at universities than the Thai monks, but we were clumsy and inattentive. When ceremonies take place, the Thai monks seem to have a way of knowing exactly when to act and what to do, and it

isn't just because they are familiar with the protocol and we aren't. Even very junior monks and novices seem to be attuned to what is happening and can respond without someone having to tell them what to do. They are attentive and more 'embodied' than we are. Owing to their better developed sense of spatial awareness they are picking up on more information. I doubt that mindfulness will ever be commodified in Thailand the way it has been in the West; it would be like trying to commodify breathing. The concept of *sati* is so thoroughly embedded in their culture.

At Wat Pah Nanachat, particularly during the seven years that constitute the first three stages of training, as a postulant, novice and junior monk, the monastic training offered is largely a process of assimilating the principle of embodied mindfulness. There is an emphasis on the cultivation of mindfulness in all aspects of life – mental, emotional, physical, relational. It is a gradual whole body-mind training

which is altogether different from 'me' performing a technique so that 'I' improve 'myself'. The understanding behind this traditional approach of embodying mindfulness is that to be able to untangle the knot of deluded egoity – to be able to investigate *anicca, dukkha, anatta,* and awaken – requires that we are mindful in the whole body-mind. Mindfulness training is not merely a mental exercise.

In Part 7, Chapter 3 of *In Any Given Moment*[4] I described how during my time as a junior monk in Thailand I was hesitant to join in with the other monks performing attendant duties with our teacher, Tan Ajahn Chah. I suggested that my hesitation was because of a fear of rejection, but it might have been more complicated than that. I suspect that I also sensed on some level that I simply wasn't up to the task. When there is embodied mindfulness we can function with ease; intuition will be informing our actions. In my case, because of a lack of embodied mindfulness, I was functioning

from a place of perpetual controlling. I was always thinking, 'What should I be doing now?' No wonder I was so exhausted so much of the time. It wasn't that I was bad, I was just a little bit crazy. Fortunately I wasn't so crazy that I couldn't learn from my mistakes, and that is really what matters.

We all fall short of how we would want to be. We all have so much to learn. However, when we have mindfulness we are more able to learn. The root of the word '*sati*' means 'remembering', and perhaps when we are translating '*sati*' a better word than 'mindfulness' would be 'presence'. We can be too trusting, too energetic, too tranquil and too inquisitive, but we can never be too present. The more consistently present we are in the whole body-mind, the better.

Regularly reflecting on these five spiritual faculties is an activity I find thoroughly rewarding. If I were sitting in the Buddha's waiting room contemplating as we have been doing,

I like to think I would be protected from falling prey to too much heedlessness. I also like to think that by sharing these reflections, readers might find a few hints that will help them as they progress along the way. It is a huge good fortune to have come across this way as explained by the Buddha. It is a privilege to find companions with whom one can share the journey. None of us know how much time we have and what challenges lie ahead. But right now it is my conscious wish that we remember to dwell in gratitude for the benefits we have already received.

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About the Author

Ajahn Munindo was first accepted into the *bhikkhu* sangha under the Venerable Somdet Nyanasamvaro in 1975 and then again later under the Venerable Ajahn Chah in 1976. He came to the UK in 1980 after a brief visit to New Zealand. After an initial period at Cittaviveka Monastery in West Sussex, he moved to Devon where he led the community in establishing the Devon Vihara. In 1991 he became senior incumbent at Aruna Ratanagiri.

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