

# Affectionate Splendour

TAKING REFUGE WITH PEMASIRI THERA



DAVID YOUNG

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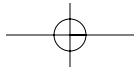
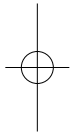
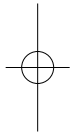
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# Table of Contents

	Preface .....	v
<b>1</b>	<b>Letting Go of What Is More Beneficial for What Is Less Beneficial .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Elephants and Good Food .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Performing Human Qualities is Fraught with Danger .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Boys Like to Swim, and a Few Deva Qualities .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Qualities of a Good Yogi, or a Spoiled Jar of Pepper Seeds .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>More on Teachers and Yogis — Wild Horses .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Past Kamma Obstructions to Path .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>More on Past Kamma Obstructions .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>House of Dhamma .....</b>	<b>77</b>
	<i>Religion</i> .....	81
	<i>Philosophy</i> .....	85
	<i>Dhamma</i> .....	89
	<b>Endnotes .....</b>	<b>91</b>





## Preface

*Affectionate Splendour* and *Taking Refuge with Pemasiri Thera* were chosen as the title and sub-title for this collection of talks from Sri Lankan Theravāda monk Pemasiri Thera for a couple reasons. For the title, the Pali Text Society Dictionary defines Pema as love and affection. It defines Siri as splendour and beauty. Combining these two terms yields a translation of Pemasiri Thera's name as *Affectionate Splendour*. As for the sub-title, when I asked Pemasiri Thera for ideas for cover art for this collection, he responded with a charming idea, "There are various types of scared creatures, including some animals. There's heavy rain with thunder and lightning and these scared creatures are taking refuge in a cave." In a way, I am one of those scared creatures taking refuge in the cave of Pemasiri Thera's teachings.

Pemasiri Thera gave these talks in August, 2010 at Sumathipāla Na Himi Senasun Arana in Sri Lanka. Pemasiri Thera speaks only Sinhala, and I speak only English. I thank the translators for exerting great effort in rendering Pemasiri Thera's Sinhala into lucid English—a difficult task. After the recordings of these talks were transcribed, numerous critical readers gave feedback on grammar and content. And now, heavily edited, these talks have been approved by students who know Pemasiri Thera's teachings thoroughly. If not exact to the letter of Pemasiri Thera's teachings, this collection is definitely in the spirit of his teachings. Pemasiri Thera accepts the result. After editing, the manuscript and cover went to graphic designers. I thank these professionals for their quality workmanship.

The artwork used on the cover is by Dr. Peter Schuepp, and I feel it suits Pemasiri Thera's ideas for the cover. Peter told me, "I think the cover looks really good, and your friend Paul Payer did a great job designing it. My only concern now is that I'd like to make sure that the acknowledgment for the cover design is okay. Since it is the reproduction of a mural painted for the Libervida School this has to be mentioned. Perhaps something like 'Cover design based on, or reproduced from, mural in the Libervida School for children with AIDS, Mogi das Cruzes, Brazil, by Peter Schuepp'. Please confirm because I do not want to short-change the school, which has a hard enough time, and for whom I made the mural after all. This is important to me."

*Affectionate Splendour*

Then, just when I thought this collection was in its final stage, a friend asked me several questions. Where are you in your own practice of meditation? Who is this collection for? Who is your imagined reader? What does your reader already know? Do you and your reader face the same burdens? Finally, what do you hope your reader gets from this collection? All good questions.

Where am I in my practice of meditation? That is a difficult question to answer in brief. I first met Pemasiri Thera at the Lanka Vipassana Meditation Centre in Colombo in 1998. Over the past fifteen years, I have lived and studied with him for a total of five years. Studying meditation with Pemasiri Thera has had a profound and positive influence on my life. To the best of my abilities, I now see the world through the Buddha's Four Noble Truths. As I said in the preface to *Walking The Tightrope*, a Buddhist Publication Society book, "Pemasiri Thera not only changed my life, but he gave me a life where one didn't exist. He showed me how to live in a meaningful way. This is a priceless gift."

I imagine the reader of this collection of talks to be quite similar to me. He or she is a westerner who comes from a non-Buddhist culture and doesn't know a great deal about this type of meditation. My reader is neither a Buddhist scholar nor a veteran meditator, but knows life is full of burdens. Searching for ways to lighten life's burdens, he or she is investigating the practice of meditation as taught by the Buddha in the Theravāda tradition. I hope by reading this collection the reader gains an appreciation of a long-term working relationship between a fine meditation teacher and one of his students. If I were to wish for results, the reader would learn a bit about meditation, be inspired to practise, and indeed lighten his or her burdens. At the very least, I hope while in the midst of reading this collection my imagined reader gets some temporary relief.

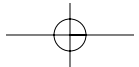
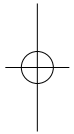
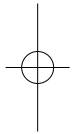
In gratitude and respect,



David Young  
Sumathipāla Na Himi Senasun Arana  
Kanduboda, Sri Lanka  
2013

*Recently, there were two good yogis practising here  
at our centre. It was with lots of joy that I spoke  
with them and with lots of joy I taught them.*

Pemasiri Thera





*At one time the Blessed One was living with the Sakyas in Nigrodha's monastery in Kapilavatthu. At that time the Sakya Mahānāma had just got well after an illness. At that time many bhikkhus were engaged in sewing The Blessed One's robe, The Blessed One was to leave on a tour at the end of the three months when the robe was ready.*

*The Sakya Mahānāma heard that, many bhikkhus are engaged in sewing The Blessed One's robe, and The Blessed One was to leave on a tour at the end of the three months when the robe was ready. So the Sakya Mahānāma approached The Blessed One, worshipped, sat on a side and said: Venerable sir, we hear that many bhikkhus are engaged in sewing The Blessed One's robe and The Blessed One is to leave on a tour at the end of three months when the robe is ready. We abide in various abidings. Which is the most suitable abiding, in which we should abide?*

Second Mahānāma Sutta<sup>1</sup>



1

## Letting Go of What Is More Beneficial for What Is Less Beneficial

**DAVID:** *Why meditate? What to tell my friends back in Canada? They don't know anything of meditation.*

**PEMASIRI THERA:** Tell them you are slightly crazy and like to be with others who are as crazy as you! Here in Sri Lanka many people say those who meditate are a little crazy. Even in the Buddha's time, because the Buddha's disciples used to meditate a lot, the disciples of other religious teachers accused the Buddha of using a mantra to trick and hypnotize his disciples. And it was said, if disciples of other religious teachers heard the Buddha's mantra, they were incapable of rejecting his teachings — they were compelled to follow.

The Upali Sutta mentions these accusations of the Buddha stealing away disciples of other teachers with a mantra.<sup>2</sup> Upali, who was formerly

*Affectionate Splendour*

a disciple of Nigantha Nataputta, became a disciple of the Buddha. When asked if he was tricked by the Buddha's mantra, Upali said, "Yes, I have been tricked and hypnotized by the Buddha and his mantra. I don't mind if all my descendants are hypnotized by the Buddha and his mantra. It is for their good."

***Did the Buddha actually trick and hypnotize Upali to steal him away from his former teacher?***

No, that of course was a false accusation. By tricked and hypnotized, Upali meant being convinced by the clarity and wisdom of the Buddha's teachings, not trickery. The Upali Sutta, number fifty-six in the Majjhima Nikāya, is an important sutta. Read it.

When talking with your friends about meditation it is better to avoid terms like samatha and vipassanā, because those terms are absurd for people who have no idea what this type of meditation is all about. There's no point either in using the terms such as concentration, one-pointedness and insight.

From the standpoint of Dhamma, talk in general terms with your friends. Talk about things that are relevant to their lives. For example, from the time they were born until now, they have been going to school, learning various skills, working at different jobs and so on. Over the course of their lives, they endured an assortment of conflicts. Your friends couldn't always meet all their needs and requirements, and they couldn't always supply themselves with everything they wanted. Remind them of their struggles with difficult situations. Ask them if the results of their hard work have been worth all their efforts. Sometimes there are few worthwhile results coming from a large amount of work. All of us must endure sickness. Most of our lives are to some degree unsatisfactory. Talk with your friends in this way.

***Some of my friends are materially well off.***

Talk about old age. Your friends may have accrued a great deal of wealth but it doesn't matter. However great the results of their work it's they alone who, in the latter part of their lives, must bear unsatisfactory results and suffer. When old, nothing remains for them but to bear up with the condition of being old. Their wealth is of little use at that point. Most old people can't bear the condition of being old, tending to get angry and irritated more often than when they were young. Old people blame others or blame some god for their problems.

*Letting Go of What Is More Beneficial for What Is Less Beneficial*

The eyesight weakens and they are suspicious of others. The skin wrinkles, teeth fall out, food is often no longer tasty. Even if the food is tasty many old people criticize the cook, “The food we had earlier was very tasty; now the food is tasteless because of the wickedness of the people in our country. The fruits don’t taste as good as they used to.” The food is the same; their senses have gone toward decay and are not working as well. Old people don’t experience food as they did when they were young.

Tell your friends that no one likes aging and decaying happening to them. I also don’t like aging and decaying happening to me; you don’t like these changes that are coming to pass. Money doesn’t help. Being materially well off won’t alleviate old age and decay.

***What about all the many disasters reported on the news?***

Natural disasters such as cyclones and earthquakes are a common occurrence. Manmade disasters such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico are also a common occurrence. A person might work their entire life developing a property, only to have a cyclone come along and destroy that property in a matter of seconds. Reflect on the destruction of property by natural and manmade disasters as well as the destruction of life caused by aging and decay.

The experiencing of all this destruction is there, happens, because your friends were born. You were witness to the destruction caused by the tsunami, with corpses lying all around. You too were close to the ocean when the tsunami hit and could have died. In fact, I thought you had died and it was only after hearing you were okay that my mind settled down. There are wildfires consuming large tracts of forest in Russia right now and these fires are out of control. The Russians can’t stop them. When I was in Australia, fires were also destroying large tracts of forest. To escape and save themselves, one family jumped into their swimming pool. They died.

Some say these disasters are befalling us because of the wickedness of today’s people, and yet there’s little difference between the people of ancient times and the people of today. The weapons used in ancient times are only slightly different from the weapons of today. At the museum in the Sri Lankan city of Polonnaruwa you saw the skeleton of a soldier who long ago fought in a battle. The soldier’s skull had a hole in it, made by a weapon from those ancient times. Today, what goes on in the world is similar. Then and now are not so different.

If you talk with your friends in this way, it’s possible you may open their eyes a little bit. Tell them it’s possible to cultivate their minds to

*Affectionate Splendour*

handle problems, conflicts and struggles. And tell them they can access a condition that is free of all problems, conflicts and struggles. That condition can be found.

In today's world, there are countless opportunities for entertainment, but nothing of lasting benefit comes from these types of entertainment. Some people use alcohol when their minds are too agitated. They use alcohol as a means of calming down. That's what people do — they drink alcohol.

***Can I tell them that meditation is the way to calm down?***

Meditation trains your mind to cope with the difficulties of daily life.

***Is that the whole reason for learning to meditate?***

There are two aspects to meditation. One, it helps us handle our problems, conflicts and struggles. And two, it helps us attain a condition where all problems, conflicts and struggles are completely absent. Meditation is concerned with the extinction of suffering, dukkha-nirodha. This path of meditation — The Noble Eightfold Path — ends suffering. Better you don't use the word meditation at all! It is unnecessary with your friends.

***Meditation is not a term that is easily understood.***

Few people meditate these days in the first place.

***Is this new or was it the same in ancient times?***

In the way the world is currently going there is little proper meditation. What we are teaching here at our meditation centre is a preliminary training to bring our lives into some sort of manageable level. Express that in your own words to your friends, express that purpose without using terms such as meditation.

***I'll do that. To a degree, I recognize the five hindrances operating in my own life — excitement of sensual pleasure, ill-will, sloth and torpor, doubt, and restlessness and worry. I see hindrances and yet tend not to deal with them. Instead I play around, especially with excitement of sensual pleasures.***

Knowledge of the hindrances keeps the hindrances at bay, gives you some distance. They are away and won't influence your life. There are two ways to do this: you either destroy the hindrances altogether or you keep the hindrances at bay. Only these two ways are available to you.

*Letting Go of What Is More Beneficial for What Is Less Beneficial*

Many people try to keep their hindrances at bay and even hope to destroy them by following ascetic practices of self-mortification. The sheer force of an ascetic practice never successfully accomplishes these goals. Self-mortification neither keeps the hindrances at bay for long nor does it destroy the hindrances altogether.

To destroy or at least keep hindrances at bay for longer periods of time, the hindrances must be seen clearly and their true nature understood. We must ask ourselves honestly, “What’s this hindrance all about?” Only through understanding is a hindrance truly destroyed and removed from our lives.

In order to explain the seeing and understanding of a hindrance I will use a simile. Let’s say you are walking down a path and nearly step on a snake. A cobra! The cobra is poisonous and, if it bites you, you’ll die. Therefore as soon as you see the cobra, you feel ill-will and want to kill it. You know how dangerous it is. However, before seeing the cobra, you didn’t have these thoughts of ill-will toward this cobra. You didn’t have any thoughts to kill a living being.

If you were to see and understand the cobra clearly, you would simply see that this is a cobra and heed that clear seeing and understanding, “This is a cobra and a bite from a cobra can be fatal.” You remain in a state of clear seeing and understanding about cobras. You don’t kill the cobra either. You may even feed it. If the cobra needs water, you give it water, all the while knowing it’s a cobra. Without any thoughts of ill-will or killing, you may even occasionally help the cobra. Nonetheless, after all of this, can you play with this cobra and not get bitten? No, of course not. Understanding the dangers of being involved with cobras, you simply recognize, “This is a cobra.”

In the same way you keep your hindrances at bay. You see and understand the excitement of sensual pleasures, *kāma-cchanda*. You see and understand the ill-will and conceit but don’t get too involved with such hindrances. Don’t play around with them. Can you play with your ill-will and at the same time not lose your temper? No, that’s not possible. So when ill-will arises, you simply recognize it — know that this is ill-will.

And definitely don’t use force to suppress your hindrances. If you push a balloon down into a pail of water with your hand, then the balloon bursts or squeezes out somewhere. Or you eventually get tired and the balloon pushes your hand up. If you fight the hindrance of excitement of sensual pleasure, the excitement of sensual pleasure will come out from another side. Or if you fight anger when it arises, your anger comes out in another form.

*Affectionate Splendour****This makes sense.***

Some yogis do loving-kindness meditation to counteract anger but their anger always comes out in a new way. Anger can do that, this is the nature of the hindrances. Say you build a dam in a river where the current is strong. Water pressure builds up behind the dam and just a small leak sooner or later leads to the dam cracking wide open. All the water collected behind the dam with all its force then gushes through the broken dam, destroying everything in its path.

As an alternative to damming up your hindrances, instead of using sheer force to suppress them, you just look clearly at the qualities of whatever hindrance arises. See all its characteristics. See how this or that particular hindrance operates, and do your best to note the first arising of the hindrance, note its beginning. Most yogis work with the middle of their hindrances, when the hindrances are already well-established and strong. That's too late.

Discover how hindrances first come into being, how they arise and how they develop. And then armed with these discoveries, right at the beginning of any type of hindrance's arising, you remove it. You have to remove hindrances right at the beginning of their arising. Clear comprehension recognizes hindrances for what they are. Don't simply accept your hindrances too much without the understanding of them, as that also leads to problems. Best to train the mind to always be in sati — however, when talking to your friends don't use terms like sati or mindfulness.

***Oops, too late. I have already been using those terms.***

At the market you can find spoiled and rotten potatoes. You can't plant, cook or eat spoiled and rotten potatoes. They have no potential to grow. There are also potatoes in the market that are unspoiled and fine. You can plant these unspoiled and fine potatoes, and they have the potential to grow. And you can later cook and eat them.

Some yogis, even though they have practised meditation for many years, are like the spoiled and rotten potatoes. They talk about dependent origination, talk about sati and talk endlessly about many other Buddhist teachings. In conversation with these spoiled yogis, there's no harm in using terms such as sati, insight, and concentration. But with yogis who have the potential to grow, these unspoiled yogis, don't use such words. Don't say anything about sati, insight, or concentration. With them it's best to simply talk about what you're doing.

***You're a pretty hard judge of yogis.***

*Letting Go of What Is More Beneficial for What Is Less Beneficial*

Without using formal meditation terms like sati and mindfulness, talk with your friends about sati and mindfulness. In the same way many monks and teachers of meditation convey to others what they figured out for themselves, you convey to your friends what you figured out for yourself. People from all walks of life help friends, colleagues, and associates in this way, relating only this and that about the Buddha-Dhamma which they personally discovered. A personal approach to helping and teaching is best.

Yes, talk with your friends about sati without mentioning the term sati. For example, say you are having a salad for lunch in your Canadian home and while eating the salad you're thinking of a trip to England. The result? In the afternoon you won't remember that you ate a salad for lunch. Or while eating the salad you are angry with a relative. So you're eating and at the same time thinking of this, that and the other. So much so, with all your thinking, the knowing of eating the salad hasn't taken place. You don't know the taste or texture of the food.

And this, the clear knowing of our everyday experiences, is the beginning of meditation. Start in this way, not with getting your friends to sit on a cushion. Start in aspects of daily life. Start them with the task of being aware of what is going on in their normal everyday lives. And only much later, and only gradually, bring them around to any formal training. First you talk about eating, and fasting.

***How do you start with a new yogi?***

I always ask new yogis this question, "From the time you were born until now, what three things have been continuously happening?" Ask your friends that question. If the yogi is twenty-five years old, I ask him or her, "For the past twenty-five years, these three have been happening." You might be eating, sleeping, learning, fighting, on a plane, or in a school, etc., etc. — whatever you are doing, these three have to be going on.

When you meet someone for the first time or find fault with others, these three are in operation. Whether you're in a strong state of samādhi or completely distracted, these three are there. Ask them, "What about these three?" No need to mention samādhi. Use the term tranquility. Terms like samādhi are for yogis who are always meditating, and their meditation practices take priority over everything else. Ask your friends this question and somehow make them answer it.

You'll get various answers to this question. They might say eating and then you have to state, "Well no, you're not eating all the time." Continue with the discussion until they say it themselves. You need to prod them. Most people talk about the fact that they are eating! You ask, "Have you

*Affectionate Splendour*

been eating continuously from birth up until now?” Get the answer from them. What are these three? And then you start from there.

In this way you're not talking about a rigorous meditation practice. Without using any terms like meditate, you are simply asking them about three things that are continuously happening in their lives and then discussing with them what can be done about these three. Someday of course, one must start meditating but not in this life. Their practices of meditation can start afterwards, in their next lives. So, if anyone asks about meditation, tell them, “Definitely do not meditate! You need to hold down a good job. Best for you to stay married, and to look after your children. Meditation is definitely out!” Say it in that way.

***What are the three?***

Many years ago, I told you about them.

***Breathing is one.***

Yes, breathing is one of three things common to all of us. You are on the right track. Try to remember the other two. We will discuss them again in a few days.

Sometimes, yogis don't eat or bathe. One Spanish yogi spent a long time doing the eight yoga practices in India and he was tending toward self-mortification. He'd never had any contact with Buddhism before he came here to our centre three weeks ago. He was here yesterday. For two months he lived in the forest on the east coast of Sri Lanka living an unnecessarily hard life.

You see, sea urchins have spikes and, while this Spanish yogi was walking barefoot on the beach one day, he stepped on a sea urchin and a spike jammed into his foot. These spikes are extremely painful and I asked him if he pulled it out. He said no. Instead, he waited until the night of the full moon when apparently the spike falls out on its own. He simply waited in one place, waiting for it to fall out. He was in a lot of pain. Extremely painful. Locals avoid that beach precisely because it is infested with sea urchins and their spikes. This Spanish yogi also had blisters on his skin from being in the sun. Living a hard life doesn't help destroy hindrances or even keep them at bay, not in this way.

Tell your friends that somehow we have to cultivate our lives to a manageable level. In that way, you can lend your friends a hand without telling them anything about sati or meditation. You can tell them what you know without using any specialized terminology.



*Letting Go of What Is More Beneficial for What Is Less Beneficial*

***Maybe I shouldn't tell them about sloth and torpor.***

Sloth and torpor means rejecting or not inclining to what is wholesome, kusala, in our minds. It's the letting go of the wholesome and inclining toward something else. In the experiencing of a wholesome object, the mind doesn't incline to it. The mind turns away from the wholesome.

Another simile. Say an elderly woman asks her young grandson to read a passage from a Dhamma book to her. The grandmother's eyes are poor and she can no longer read. I'm actually talking from my own experience. While reading this passage of Dhamma to grandmother, I started to yawn. I found it extremely difficult to do this reading for grandmother, and I did not read the passage properly. But because grandmother had asked me to read it to her, I forced myself to read and somehow managed to go on. Otherwise she would have been hurt. I yawned and continued to read. Then grandmother started getting sleepy too and would say, "That's enough for now." And I stopped reading.

I was twelve at the time. I also had a book about explorers who travelled in a region inhabited by cannibals. I could read that book about exploring, travel and cannibals until dawn! It shattered any sleepiness, and I always wanted to read just a few pages more to see what happened to these brave explorers. In comparison, it was always difficult to read even one page of the Dhamma book for my grandmother.

Quite often, after I had stopped reading the Dhamma book to grandmother, I took the more interesting book, the one about explorers, up to my room. With the interesting book, my mind didn't turn away. The passage from the Dhamma book talked about self-discipline, and my mind didn't incline to read about self-discipline. My mind turned away from it. In contrast, the book about explorers was an exciting non-fiction account of an actual expedition in Madagascar. I wasn't sleepy at all! This is how sloth and torpor can be recognized.

***Grandmother also turned away from the Dhamma book.***

In activities that are truly useful and wholesome, the qualities of sleep and tiredness appear in our minds. That's sloth and torpor. But when our activities are simply entertaining our minds are awake.

***My friends will ask what is useful? What is wholesome? Why exercise self-discipline? Where does this lead?***

Useful for the people who want to attain to the deva levels, and for those who want to attain to the brahma levels. A great deal has been written

*Affectionate Splendour*

about attaining deva and brahma levels. In the Theravāda tradition, we believe in the attainment of nibbāna. The writings about devas, brahmas, and nibbāna are not false. Yesterday, you visited a temple in the ancient city of Polonnaruwa. The guard who worked at that ancient temple told us, “Even in this day and age, you can’t go inside the temple area if you have eaten meat. If a meat-eater enters this area, something bad will befall him or her. It is difficult for us to explain these sorts of phenomena.”

I don’t know how to explain these phenomena either. The guard believes devas are protecting that temple. When people speak of devas and other such phenomena, I feel sleepy. This type of talk doesn’t suit my temperament, or suit my mind. Perhaps I don’t believe what the temple guard said. I feel sleepy when I hear such talk of devas. In fact, I do believe in devas but I don’t believe devas would do many of the actions that are credited to them by people. I also believe there are brahma worlds of existence but again I don’t believe brahmas would be doing many of the actions credited to them by people. Therefore, whenever I hear or read about the actions of devas and brahmas, I also get this sloth and torpor.

I like to read passages of Dhamma dealing with the qualities necessary to become a deva, and to read passages dealing with the qualities necessary to become a brahma. For example, in order to become a deva, we need to cultivate five qualities — faith, virtue, learning, generosity, and wisdom. Training in these five is a good, interesting and useful teaching. Devas are living beings like we are living beings. The Buddha said we have the potential to cultivate these five qualities and become devas. And we gain joy from having these qualities within us.

The potential to be a deva is there in you. The qualities to become a brahma are also there within you — loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. When you see these brahma qualities within yourself, you have joy. These four brahma qualities are known as sublime abidings and are the necessary prerequisites to attaining the level of brahma. Devas and brahmas are real and true beings. Nevertheless, definitely don’t mention devas and brahmas to your friends.

***This is an interesting contradiction. Devas and brahmas are apparently real and true, yet I shouldn’t mention them to friends. Okay, I won’t mention these beings to friends. What about sloth and torpor? Are they always associated with the need for self-discipline?***

Sloth and torpor is the turning of the mind away, when something wholesome has to be done. Say you’re meditating and able to stay with the meditation object quite well. You’re clearly observing the in-breath and

*Letting Go of What Is More Beneficial for What Is Less Beneficial*

out-breath. And then sloth and torpor starts arising in you. Sloth and torpor doesn't mean your head is drooping. It isn't the dozing off or tiredness. No, that's not the meaning of sloth and torpor, thīna-middha in Pali. Sloth and torpor is the rejecting of what is wholesome in our minds.

You once told me of a time when a yogi was meditating beside you in the meditation hall, and the thought occurred to you, "How can I best advise this yogi sitting beside me? I want to help him." You assumed that this thought of advising your fellow yogi was something wholesome. You genuinely felt that it was a good thing. It was at this point that the hindrance of restlessness was arising. Restlessness was getting established. You were letting go of your meditation and your thoughts were turning toward how to best advise the yogi sitting beside you. So, you were letting go of what you were doing and started doing something that you assumed in the moment to be more beneficial. That's how it appeared to you. In truth, you were doing the opposite. You were letting go of what was more beneficial for what was less beneficial.

The hindrance of sloth and torpor ought to have been noted at its first arising. At the very beginning of the hindrance's arising, you should have noted, "This wanting to advise my fellow yogi is useless. It will turn my mind away from the meditation object." And then you should've let go of that idea. Since the noting of sloth and torpor didn't happen, it developed into restlessness. Various other thought processes started working with the object, and you lost your meditation object completely. I think, on that occasion, you did actually get up from your cushion and tell your fellow yogi how to practise properly. When meditating in Colombo did you and other yogis often pass along advice in this way?

***Yes, many of us were guilty of regularly passing along advice in Colombo, and plenty of advice being passed along here too in Kanduboda. I was recently told to teach meditation to my aging father. He is eighty-nine years of age.***

I wonder if the one who was advising you looked after his father.

***He is pretty young. He said I should teach my father in-breathing and out-breathing meditation. I think it's a bit late.***

It is not necessary to teach your father about in-breathing and out-breathing. See that your father eats his food and then switch on the television for him to watch.

*Good! Mahānāma, sons of clansmen like you should approach the Thus Gone One to ask this Venerable sir, we abide in various abidings. Which is the most suitable abiding, in which we should abide? Mahānāma, one with faith will be successful, not without faith. One with aroused effort will be successful, not without aroused effort. One with mindfulness established will be successful, not without. One concentrated will be successful, not without concentration. A wise one will be successful, not one without wisdom.*

*Established in these five things, you should further develop six things. You should recollect the Thus Gone One, worthy and rightfully enlightened, endowed with knowledge and conduct, well gone, knows the worlds, the incomparable tamer of those to be tamed. The Teacher of gods and men, enlightened and blessed. Mahānāma, when the noble disciple recollects the Thus Gone One, at that time his mind is not overcome by greed, by anger and by delusion at such time his mind is straightforwardly placed in the Thus Gone One.*

Second Mahānāma Sutta<sup>3</sup>



2

## Elephants and Good Food



**DAVID:** *I'd like to talk more about what I can tell my friends back in Canada. They wonder why I'd go to a meditation centre.*

**PEMASIRI THERA:** It's perfectly okay to tell them you're going to a meditation centre like this and what sort of place this is. But if upon meeting them you straightaway launch into a discussion about sati and mindfulness, such a discussion would be neither appropriate nor beneficial in any way.

Start by telling them that meditation is a training of mind. Tell them our minds are like wild bull elephants wandering the forest. In order to get a wild bull elephant to work for you, then you better train it. In the Dhammapada, you will find many verses on elephants and yogis.<sup>4</sup> A meditation centre is where gradual training of the mind takes place.

*Elephants and Good Food*

There's a sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya where the training of a wild elephant is described.<sup>5</sup> The village mahout captures the elephant when it is still a baby living in the forest. By force, he brings it back to his village. Not used to harsh and strange treatment, the elephant is extremely agitated and vigorously tries to escape. In the first stage of training, the mahout familiarizes the baby elephant with humans and their voices. A routine is introduced. The elephant is fed at a particular time of day and is bathed at a particular time.

***Harsh treatment? I am siding with the elephant!***

You are the mahout. The wild elephant is your mind. Ever so gradually, the mahout instills commands associated with the sounds of a flute and the beats of a drum. Little by little, the mahout trains the elephant. After many years and many stages of training, this baby elephant grows into a well-trained adult bull elephant. A powerful and majestic tusker. It becomes the King's chief festival elephant, akin to the chief festival elephant now working at the Temple of the Tooth in the city of Kandy.

The movements of the chief elephant at the Temple of the Tooth are careful and controlled. Before setting its foot down, the chief elephant waits for a cloth to be laid down on the ground. Ever so carefully and slowly, it sets its foot down on the cloth. The Tooth Temple's chief elephant is a proud, dignified and well-trained elephant.

***It is a good example. The elephant is trained away from its wild nature into behaviour that serves the mahout. Is a yogi only training away from the wildness of his or her human nature in the same way, or is the yogi training away from human nature altogether?***

The teacher gradually takes the yogi to the higher and higher stages of human nature, as well takes him or her to the deva and brahma stages. Training might culminate in ordination. I give yogis the necessary preliminary training in self-discipline and seeing honestly.

The Festival of the Tooth occurs once a year in the city of Kandy. The Buddha's Tooth is placed in a magnificent relic casket, which is then tied to the back of the chief elephant. The chief elephant parades the casket through the streets of Kandy. One time during the parading of the Tooth the chief elephant stopped walking and refused to take a step forward. Its mahout commanded it to take a step forward but the chief elephant refused to budge.

*Affectionate Splendour****What was wrong?***

The mahout found one of the cords holding the Tooth Relic Casket to be loose. The Tooth Relic Casket was shaky. Once the cord was retied and the Casket secure, the chief elephant walked forward. And on the last day of that weeklong Festival of the Tooth, the chief elephant cried. It had tears of sadness because its work was over. That particular chief elephant died recently and now a new chief elephant carries the Relic Casket.

This new chief elephant also displays many of the same qualities as the last chief elephant because it has been trained for the work of carrying the Relic Casket in the Festival of the Tooth. The new chief elephant doesn't attack people or show any aggressive behaviour. It is a well-trained and restrained animal. It walks inside the Temple of the Tooth right up to the location where the Buddha's Relics are stored.

The elephant has to gracefully walk up many steps to reach the location where the Relics are stored. The elephant really has to accordingly adjust its body to walk up each and every step, and it also has to walk down the steps in a graceful manner. The elephant has again been trained to do this properly. When the Festival of the Tooth is on, you can see how well the chief elephant is trained.

***This elephant story is certainly an impressive vision of how completely a being can become self-disciplined and sensitive to the needs of the master.***

All of us must be trained. We gradually learn how to attentively take our food, how to attentively bathe and so on and so forth. This is known as manasikāra. We perform more and more of the daily activities in our lives in an attentive way, perform them in a restrained and orderly fashion.

***Is this the essence of Buddhism? My friends also ask me about this religion.***

At the beginning, we don't require a religion. No, we don't talk of religion or any system of beliefs. You can talk with your friends about a general teaching, or a Dhamma, or a nature of things. It's about keeping your mind steady without letting your mind fall to a lower gross state, because when the mind falls, problems arise both for us and others. In Sri Lanka, we have a lot of problems because we are letting our minds fall. We are not restraining our minds or our bodies. With a fallen mind, someone could break into another's home and steal away everything of value. A mind can fall to that degree.

*Elephants and Good Food*

There was a man who fifteen years ago frequented the Lanka Vipassana Meditation Centre in Colombo. He didn't dress properly and was addicted to drugs. He wasted his family's wealth on drugs. He brought waste and destruction to his family. At Lanka Vipassana, I gave him food and drink, and I asked him to stay. He looked like a beggar living on the streets. Very rough. I gave him clean clothes.

One day at Lanka Vipassana, a well-dressed young woman arrived in a Mercedes Benz. She scolded this man. I thought this beggar man, this drug addict, was one of her servants. I was annoyed with her for scolding him on the grounds of our meditation centre. She firmly told me to get rid of this man, to chase him away from Lanka Vipassana. Some days later another well-dressed woman arrived at Lanka Vipassana. She was elderly and also arrived in a Mercedes Benz! And she also scolded this same beggar man. This elderly woman told me that this man had been caught stealing from her home. Finally, she said, "This man is my son. The young woman who was here yesterday is his wife, and they have a lovely daughter too." That is the story.

After going through the family's money, he sold their land, all to support his drug habit and to support the drug habits of his friends. I handed him over to a rehabilitation centre in the hope that they could cure him of his drug addiction, but he was caught stealing at the rehabilitation centre and had to leave. Afterwards he was seen loitering around the Colombo suburb of Borella just begging and living in the street. He was not accepted in his home; he is wasting his life. In such a person the mind has fallen to a very, very low level.

Truly, what is required of us is the training of our minds to bring them up, not just to the level of an ordinary human being. More. We must raise the level of our minds. We have the potential to do better. At the very least, we should have human qualities. If a person does not have human qualities, he or she is really of not much use. For training in human qualities see the Dantabhumi Sutta.<sup>6</sup>

***You seem to believe that everyone is capable of training, and I appreciate this. What are human qualities?***

Good question. A variety of lists of human qualities can be found in the Āṅguttara Nikāya. In one, there's giving, beneficial speech, beneficial conduct to oneself and to others, and impartiality to everyone. And there has to be some self-discipline, a foundation of morality. Patience

*Affectionate Splendour*

needs to be cultivated. Loving-kindness toward others. All these are good human qualities. Humans who don't have these qualities are not worth much. We need to raise ourselves at least to the level of a good human being. The Alavaka Sutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya is also well worth reading.<sup>7</sup>

***To say humans who don't have these qualities are not worth much sounds cold and heartless.***

Almost all religious traditions have in one way or another something to say about good human qualities, and they also have something to say about the cultivation and development of such qualities. A few religious traditions describe training in the development of divine qualities, a training that goes beyond being a good human. Training in the divine approaches the jhānas, the absorptions, and the higher states of tranquility. Their training might even approach the attaining to path knowledge.

In the Theravāda tradition, we of course should know about cultivating human, deva and brahma qualities. Deva qualities, found in the Mahānāma Sutta and the Anathapindika Sutta, include faith, virtue, learning, generosity, and wisdom. The qualities to become a deva or a brahma are there within us. Brahma qualities include loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These are higher qualities to be cultivated by humans.

The human qualities lead to arising in the human plane. The deva qualities lead to arising in the deva plane. While the brahma qualities lead to arising in the brahma plane, not just to arising in the human or deva planes. If a Theravāda Buddhist aspires to go further, to the attaining to path knowledge and enlightenment, he or she trains in insight knowledges, mindfulness, and clear comprehension.

Tell your friends that nearly all religious traditions have goals comparable to the goals spoken of by the Buddha. In India, many hundreds of millions of people have the Hindu religion as the base of their activities. They believe in a wide assortment of gods. Hindus perform good actions on account of their beliefs.

***If faith and beliefs lead people to perform good actions, then faith and beliefs are of great value.***

Faith is a double-edged sword: there are two ways to it. There's the classic story of a beautiful Hindu woman who prayed to the god Shiva to be ugly. Shiva granted her wish. Shortly afterwards, she didn't want her ugly form of a body. She performed many rituals, many pūjās, and she beat the drums,



*Elephants and Good Food*

all to get her beautiful body back. It was because of her wish not her religion that she was given that ugly body. People have various wishes and beliefs and do things accordingly. Their wishes and beliefs shape their lives.

Faith can turn to the good side, and also to the bad. Blind faith. We might have faith in a tree. For example, without knowing much about the tree, just have faith in the tree. Or we might have faith in some other object. Faith can take the form of liking an inanimate object. Could be there is a liking to hear about the tree and what is happening to the tree. There is an interest directed toward the tree.

***We do this with cars in Canada.***

Then there is a reflecting upon the tree — it helps me in this way; it helps me in that way. After that, we routinely fall into views about the object, say the tree or what have you. It's due to faith that some people in Colombo embed hooks in their backs and pull large carts on the road. All because of faith. Any inanimate object will do. I can even take my umbrella for veneration: offer it flowers, light a lamp in front of it and do some pūjās.

As a child, I venerated a cupboard in my home. I was very respectful toward the cupboard because I believed this cupboard was connected to my grandmother. I remembered the death of my grandmother and remembered where she was buried. On the anniversary of her death we lit lamps and remembered her. For New Year's and Wesak celebrations the area around her grave was cleaned and decorated with flowers.

A small tree was planted on her grave and after a few years it grew into a big tree. It completely covered my grandmother's gravesite. I had the belief that, as this tree grew up, my grandmother grew up. Since the tree was growing out of grandmother's gravesite, grandmother must be in the tree. Then the tree was cut down and the wood from the tree was made into a cupboard. And because grandmother was in the wood of the cupboard, I had a respect and affection for the cupboard. I identified grandmother with the cupboard and sometimes offered food to it. Afterwards I ate the food myself, for sure! Ah, grandmother.

I must have been around twelve years of age at the time. My uncle told me the cupboard wasn't grandmother but I was convinced the cupboard was in fact her. I had immersed myself in that belief. I held onto that view and it all seemed quite logical. Grandmother got buried in the ground, the tree grew out of the same ground and then the tree was cut down and made into a cupboard. So now, grandmother must be in the cupboard.

*Affectionate Splendour*

My grandmother used to carry me around but as a cupboard she could no longer do so. Still, the cupboard was a comfort and protection for me.

In time, my view of grandmother being the cupboard broke up and I even threw the cupboard away. I didn't want the cupboard anymore. My thought process was like this. There were other family members in our home who also had cupboards and they didn't do anything for their cupboards. No veneration. One of the other cupboards even caught fire one day.

So, I thought this belief of grandmother being a cupboard didn't hold. There was no grandmother in the cupboard. Then I was able to think in a more mature way. I rejected the grandmother cupboard belief and came around to believing that it was just a piece of wood. I outright rejected the grandmother cupboard view. This is a true story from my life. My parents never discouraged or forbade me from thinking in that way. They respected my childhood faith and beliefs.

***A charming story. However, like the elephant story before, I am siding with you as the less mature boy. You had intelligence and logic and love on your side. I am sorry you threw the cupboard away, even after you no longer venerated it.***

Good that you appreciate the child's point of view. Also when very young, I was against the belief in nibbāna. Because I was not to be born in nibbāna, I thought nibbāna unnecessary. I wouldn't have anything happening there, and that's not necessary. So what's the big deal about nibbāna? I asked many people about nibbāna. They always told me that nothing happens in nibbāna. Then I thought nibbāna is definitely not for me.

***You sound a bit mixed up.***

I was very young at the time and was trying to sort things out by asking adults many questions, "Is nibbāna something you can see, or is nibbāna something you cannot see?" I asked, "Is the Buddha existing, or not existing?" I was told the Buddha is not existing; then I thought, "Not existing? No. Not around? Then no need for me to worry." These were major questions and problems for me when I was a child.

Many questions; many problems. My second eldest sister gave me a knock on the head because I asked her a question about stones. I had two similar looking stones. One was light in weight, and one was heavy. I found it strange that two stones, which looked alike and were about the same size, could differ greatly in weight. At that moment in time, my sister was studying for her 'A' level exams. So, when I asked her about

*Elephants and Good Food*

the two similar stones, she threw the stones away and gave me a hard knock on the head! She was annoyed, and angry to be bothered.

I then went to my eldest sister with my question, “I don’t know.” After that to mother, who said, “One stone, the lighter stone, has more air element in it. The heavier stone has less air element in it.” I was quite satisfied with my mother’s answer. This is the type of question that occurred to me as a child. So with one sister, I got a knock on the head and no answer.

***Interesting personal stories. The point of them is somewhat unclear, if that matters. I think your point is that the things we believe affect the outcome of our lives. Faith does lead to actions, though not always good actions. Faith and beliefs can lead us astray, and it is not easy to change faith and beliefs.***

Many people do not have religious faith whatsoever yet have firmly established beliefs and views.

***I was one of them. I rejected religion.***

Just as I rejected the belief in nibbāna as a child, I rejected the belief in divine beings because I couldn’t see them. I used to go to the Buddhist temple with my second eldest sister. She venerated and worshipped a statue of the Buddha and recited gāthās. I was fifteen years younger than this sister. She asked me to venerate and worship the Buddha but I found this difficult.

My sister continued to worship. She laid out a blue cloth there on the floor near the statue of the Buddha. Alongside the Buddha stood the statue of a god with many arms. There were also statues of a snake, a peacock and yakkhas. I shouted at these statues! My sister was disturbed in her worship. She planted her hand over my mouth, not pleased that I had spoken to the gods in a disrespectful way.

She dragged me out of the temple and told me to stay out. Since she hadn’t finished worshipping, my sister went back inside the temple. Now there she was, worshipping the gods. Crouched down on her knees, she explained to them, “This is my youngest brother. This is an extremely ignorant sibling. He doesn’t know anything.” As she finished her explanation to the gods and was getting to her feet, she struck her head on the bottom of the altar table.

I laughed, then shouted, “Good for you! Ha. Ha.” Then my sister really hammered me. She complained to our parents about my behaviour

*Affectionate Splendour*

at the temple. Then my parents told my sister to never take me to the temple again. I was spared. I didn't have to go to the temple again and I had no problem with that.

Shortly afterwards, however, my sister did again take me to the temple. This time I wouldn't go inside. I asked my sister, "Why is the Buddha so big?" I asked, "Why are his eyes so big?" and "Is he a human being?" I told her, "Such large human beings we don't find in this world. How did he get through the small doorway?" My sister had no answers to my questions. "Is the Buddha here today, or not here?" She told me to be quiet. "Was the Buddha Sinhalese or what nationality?"

She told me the Buddha was from India. "In that case," I said, "I really don't want to know him." Many more questions, "Can I see him, or not see him?" I had so many questions, and she would not answer any of them. My father explained to my sister, "I told you not to take this child to the temple, and told you not to try to teach him any religion. He can learn at home." And then, after father had spoken to my sister for this second time, I didn't have to go to the temple at all.

When I was a little older I went to a church because I was curious about the church's practice of forgiving sins. The priest asked me, "Have you sinned?" I said, "Yes." He asked, "What kind of sins?" I said, "Lots. I have done lots of sinning." He explained, "When you have a wound and it's treated with medicine, the wound heals. In the same way, once your sins are forgiven, that's finished." I was rude to the kind priest. I said, "I don't like the scars left on my skin from the vaccination shot. Because of this, I blame my sister. She had been waiting at the bus stop with a person infected with smallpox. She got a shot against smallpox and so I had to get a shot too."

Since I got the shot and the scar because of my sister, I was cross with her. There were these two sources of anger.

Now the priest told me, "When you treat a wound with medicine, the wound disappears." I showed him the scar on my arm from the vaccination shot and snapped, "This scar is still there, and I don't like it." The priest said, "Okay, it doesn't matter. You needn't go to church." The priest was an uncle of my mother's. Now, I wasn't required to go to the Buddhist temple or go to the Christian church. I later apologized to the kind priest.

I had to think of another system of beliefs. I wondered about the water inside of a coconut, "How does water get inside a coconut?" I always had new questions. I wondered, "One tree has big leaves and another tree has small leaves. Why the difference in leaf size?"

*Elephants and Good Food*

We all have our thoughts and ways of thinking and these thoughts and ways of thinking fit with particular beliefs and views. Breaking our beliefs and views generally takes a long time. Once our faith is firmly established with particular objects, it is hard to change the nature of our faith in those objects.

***Okay, sounds as if faith in objects is a first step, but we need to move beyond this kind of blind faith. How to go beyond blind faith?***

I asked myself similar questions and it occurred to me that it would be beneficial to do all my activities of daily living — eating, drinking, walking, etc. — with a degree of attention. This was partly a reaction to mother’s constantly correcting my behaviour. For instance, she said to me, “You just take off your shoes and then forget where you put them. Your books. Your clothes — like that. Same. You don’t know where you left them.” I thought, “If I can pay attention to what I am doing, I will be able to reduce my problems.”

I also had two brothers. My second eldest brother and I were the same size, which meant I could wear his clothes. I often simply mistook his clothes for mine and wore them. When I did, he beat me and took his clothes back! We fought. So, wanting to avoid fights, I started paying more attention to the clothes I wore. I became more attentive. That was my mother’s simple instruction, “Pay attention to what you’re doing!” Not that my mother knew about meditation. She said it naturally, “Do things with attention.”

I began to eat slowly. I began to wear my clothes attentively. I wore my own clothes and didn’t wear my brother’s clothes. I tried to be as attentive as possible. I tried to pay attention to what I was doing. My clothes were stained with clay and paint while my brother’s clothes were clean and tidy. My brother absolutely did not want to wear any of my stained clothes. He never mistook my clothes for his. And my slippers, and shoes? Many were in halves. I could only find the left of one pair, the right of another.

My parents didn’t give me new clothes or new shoes. Why would they? And the seats of many pairs of my pants were torn from sitting on barbed-wire fences. I was told, “You won’t get new shoes or new clothes until you start caring for the shoes and clothes you now own.” My clothes were repaired and mended, and I was told to wear them again. Others in my family didn’t wear torn and mended clothes.

*Affectionate Splendour*

All these problems brought me back around to thinking about the importance of paying attention to what I was doing. I wanted to avoid problems. Little by little, I discovered that paying attention really did reduce problems. Attention was beneficial for me. This was the beginning of a meditation practice. I noticed that I was starting to automatically perform some of my tasks with attentiveness. I discovered that my shoes and clothes and books were located where they should be located. I could find them, and my inclination to ask many questions abated somewhat.

I'm trying to illustrate that what we call meditation is a gradual system of training our minds. We develop attention, what is known as *manasikāra* in Pali, in all our activities of daily living. We all have the base of attentiveness. It turns on automatically in childhood. We need to cultivate this factor of attentiveness, and this is basically the whole path of meditation. Ever so gradually and steadily we develop attention. We cultivate our factor of attentiveness. This is the way.

***At the Kanduboda Meditation Centre Sumathipāla Na Himi must have given you more meditation instructions than simply attentiveness.***

Not initially. At about fifteen years of age I had run out of questions and topics at home. I went to the Kanduboda Meditation Centre and started questioning the people in that community. My family considered going to this meditation centre to be eccentric and asked, "And just what do you think you are going to do there, young man?" My family didn't want me to go to the Kanduboda Meditation Centre, "Do anything else, but don't go to the meditation centre." My family worried I would bring dishonor to them. They were afraid I would embarrass them. I promised not to dishonor or embarrass the family.

At the Kanduboda Meditation Centre I found others to be doing what I was doing at home. I fit in with the meditation community at Kanduboda. So, reassured that what I was doing was correct, I thought I could develop at Kanduboda and I calmed down. For a brief time while a teenager, few abstract questions arose in my mind. I temporarily stopped searching here, there and everywhere, and instead regularly visited the Kanduboda Meditation Centre, not that anyone ever told or asked me to visit there.

No one forced me to meditate or to observe *sīl*, the precepts. I simply visited with members of the community who were living at the Kanduboda Meditation Centre, and the food was great. I liked all their great food!

*Elephants and Good Food*

I enjoyed an appetizing meal at Kanduboda and then back home I'd go. I visited the meditation centre mostly to eat!

***You went to the meditation centre for its food?***

Yes, and not just the Kanduboda Meditation Centre. At our local village community centre, dozens of people observed sil on Poya days. Their committee also provided delicious food. On the remaining days of the month there were matches, dances, carom competitions and other games. This is typical of Sri Lankan community centres. Candle dancing was taught.

My eldest brother was the committee secretary of our local community centre. He attended various functions in this role and I tagged along. On Poya days, I dressed appropriately in white, observed sil, took the precepts, and participated in other Dhamma activities. Nevertheless I was mostly interested in the food that was provided. After the meal, I took off my white Poya day clothes, cleaned up, and dressed again in street clothes. Then I left the community centre.

I enjoyed the food at the Kanduboda Meditation Center and enjoyed the food at our local community centre immensely. At home my family was strict with food, "Don't eat this. Don't eat that. This is bad and will make you sick." or "Don't eat too much pineapple — too acidic." At the community centre I ate whatever I wanted and as much as I wanted. I ate what children like to eat.

***What does enjoying food have to do with developing a meditation practice?***

All things only grow gradually. So don't tell your friends that you're meditating. Just quietly and ever so gradually describe the training. First, focus on the basic human qualities — giving, beneficial speech, beneficial conduct to oneself and to others, and impartiality to everyone. Then focus on the higher human qualities — faith, virtue, learning, generosity, and wisdom. Also known as deva qualities. Eventually, slowly tell them about paying attention and how paying attention reduces problems.

In this way, tell a friend or two about paying attention to what they are doing. And tell them that in about one full month of the practice he or she will see for him or herself what is attention. This type of progress is gradual. When I was abbot at Lanka Vipassana Meditation Centre, I spent many hours talking with a Sri Lankan Army bodyguard. We enjoyed each other's company and he provided protection when I travelled in dangerous areas.

*Affectionate Splendour*

The bodyguard and I had over the years many fruitful discussions about beliefs, views, and problems. We discussed the benefits of paying attention, and discussed finding a condition that is free of problems. The bodyguard eventually ordained as a monk. People can be trained in this way. Don't try explaining any complicated Buddhist doctrine to your friends.

Is this sufficient for you? Do you have enough information and suggestions for your Canadian friends?

***Plenty. Thank you. Anyway, I don't know any complicated Buddhist doctrine.***

No, don't delve into deep Dhamma. Don't discuss matters that are difficult for you and others to understand. Discuss simple matters with a small group of people, at most three or four people who are interested. That is best. Then later, you'll find that people flock to the discussions, and the group becomes bigger. You'll be asked, "What are you doing? What do you talk about in your group?" There will be those who are already practising. They want to see what is going on and a crowd will grow. One day, the whole village might appear at your doorstep!

***Did you have a meditation group when you were a teenager?***

Yes, I started a group with two or three teenage boys who were working for my father. In time all the young boys working for father came together as a group to meditate in the evenings. Most of them were either working in father's shop or working at other odd jobs for him. Later, a few of the local boys who weren't working for father also joined our group. At one point eighteen of us were getting together to discuss and practise meditation.

***What was your group's practice?***

Mostly the rising and falling of the abdomen, as that's what I was learning at the Kanduboda Meditation Centre. After gaining some proficiency in rising and falling, just a preliminary training, our whole group regularly met with a monk who had a good understanding of meditation. He lived at a temple in the village of Gampaha. After travelling to the temple and visiting with him, we were always quite late getting back to our homes.

A mentally unstable older man frequently joined our group. He was addicted to a drug, and its use led to his mental instability. He did not benefit from our group. During our conversations with the monk at the temple in Gampaha or while we sat in silent meditation, he frequently



*Elephants and Good Food*

fell into a deep sleep. Sometimes at this Gampaha temple, a Buddhist temple, he chanted in praise of the god Vishnu or in praise of the god Kali. He did this alone. The older man didn't want any young boys joining him in chanting to Vishnu or Kali.

One night, I pulled an uncalled-for and regrettable stunt. The man was again high on drugs. We told him not to travel with us to the temple in Gampaha. Despite our telling him to stay home, he went to Gampaha and as usual fell into a deep sleep inside the temple. Two of us picked him up, carried him outside and threw him into a clump of bushes. Our carrying and throwing him into the bushes didn't wake him up. After visiting and meditating with the monk, we left the temple. Outside, we found the man still in the bushes and still in a deep sleep, just as we had left him an hour before. We picked him up and took him back to his home.

It was wrong to throw the man into the bushes at the temple. During that evening's meditation I couldn't direct my mind properly to the rising and falling of my abdomen because thoughts of throwing him into those bushes kept coming up in my mind. Okay, we couldn't wake him up from his drug induced sleep, and we did after all take him home. The next day, however, he heard of how we had thrown him into the bushes, and stopped attending our meditation group.

*Mahānāma, when the noble disciple's mind is straightforward he experiences the meaning, the Teaching and delight arisen on account of experiencing the Teaching. To one delighted arises joy. A joyful one has an appeased body. One with appeased body experiences pleasantness. The mind of one who is pleasant concentrates. Mahānāma develop this reflection on the Enlightened One, even when walking, standing, sitting or lying or when doing some activity recollect it even when living in the household with wife and children.*

Second Mahānāma Sutta<sup>8</sup>



3

## Performing Human Qualities is Fraught with Danger



**PEMASIRI THERA:** Giving, beneficial speech, beneficial conduct to oneself and to others, and impartiality to everyone — developing human qualities is a difficult and big project. We think human qualities such as self-discipline, patience and loving-kindness toward others are commonplace but when we try to develop these qualities we find ourselves getting into conflicts. Conflicts arise because others fail to recognize the human qualities that must be developed. For example, if one day I were to treat you particularly well, you might think, “Pemasiri Thera is up to something!” You might be suspicious of my motives, “This Pemasiri is treating me too well.” Your thinking doesn’t rise to the level that I am doing my pāramis, trying to perfect my human qualities.

The tradition of developing and perfecting human qualities is diminishing and not seen a great deal these days because their development all too often results in conflicts.

I no longer bother performing human qualities to their full extent or even at a high level, because I expect to run into difficulties when I perform human qualities at a high level. If I could perform a human quality at

*Performing Human Qualities is Fraught with Danger*

the one hundred percent level, I will instead perform it at the ten or twenty percent level. Or maybe even at five percent of the human quality's maximum because performing human qualities at high levels is fraught with danger.

As part of performing human qualities I might clean around your kuti. I want to be kind. I want to help. Later in the day, your digital recorder goes missing. It's gone. Though you only misplaced your recorder, you suspect me of pinching it and now I'm a thief in your eyes. A similar incident happened to me. And so, because of many such unpleasant incidents, I perform human qualities rarely and only perform them at a low level. Know that the actions of lots of good people are frequently misunderstood.

**DAVID:** *True enough. When you are kind to me for no apparent reason, I do become suspicious. You seem too good to be true.*

There was a time many years ago at the Kanduboda Meditation Centre when Sumathipāla Na Himi had only three meditation teachers: myself and two monks senior to me. In addition to teaching meditation, I involved myself in much of the work around the centre. Now and again, I arranged for materials and skilled workers to be brought from home for use in the construction of a few buildings. Some of the monks and laity were suspicious, as they saw the use of personal resources as my way of gaining a foothold in the centre. They entertained the idea that I wanted to one day own the Kanduboda Meditation Centre.

Sumathipāla Na Himi told me, "Go easy on work around the centre. Reduce your involvement in construction projects. Stop arranging for building materials and skilled workers." As consolation, he said, "You can bring a few meditation mats and cushions for the comfort of the yogis." So, I reduced my involvement in construction projects and stopped arranging for materials and workers. Sumathipāla Na Himi never requested I use resources from my family's home. With few exceptions, he discouraged me from using personal resources. It took me a long time to realize the trueness of my teacher's words on the typical ways of people. To avoid conflicts, he wisely said, "Go easy on work around the centre."

For decades my life revolved around Sumathipāla Na Himi, around the Kanduboda Meditation Centre and around its community. When my teacher died, several people in the centre's community thought no one could replace Sumathipāla Na Himi. No one could take over as abbot of Kanduboda and properly continue his work. The Kanduboda

*Affectionate Splendour*

Meditation Centre needed an abbot. I filled the vacancy and continued his work to the best of my abilities. I tried to perform the duties of abbot in the same way Sumathipāla Na Himi performed his duties as abbot.

Nevertheless, controversy in the community grew, “Pemasiri Thera is taking over the Kanduboda Meditation Centre.” There was resentment. Many harsh words were spoken. These are the ways of people who are not making any attempt to develop human qualities. If they were sincerely developing human qualities, resentment would not have arisen. Harsh words would not have been spoken.

***At the end of the day, it shouldn't matter what others think and say.***

It does matter what others think and say. We must understand the differences between the ways in which we think, speak and act and the ways in which others think, speak and act. Our failure to appreciate these differences results in speaking and acting in ways that are misunderstood by others. People get the wrong idea about what we are doing. Say you are developing human qualities at a high level and a friend is developing human qualities at a low level. Well, you have to go easy. You must perform human qualities at your friend's lower level. Match your friend's lower level and you will be understood. No conflicts.

Or say it is you developing human qualities at the low level and your friend is the one developing human qualities at the high level. Again there will be misunderstandings between the two of you and possible conflicts. Could be your friend is not thinking at all of developing human qualities. In that case, it's best for you to let go of all thoughts of developing and performing human qualities. Give up that line of thinking entirely. As for me? The minute I see my actions misinterpreted and judged unacceptable, I let go of their performance. I have a great deal of experience in how helping others results in conflicts.

I'm not saying that no one develops human qualities. There are amongst us many who are developing human qualities quite well. One of my great-aunts had many human qualities. And when you and I lived together at the Lanka Vipassana Meditation Centre in 1998, you bought 11,000 rupees worth of sand to patch muddy holes in the entranceway. Do you remember all the mud at the entrance?

***I remember those days quite well.***

An eminent lawyer, moved by your gift, also bought sand for Lanka Vipassana's entranceway. And do you remember the main building's weak

*Performing Human Qualities is Fraught with Danger*

and crumbling support columns? Colombo structural engineers told me, “It’s impossible to repair those decrepit columns.” Nonetheless, we managed to repair them. When a German engineer asked, “Who undertook this repair work?”, I gave him the name of my father.

***After years as abbot at the Kanduboda Meditation Centre, you were abbot at the Lanka Vipassana Meditation Centre for many years and now you are abbot at the Sumathipāla Na Himi Senasun Arana. Why did you leave Lanka Vipassana Meditation Centre? Seemed like a great place.***

Yes, I gave up the position as abbot at Lanka Vipassana. Its community was no better or worse than most communities. Many of Lanka Vipassana’s residents were lacking in human qualities. It doesn’t matter if we are monks, nuns or lay people, the development of human qualities to a high level is our primary need. Many of Lanka Vipassana’s residents were adequate in human qualities.

***How then to develop human qualities to a high level?***

Look at them closely. Investigate. There is a reason why religious as well as non-religious communities stress the development and performance of human qualities. Catholics stress compassion. Worldly communities stress duty and responsibility — what one member of society should do for another member of society. In both religious and non-religious communities personal responsibility for actions is stressed and hence their communities endure.

It is often difficult to develop the most basic of human qualities. Years ago I lived briefly in a temple in North Victoria, Australia. An elderly woman lived with her daughter in a house quite close to our temple. We regularly heard the daughter scolding her mother, but there was little we could say or do. One night, lightning knocked out the electricity in our neighbour’s house and in our temple — no lights. I went over to our neighbour’s house with a large torch and gave it to the elderly woman. The stench in that house gave me a headache. The elderly woman was delighted to get the torch.

Later that night, the daughter arrived home. She scolded her mother, and then walked over to our temple and scolded us. What could we do? We merely noted that we got a scolding. On many occasions, the wisest course of action is just to let things be. We try to help and our help backfires; it comes back on us in unexpected and nasty ways. The dangers associated with human qualities is the theme in countless Jātaka Stories.

*Affectionate Splendour*

Some yogis tell me, “I want to develop my human qualities. Tell me how to develop them to a high level.” I immediately discourage the yogi, “Don’t develop your human qualities too much! This practice is quite dangerous!”

***Why discourage the yogi? I assumed developing human qualities was the correct way to go.***

Thinking in a conventional way, I expect the yogi’s acts of kindness to backfire on the yogi. I expect nothing but trouble to come from helping others. I also wonder what will happen to me out of all this goodness the yogi is spreading around. And so, out of fear for the yogi’s future and fear for my future, I discourage the yogi, “Don’t develop your human qualities too much!” I want to keep the peace in our community.

***So to keep the peace in your meditation centre, you discourage yogis from developing human qualities. It sounds like giving in.***

We are not lowering the level of our human qualities. Our human qualities remain at as high a level as possible. We are not surrendering. No, we learn to avoid and manage the dangers associated with human qualities and we continue to develop human qualities.

The first human quality to develop is giving. Not just money, we give of our time and effort. Right now, we are discussing Dhamma. We are giving of Dhamma. Sharing the Buddha’s teachings. Though my giving of Dhamma talks is unlikely to result in my attaining to nibbāna, my giving of talks may benefit others and it may even benefit me to an extent. In the Commentaries, I read that giving Dhamma talks does indeed benefit the person giving the talk, if that person has already significantly developed his or her human qualities.

Our giving is almost always tainted with self-interest. We expect our giving to be reciprocated in some way. Recognizing others to be helpful in fulfilling a plan, we entertain them. For example, I help the young boys who work at our meditation centre. I am considerate to them. I provide them with items they require to live well here at our centre and to live well in their private lives. Looking more deeply, you can see that my giving to the young boys is incomplete. I am not only giving — I have expectations. My giving is tied to the performance of my duties as their boss. Of course, I can’t avoid performing my duties to these boys. It must be done.

***You are very generous to the boys.***

*Performing Human Qualities is Fraught with Danger*

My giving to the boys at our centre is not at a high level. There is the fact that they are working here at our centre. They are helpful for that reason. Would I perform my duties to these young boys if they didn't perform their duties to our centre or to me? No, I would not. They have work to do. My giving is tied to their working properly. When somebody does something for us, we reciprocate and do something for them but this type of giving is not at the level of perfecting the human quality of giving. We haven't perfected giving; it isn't a perfection, a pāramī. Something has gone amiss in our thinking, as our giving is already tainted with self-interest.

Giving at the level of a perfection is not about reciprocity and is not tied to self-interest. We consider a person's need and, regardless of our relationship to him or her, we give with an open heart. We simply want to help this needy person — that would be the real giving at the level of a perfection. We are moved by their need, and we give.

***What about giving with the idea of gaining merit?***

Thinking about results is alright. The act of giving is one element at play. The knowing that there is merit, pin in Sinhala, accruing from the act of giving is another element at play. If there is no craving for results in the act of giving, the act of giving is far more wholesome and beneficial, kusala. A wholesome and beneficial result is natural from the performance of a wholesome and beneficial action. You don't have to crave the wholesome result. From a beneficial action, you naturally get a beneficial result — the joy arising in your mind and heart.

The directing of merit is a different issue. Every day across Sri Lanka, you find men and women directing merit to deceased relatives, “On the strength of this wholesome action, I wish my father takes birth as a deva.” or “By the power of this merit, may my mother be a brahma.” Another says, “I dedicate these merits to my deceased sister, for her to take birth as a human.” This is all typical Sri Lankan practice. A mother might say, “By the merit of this dāna, may my child attain to nibbāna.”

My approach is different. I don't think in this way, even in regards to nibbāna. I perform wholesome actions without caring one way or another about the accruing of merit. Merit may or may not accrue. Doesn't matter. I perform wholesome actions because performing wholesome actions is a good thing to do. It is a human quality. Even if I end up in hell with this approach, then it's still okay! Wherever I'm going, so be it. If I take birth in a deva plane, then so be it. If I attain to nibbāna, that's also fine.

*Affectionate Splendour*

I have no need to think about amassing merit in order to take birth in a happy plane. That way of thinking is personal desire. I'm not imposing these ideas on you.

I have a great deal of gratitude and devotion to my parents. I was born because of them. Most people want a deva or a brahma birth, or a birth in nibbāna. I find this difficult, the wanting to be a deva or even a brahma. I believe what is said in the suttas about devas and brahmas. And I do not think of nibbāna as a next life. If I'm without craving in this moment then I am experiencing nibbāna. Is there anything in this moment to which we should be attached? Is there anything in this moment to which we should be averse to, or angry? There is nothing here in this moment to be attached. And there's nothing here in this moment to be averse to or angry.

These are my ideas. I do not impose these ideas on the generous people who come to our centre and give dāna. I bless them and give merit in the usual way. I dedicate merits to their deceased relatives' attaining to nibbāna and to the ending of their suffering. This is the traditional Sri Lankan way. I don't want these good people to go away thinking that I don't give merits. It's difficult to give Dhamma talks to the assortment of people who visit our centre. It's necessary that I inspire them to develop good human qualities. That is what I do in Dhamma talks.

If nibbāna is real, then let it be. I am confident there is such an unconditioned state but I have no aspiration for it.

***How does this fit with what you said earlier, that practising meditation takes us to a condition without problems?***

A wholesome act is a cause and its merit is the result. In its initial stages, practising meditation leaves us still acting in the realm of cause and effect, the conditioned. The Buddha spoke of the unconditioned as well as the conditioned. If there is this cause, then there will be this effect. If you are doing something wholesome, then naturally there will be joy, contentment and happiness.

***The unconditioned sounds a bit boring.***

The second human quality is beneficial speech. Of six types of speech, only two are beneficial:

1. There is true and pleasant speech that is beneficial
2. There is true and unpleasant speech that is beneficial



*Performing Human Qualities is Fraught with Danger*

Whereas, of our six types of speech, four are useless:

3. There is true and pleasant speech that is useless
4. There is untrue and pleasant speech that is useless
5. There is true and unpleasant speech that is useless
6. There is untrue and unpleasant speech that is useless

The true and pleasant type of speech as well as the true and unpleasant, are on both lists. These two types of speech, depending on their usage, can be either beneficial or useless.

We easily observe that the majority of speech in the world is of little or no use. Useless. For example, far too many politicians are constantly using untrue and pleasant speech, speaking in the most flowery way. Nothing except sweet words. But when you look behind the flowers and sweetness, there are great big balls of fire coming at you! In the world, we find no shortage of pleasant and unpleasant useless speech. Pleasant speech is used to flatter and pass the time — you find that a lot in society. Even though sounding pleasant to the ear, it's absolutely useless.

Beneficial speech as a human quality certainly does not mean using pleasant sounding words to flatter and curry favour with someone.

To small children, we speak mostly in a simple and pleasant way because children need the simple and pleasant. It's difficult, at least initially, to talk with children about important matters that are beneficial. If we want to get something important across to children, we start off with simple and pleasant speech. Then ever so slowly, we work our way up to more meaningful and pleasant speech. And what we say to a child most certainly must be true.

A few days ago, I talked with Mallika's grandson for about one hour. It was tiring and difficult to talk with this child for one whole hour. I had to listen carefully to what he said. For Mallika's grandson it wasn't at all difficult to talk to me for one hour! He told me that he has four torches. He talks in English, and then switches to Sinhala. He talks about computers and talks about his gadgets. He is five years old and is exceptionally knowledgeable, "The Mercedes Benz is awfully expensive! Wealthy people buy this type of car, but I don't think there is much value in owning a Benz."

Mallika's grandson added, "From a mechanical point of view, this Benz has some value. Aside from that, a Mercedes Benz has no value." He understood the mechanics of the car. I encouraged him to become a

*Affectionate Splendour*

car mechanic. Mallika's grandson said, "A car mechanic is a hard job." He explained many intricacies of the car's design, "There are parts falling in and parts falling out!" I suggested he might be imagining some things. Mallika's grandson, this five year old child, was emphatic, "No. No. This is the way parts move in the Benz."

This is my experience of talking with a child. He had countless questions, "What colour are gods?"; "How long is the hair of the gods?"; "How do they look?" and "What do gods eat?" I found it difficult to answer his questions. "How do you visit a god?" and "What's the point of visiting a god?" It's tricky to deal with children asking these types of questions. I was with Mallika's grandson for more than one hour.

***You asked similar questions when you were a child.***

Oh no. This young boy asked far more difficult questions than I ever asked at his age. Much harder questions. Anyway, I explained to the boy as well as I could, "If you want to be a god, you have to behave like your grandmother." I told him what he shouldn't do, such as lying. Immediately he said, "There are two people in my home who lie." Apparently some of the staff in his home had lied to him. He had worked it out. He asked, "Then okay, if these two are not going to hell because they lied, then where do they end up?" I didn't say they'd go to hell because then I'd have to give a description of hell. Instead, I told him these two liars might end up as dogs, or as working elephants, or as bulls tied to carts.

Then he said, "You know it's not all that bad to be an elephant. I like elephants, and I like dogs too. Not bad to be a dog. My mother has a dog at home, and she loves her dog." It is very hard to explain to a child. Then I asked him about worms, "What if you were born as a worm?" He said, "Aiyo!" The boy didn't like the idea of being born as a worm. I made a mistake talking about taking birth as a dog or as an elephant. With worms, he got the message, that this would be an unpleasant state to be in. Finally, grandmother Mallika took him away, which was good because otherwise I would have fallen into deeper difficulties. He is even in the habit of calling me on the telephone when he wants to clarify an idea.

***How old is Mallika's grandson? You told me, but I forgot.***

Five. He hasn't as yet started schooling proper. There is a lot going on in his head. The boy is participating in a small play where he acts as a beggar child and a friend acts as a wealthy shop owner. In the play, the beggar child picks up a ten rupee note. I asked, "Is it a real ten rupee note?" He

*Performing Human Qualities is Fraught with Danger*

said, “No. It’s a fake note. We made it.” In the play, the beggar child goes to the shop and buys something, and the shop owner cheats the beggar child. The wealthy shop owner doesn’t give him the correct item. At any rate, that was all he had to say about his play. I didn’t get to know more about it.

I have to practise especially pleasant speech with this boy, Mallika’s grandson. I cannot talk to a person at that stage in life about beneficial Dhamma. I can only talk about simple things of the world in a meaningful way. To keep his mind from becoming coarse, I can possibly plant little ideas that will help him be a good person. Without doubt, what you or I say to any child must be true. With children, we must always be careful. We have to use the most appropriate type of pleasant speech, to get through to them properly.

The third human quality is beneficial conduct to oneself and to others: we help ourselves and help others in the performance of good actions. Yet again, trying to do this practice in real life is problematic. In real life, you will experience dissatisfaction and conflicts with others when trying to explain various ways of performing good actions. Others may very well think you’re trying to teach them and are acting clever. Advice is easily misunderstood.

***It’s one thing for you to teach me how to develop human qualities. It is quite another to practise them.***

Because you asked me about human qualities, you surely want to learn about human qualities. You are listening to what I’m saying. Fair enough, what you say is correct. In a normal setting in the world most people are not asking, not wanting to learn, and not listening, which means it’s not easy to help them in the performance of good actions. Advice often leads to problems.

***My next-door neighbour in Canada is a convicted sex offender. It’s disturbing. I now find it nearly impossible to associate with him, let alone be kind to him.***

An act of kindness to another person doesn’t rely on the moral quality of the other person. You don’t have to label your neighbour as decent or depraved. Has he ever helped you?

***Yes. He has always been exceptionally good to my aging father.***

The Buddha said, “This man performed a thousand bad deeds, but he also performed one good deed. Bear in mind the man’s one good deed

*Affectionate Splendour*

rather than his thousand bad deeds.” Your neighbour may have fallen to a low level of behaviour. At one point, however, he was good enough to do something of value. If he helped you or others even once, then think of that one good action. Recall the times your neighbour helped your father and bring those good qualities of your neighbour to mind.

***Thanks. I’ll work at it.***

Our fourth human quality is impartiality to everyone, regardless of their circumstances, and this human quality of impartiality is another one which is easier said than done. Say you and I are sitting together on a bench having a chat. Someone comes along and says, “Why is David sitting at the same level as Pemasiri Thera? Doesn’t Pemasiri Thera understand this is improper?” I know monks and laity who think in this way. Impartiality to everyone is one thing; respecting everyone is something else.

When I was a child, I was friends with a child from a beggar family, and I was also friends with a child from a wealthy family. I was a child. My friend from the beggar family was a child, and my friend from the wealthy family was a child. I had to consider them like that. What more? When I was seen with the beggar child, adults made cruel remarks but, when I was seen with the child from the wealthy family, the same adults made no cruel remarks at all. Some adults said, “You are crazy to associate with beggar children.” They honestly thought I was mentally off balance.

A wealthy professional once told me, “Don’t go for alms food to homes of the poor. You have adequate alms food here at the meditation centre. Don’t visit poor people.” This is my experience with impartiality. Surgeons, engineers, lawyers, politicians, etc. — professionals from across-the-board are functioning at a high level. They are extremely intelligent and are performing complicated tasks with ease. And yet, when it comes to the development of human qualities, many professionals are extremely unintelligent. Ask your American monk friend about going for alms food in Colombo. He only gets food from the poor homes.

There is a superstition about monks in our country. If we see a monk first thing in the morning, it’s bad luck! That’s only a problem for Sri Lankan monks, not a problem for foreign monks. This belief of not wanting to see a monk in the morning comes from India. They see it as inauspicious, but apparently inauspicious just in regards to our local monks! Do you remember having tea in the city of Batticaloa? It was undrinkable. We could have drunk medicine more easily. We drank their tea anyway.

*Performing Human Qualities is Fraught with Danger*

In the spring of 2005, you joined Mr. Jayawardene's aid group in helping a few people in the northeastern area of Batticaloa. Those people lost everything in the tsunami. I was slammed by my local supporters, "Why travel hundreds of kilometers to Batticaloa and help those people? You have enough people to help right here in our own area of Kanduboda." It is difficult to be impartial in our daily lives. Still, impartiality has to be practised. Practise carefully.

Giving, beneficial speech, beneficial conduct to oneself and to others, and impartiality to everyone — these are all basic human qualities. Then there is the performing of one's duties, tasks and responsibilities, and the helping of the sick with small chores. Both Mohammed and Buddha advised living in ways that do not trouble one's neighbours. Mohammed went so far as to tell followers to close gates quietly, as the noisy closing of a gate is a small trouble to one's neighbours.

Right now, you can hear Buddhist chants blaring from the loudspeakers of our local temple. Blaring chants from loudspeakers is not a human quality, as those sounds trouble many people in our neighbourhood. The Muslims at our local mosque also use loudspeakers for their calls to prayers — also troubling many in our neighbourhood. Across Sri Lanka, there is an ongoing war of sounds. Who can be the loudest? In some villages, Hindus at local Kovils have joined this tit-for-tat war of sounds.

***I thought it was against the law to use loudspeakers.***

Yes, a law prohibiting the use of loudspeakers was brought in. However, many people protested against the law and they managed to get the law amended. It suits them to use loudspeakers. It doesn't matter whatsoever to these people that their use of loudspeakers doesn't suit others.

In this day and age, with human qualities in decline and hardly anyone interested in living in ways that don't trouble his or her neighbours, worldly communities have laid down strict laws to enforce the performance of human qualities. Such externally based enforcement doesn't work well and many people still break the laws laid down by their communities. Human qualities need to arise internally, naturally from within us through our religions and understanding.

*Again, Mahānāma you should recollect the Teaching — Well proclaimed is the Teaching of The Blessed One, here and now, not a matter of time, leading inwards, to be realized by the wise by themselves.*

*Mahānāma, when the noble disciple recollects the Teaching, at that time his mind is not overcome by greed, by anger and by delusion at such time his mind is straightforwardly placed in the Teaching. Mahānāma, when the noble disciple's mind is straightforward he experiences the meaning, the Teaching and delight arisen on account of experiencing the Teaching. To one delighted arises joy. A joyful one has an appeased body. One with appeased body experiences pleasantness. The mind of one who is pleasant concentrates. Mahānāma develop this reflection on the Teaching, even when walking, standing, sitting or lying or when doing some activity recollect it even when living in the household with wife and children.*

Second Mahānāma Sutta<sup>9</sup>



## 4

# Boys Like to Swim, and a Few Deva Qualities



**DAVID:** *What are the qualities of a good son?*

**PEMASIRI THERA:** Sixteen year old Alexander is with us today. He knows this topic well. He is a very good son to his mother, Tamara. Alexander lost his father a few years ago. Alexander was raised in Dhamma. From a young age, he learned to meditate. He is interested in science and a first-rate son to his mother. Well, I can't be sure Tamara won't spoil him later on! Right now, he's a good son.

I don't think Alexander will go astray in the future. I can definitely say Alexander has many good qualities. At this moment in time, he has virtue. He is also considerate to his mother, respectful of his teachers, clever at his studies, and content with what he receives. Alexander doesn't bother his mother in any way. He doesn't ask for this, that and the other. Alexander, is what I'm saying correct?

*Boys Like to Swim, and a Few Deva Qualities***ALEXANDER:** *To some degree.*

And I don't believe you quarrel with your mother. Perhaps with teachers you argue and debate.

***If mother and I are busy, we get irritated.***

That is natural. Your mother, Tamara, is awfully busy with her university work, and you too have your own things to do. Irritability is understandable, even more so as your father is no longer alive. Irritability is a normal part of life. And this is also true for you, David. We don't want a perfect life. There has to be some irritation somewhere. There has to be something we want, something worth looking forward to. Path knowledge! Jhānas! Right at the beginning of our lives we don't want everything given to us on a silver platter.

Children are not all like this in reality. We know from experience that many children are up to all kinds of quite bad things. Some children are a heavy burden to their parents. Sometimes they leave home without telling their parents where they are going, and then there's a lot of heartache for their parents. The parents must search for them. There are oftentimes lots of problems with children.

**DAVID:** *You got into a bit of trouble when you were a child.*

My behaviour didn't cause much trouble for my parents. My eccentric mind was the main cause for their troubles, and usually only around religion. I was curious about all the major religions and their beliefs. I never deliberately created problems at home. I never fussed about my food, for example. Only when my second eldest sister told me to study more did I resist and we quarreled. I never learned to steal or to lie. Indeed, there was almost no need to ever tell lies at home. It was much easier to tell my parents the truth. If I broke something, I could say, "Yes, I broke it." I didn't have to blame someone else, and I wouldn't be scolded for that, which meant it was easy. There were no major problems with my parents.

***This isn't the whole story. There were problems at home.***

There was one problem. I regularly went swimming with my two brothers, and we didn't always return home on our own. Someone had to call us home. We didn't go home voluntarily.

And we didn't swim in waterholes but swam in a river where the current was strong and there were even crocodiles. Of course if crocodiles were

*Affectionate Splendour*

spotted, then we didn't swim in the river that day. And in this river there was white water, where the river smashed against the rocks and sometimes we found ourselves struggling to get out. And we dove into the river head-first, even at those times of the year when the river was shallow. It was dangerous. These are things children do. They climb trees, fall down, hurt themselves, and break their bones a little. Young boys like to swim. This is not wrong behaviour. It's just part of growing up.

It would have been wrong behaviour if we were breaking precepts — killing, stealing, lying and so forth. We weren't breaking precepts, and our parents were at ease. They knew we didn't normally get into fights, tell lies or dishonour the family. There were problems at home when I refused to do my studies. I did my studies when I wanted to and not when someone told me to do them. Anyway, that wasn't a major source of conflicts.

***When I was a child, I had lots of conflicts with my parents. I fight now too, most every day with somebody, and that's in spite of meditating with you for years and years.***

A practice of doing activities with attention will not on its own alleviate conflicts. You lack wisdom. Even if you develop a much more consistent attention to what you are doing, you will still be averse to certain objects, will still get angry, and will still end up in fights. Only wisdom eases aversion and anger. Best we turn to developing deva qualities.

***What are deva qualities?***

Faith, virtue, learning, generosity and wisdom — these five deva qualities are found in the Mahānāma Sutta.<sup>10</sup> Deva qualities are higher Dhammas to be developed by humans. A human who develops deva qualities may take birth as a deva. David, you are human. While being a good human here at our centre, you are to some extent developing deva qualities and might end up as a deva. It doesn't really matter; you might even end up as something better than a deva!

The central deva quality to develop is learning. You hear beneficial talk and learn. For example, you are listening to a Dhamma talk right now. You hear this beneficial talk and learn. Deva quality learning isn't what we generally hear in the street. The topics discussed in society are for the most part useless. Deva quality learning is the gathering of knowledge on beneficial topics, such as almsgiving, maintaining virtue, and renunciation. It means hearing about tranquility and wisdom. We learn the teachings found in this Buddha-Sāsana.



*Boys Like to Swim, and a Few Deva Qualities*

There are four stages to learning:

- hearing
- reciting
- investigating
- purifying

After hearing what the Buddha said on a topic, we recite those teachings until we know them by heart. Then we investigate, “How do these teachings work in practice?” We reflect in our minds upon what we hear. Finally, we come around to purifying our views with regards to the topic. We bear in mind what we have heard and apply it in our lives. Anyone who fully develops the deva quality of learning only needs to hear a few words of Dhamma to attain to path knowledge.

***How do these teachings work in practice?***

Someone may hear that he or she can take birth as a deva by giving alms. They give alms. Or they hear of becoming a deva by being virtuous. Then they recite the teachings on virtue and do their best to be virtuous. Perhaps it was the letting go of attachments. After investigating letting go, they purify their views on letting go. Or hear about tranquility. Same. They learn the teachings on tranquility by heart and develop more tranquility.

It could be that it’s a talk on compassion and wisdom that is heard. Afterwards, they recite, investigate and purify views on compassion and wisdom. They practise more compassion. They are wiser. Through the deva quality of wisdom, humans have taken birth as devas. You and I have had discussions about the nature of our minds and bodies, *nāma-rūpa*. Whatever personally beneficial Dhamma we hear is then recited, investigated and applied.

We are fortunate to have been born as humans because humans can understand Dhamma more quickly than many other types of beings. We have an opportunity to quickly put these teachings into practice. People who develop deva qualities don’t have to wish for a deva birth. Really, there is nothing to wish for.

In a sutta of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, a man is practising deva qualities at a high level. He suddenly dies. At the moment of death, he is without mindfulness, *sati*, and is born amongst the devas. In the deva plane, our man who took birth as a deva meets a second deva. The second deva has also practised well and is giving a Dhamma talk. Our man who took birth as a deva hears the second deva’s Dhamma talk and realizes, “I have heard

*Affectionate Splendour*

these teachings before. Deva qualities are something I have practised in the past.” In short order, our man who took birth as a deva understands and he attains to path knowledge. Devas can also understand Dhamma quickly.

Though remarkable, devas vary widely in ability. There are devas living in one plane that have more faith, virtue, learning, generosity and wisdom than other devas living in the same plane. Many devas know about the three characteristics of all conditioned things — impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality. Not surprisingly, the devas who know Dhamma well have an advantage over the devas who know Dhamma less well. Without taking birth again as a human, the devas who know Dhamma well carry on in this practice and incline toward nibbāna.

That’s enough about devas!

***Is the human quality of giving pretty much the same as the deva quality of generosity?***

The human quality of giving differs significantly from the deva quality of generosity. With generosity, we generally think of giving an item to a likeable person. Young Alexander studies hard. Say I give Alexander a present to congratulate him on passing his exams. My present to Alexander is at the human quality level of giving. My present is not at the deva quality level of generosity.

My present to Alexander is at the lower level of giving because I am tying my present to his studying and doing well in his exams. I have expectations. I want him to study. I want him to do well. If I give an item to Alexander based solely on his need for the item, I am giving at the higher level of generosity. I give him the item and do not tie it to his studies.

Deva quality generosity means giving without expectations. There is a letting go of attachments. A renunciation. At its highest level, the deva quality of generosity is the letting go that leads to nibbāna. For example, in attaining to the first path knowledge, a man or woman lets go of the first three fetters — personality view, rites and rituals, and doubt. Letting go of three fetters that bind us all to the cycle of rebirth is an example of the deva quality of generosity working at its highest level. The Buddha points toward this highest level of generosity in the Dhammacakka Sutta. He speaks more plainly about various levels of generosity in the Dakkhinavibhanga Sutta.<sup>11</sup>

Our generosity is rarely at a level that leads to the attaining to path knowledge or to nibbāna. Nonetheless, in our way of performing daily activities, there should be an element of freedom from expectations. We

*Boys Like to Swim, and a Few Deva Qualities*

have heard teachings on the deva quality of generosity. Now, we need to systematically and gradually put those teachings on generosity into practice. Progress is subtle and cumulative.

***You are no longer the abbot of the Kanduboda Meditation Centre and yet you have quite a bit to do with the centre. Does your letting go apply to Kanduboda?***

Yes, my letting go of expectations absolutely applies to my dealings with the community at the Kanduboda Meditation Centre. They are our next door neighbours. I try living in a way that does not trouble them. I never say, “Oh, I’m the senior disciple of Sumathipāla Na Himi. I have the right to lead the Kanduboda Meditation Centre.” No, I’m not suggesting leadership in any way.

Whenever possible, I help the Kanduboda Meditation Centre. If members of that community ask me for advice, I give it to the best of my abilities. And I try to give advice without expecting my advice to be taken, since advice given without expectations doesn’t result in the arising of anger. They recently had a problem with their sewage system. The septic pits weren’t installed properly and they collapsed.

***The area near the back wall smells bad.***

The abbot of the Kanduboda Meditation Centre dropped by to discuss the rebuilding of their sewage system. It is a big project and I encouraged him, “Go ahead and do it!” I asked him, “How many people use these toilets every day and how many use the toilets on a Poya day?” Fifteen hundred people attended Kanduboda’s last Poya day. I asked, “On the non-Poya days, what volume of water does each person use?” Some people use one hundred litres per day. Some people use two hundred litres per day. On average, each person uses one hundred and fifty litres of water per day. From these numbers, we determined the total volume of waste water flowing into the septic pits.

Many factors were considered. Since bacteria digest the sludge, what needs to be done to ensure they thrive in the septic pits? And how much water can the ground surrounding the pits absorb? And will this water that is flowing from the pits into the surrounding ground be properly filtered? Should there be one, two, three or four pits? And if four pits are required, where should these four pits be located?

Considering these and other factors, we designed the depth, diameter and number of septic pits. I agreed to locate one of Kanduboda Meditation

*Affectionate Splendour*

Centre's septic pits on the Sumathipāla Na Himi Senasun Arana property. We gave tens of thousands of rupees toward the cost of rebuilding their sewage system. You can put these actions down to developing the deva quality of generosity.

It is always easier to be indifferent to the problems of others than it is to be compassionate. Much easier to be cruel than to be kind. In spite of helping without expectations, problems will still come our way. I always help the Kanduboda Meditation Centre to the best of my abilities. No, I am not about to be one bit gloomy about sewage and bad odours! If I was indifferent and cruel, I could get a bulldozer and close off the area! However, bringing in a bulldozer would not help me or members of the Kanduboda Meditation Centre develop deva qualities.

***Why did you establish the Sumathipāla Na Himi Senasun Arana?***

My only thoughts in bringing up this meditation centre were of gratitude to chief monk Sumathipāla Na Himi and to the many other eminent monks, such as Mahasi Sayadaw, Webu Sayadaw, U Sujato, Venerable Javana, and U Pandita, who lived on this land for a time. I personally knew these remarkable monks and am deeply grateful for their teachings, example and inspiration. I feel privileged to live on the same land where monks of such high caliber once lived. On this very land, with these teachers, many yogis developed the jhānas, the absorptions, and attained path knowledge. A sense of gratitude motivates me to build up the Sumathipāla Na Himi Senasun Arana.

Even if I had only the most modest of kutis on this land, I would be grateful and feel privileged. Thus I do what I can to continue the Buddha-Sāsana, in a way. If not developing jhānas and attaining to path knowledge, the yogis who stay at this centre can at the least observe the five precepts. Yogis have a place where they can develop their moral behaviour, their sīla. I am quite content and happy if yogis maintain the five precepts properly. Hopefully, they will develop some compassion and loving-kindness as well.

***I am certainly grateful for all you have done for me over the years, and am grateful to our translators. I would be lost without them.***

Sometimes I feel running this centre is more trouble than it is worth and it would be best for all concerned that I go someplace else. I can't however seem to ever get away. And some supporters are especially against my leaving and I don't want to upset them.

*Boys Like to Swim, and a Few Deva Qualities*

***Your teachings are good for me, as I'm fed up with Christianity and now thinking more about Buddhism.***

No need to talk of religion. Dhamma is the nature of things.

Quite some time ago, we touched briefly on the Upali Sutta.<sup>12</sup> Upali had listened to a talk by the Buddha and then proclaimed his respect and allegiance to him. The Buddha cautioned Upali, “Now wait a minute. You are a famous person in society. Reflect a little before you go to me for refuge. Think long and hard about what you are saying.”

A second time, Upali proclaimed, “I am going to you for refuge. Your teachings go beyond the teachings of my current teacher, Nigantha Nataputta. So, I go to you for refuge.” The Buddha again cautioned, “Do what you think is best. Nonetheless, when former teachers and their disciples visit your home, you should give them alms and help them, just as you did before taking refuge in my teachings. Regardless of how your views have changed, treat your former teachers well.” Upali was surprised and impressed, and a third time he went to the Buddha for refuge.

Upali's society was a highly organized and civilized society. They had good Dhamma, their basic cardinal principles were excellent and they applied these principles in their daily lives. Upali, the embodiment of the best of his society, had developed basic human qualities to a high level. After hearing teachings from the Buddha on developing even higher qualities, Upali's deva qualities blossomed brilliantly.

*Again, Mahānāma you should recollect the Community of bhikkhus — The Community of bhikkhus of The Blessed One, have come to the right path, the straight path, the wise path and the path of mutual understanding, such as the four couplets of eight Great beings. These are The Blessed One's disciples who are worthy of reverence, hospitality, gifts and honour with clasped hands — the incomparable field of merit for the world.*

Second Mahānāma Sutta<sup>13</sup>



5

## Qualities of a Good Yogī, or a Spoiled Jar of Pepper Seeds



**DAVID:** *What are the qualities of a good yogi?*

**PEMASIRI THERA:** A samatha yogi or a vipassanā yogi?

*You once told me not to use the terms samatha and vipassanā. You also said samatha goes together with vipassanā.*

There is a slight difference between a yogi who is practising samatha and a yogi who is practising vipassanā.

*Then what are the qualities of a good vipassanā yogi?*

Both types of yogis must be obedient. Obedience is the most important quality of a good yogi. Obedience doesn't mean the yogi is forever working for the teacher, freeing the teacher to get his or her own work done. Obedience doesn't mean working for the teacher. Obedience means the yogi accepts and follows the meditation teacher's directions toward a specific object. If the yogi is disobedient and doesn't follow the teacher's directions, if

*Qualities of a Good Yogi, or a Spoiled Jar of Pepper Seeds*

the yogi fools around with the object in any way he or she wants, the meditation practice goes in a wrong way. Then, there are lots of troubles and it becomes difficult for the teacher to correct the yogi's practice.

A meditation teacher directing a yogi's practice is similar to a signalman directing an engineer's train. According to the signalman's directions, the engineer takes the train down this set of tracks or that set. The engineer stops the train when the signalman directs him or her to stop the train. The engineer starts the train when the signalman directs the engineer to start the train. There is no choice in the matter. To keep the train moving along the right set of tracks, the engineer must follow the signalman's directions.

When the signalman's directions aren't followed, the engineer takes the train down the wrong set of tracks. The engineer might start the train when the signalman had directed him or her to stop the train, or the engineer stops the train when the signalman had directed the engineer to start the train. The engineer may go forward when he or she should have gone backward, or gone backward when he or she should have gone forward. This isn't the fault of the signalman. The signalman gave the correct directions to the engineer, but the engineer didn't follow the signalman's directions. Instead, the engineer took the train in his or her own direction. Take that as a simile. Going the wrong way, the train ends up somewhere else.

It's difficult to teach meditation to yogis who have read at length about meditation because what they read in various books invariably gets mixed up with the teacher's instructions. These days, many yogis know a lot about the hindrances, spiritual faculties and the enlightenment factors. Many yogis have amassed a great deal of knowledge about meditation from a wide range of sources, which results in many problems for teachers and yogis. It's difficult to teach them. They say to me, "I have been taught dhammānupassanā." or say, "I understand cittānupassanā." or "I know ānāpānasati."

It is always challenging for me to listen to their speeches. They have got used to speaking heaps, and I just listen. What they have to say is of absolutely no use, a complete waste of everyone's time. I simply listen, trying my best not to show any aversion. I just note with the thought, "When will this person stop talking? Will he ever leave?" There is nothing in these types of yogis. They are empty. Such talk with the teacher about what they know and what prior experiences they have had is unnecessary.

On the other hand, if a yogi comes to our centre after having studied with a good teacher and has learned meditation properly, then it's a joy for me to teach him or her. It's also interesting for me, the where and

*Affectionate Splendour*

how that yogi practised. I tend to ask, “With whom did you practise? How did you practise?”

Recently, there were two good yogis practising here at our centre. It was with lots of joy that I spoke with them and with lots of joy I taught them. Since they had started off their practices in exactly how their practices should have been started off, then quickly I could teach them. I didn't have any trouble at all with these two. They worked at developing mindfulness and clear comprehension in all their activities for about eighteen hours per day. They tried to be as attentive as possible.

These two were good yogis, always going along in exactly the right direction, and their trains ended up in the correct place. Before coming to our meditation centre they had learned from an excellent teacher. And more important than their learning from an excellent teacher, these two yogis obediently followed my instructions. They did exactly as I told them to do, without going in a roundabout way. The instructions of a meditation teacher must be followed to the letter by the yogi, right from the beginning — that is the most important quality of a good yogi.

Good yogis don't add anything at all to the teacher's instructions. They don't add what they heard before, or add what they read in a book on meditation, or add any of their own ideas. These two yogis didn't do any of these things. It's easy for a meditation teacher to teach meditation to yogis who don't mix up their teacher's instructions with their own ideas about practising meditation.

***Then it must be easy to teach children. They don't have any prior knowledge of meditation.***

On the contrary, teachers from all walks of life, not just meditation, say teaching a child can be difficult. Teaching children certainly differs from teaching adults.

In one way, teaching a child is easy, as almost all children gladly accept the teachings. In another way, teaching a child is difficult because the child is just growing up and is impressionable, which means the teacher must take the child's future life into consideration. It is demanding for a teacher to take a child's future into consideration. Our own first teachers, those we had as children, are retained in our minds. I remember my first teachers well. We all remember our first teachers well. When taught properly in the early stages, a child will be successful throughout his or her entire life of learning. Teachers want children to get a good start in life.

Teaching an adult can also be easy or difficult. With an adult, the teacher gets feedback and questions, “How should this practice be done?”



*Qualities of a Good Yogi, or a Spoiled Jar of Pepper Seeds*

An adult isn't as impressionable as a child. Of course, teaching is easy when the adult gladly accepts the teachings, and near impossible when he or she opposes the teachings.

Teaching a yogi who is new to meditation is similar to teaching a child who is new to learning in the sense that, at the start of his or her practice, the yogi is impressionable. Thus, when taught properly right from the start, the yogi has a good chance of making progress throughout his or her life of meditation. Somehow, the teacher must get the yogi going in the right direction, get him or her going down the right set of tracks.

Obedience to the teacher, following his or her instructions, is the most important quality of a good yogi. Not mixing anything from external sources into the meditation practice is the second most important quality of a good yogi.

It's okay for a yogi to have learned many things about meditation from sources external to his or her current teacher. However, when practising meditation with one teacher, the yogi must let go of what he or she has learned about meditation from other teachers and from other sources. Whatever a yogi has learned about meditation before, from someone or some book, the yogi has to drop all that knowledge. If you want to study the Satipaṭṭhāna with me, for instance, you need to let go of all you learned about the Satipaṭṭhāna while you lived in Canada. Then we'll start.

Canadians practise meditation differently than Sri Lankans practise meditation. When Sri Lankans practise, they have faith in the Buddha and faith in the idea of nibbāna. When Canadians practise, they do not automatically have faith in the Buddha nor do they have any idea of nibbāna. There is no need to talk of faith and nibbāna with Canadians. Nonetheless, a meditation teacher expects Canadians to follow instructions.

***I have many friends in the Ajahn Chah tradition.***

Later on, you are welcome to practise the Ajahn Chah methods, but not at the time you are practising a particular method with me. Although I have given you advice on practising properly, most often you don't take my advice.

***I'm listening now.***

A meditation teacher cannot, on first meeting, tell a good yogi from a bad yogi. The teacher begins with instructions to the new yogi in the practice of paying attention. If a meditation teacher can bring the yogi around to paying attention, as the yogi should be paying attention, then that is good. Paying attention helps the yogi.

*Affectionate Splendour*

It takes only a few days for the teacher to determine if the yogi is good or bad. If the yogi is good, he or she will properly follow the teacher's instructions in the practice of paying attention and will naturally arrive at restraint. The yogi doesn't need to put on airs of restraint. After two or three days in the practice of paying attention, the restraint arises naturally from within the yogi. He or she isn't forcing restraint upon him or herself. This is a good yogi.

If the yogi is bad, he or she will not properly follow the teacher's instructions in the practice of paying attention and will not naturally arrive at restraint. Since the yogi doesn't arrive at restraint in a few days of the practice, the teacher knows the yogi is not following instructions properly. He or she is a bad yogi. When the bad yogi sits in front of a teacher, he or she may put on airs of restraint. The teacher can then tell the difference between a good yogi and a bad yogi. The teacher recognizes forced restraint.

***Am I paying attention properly? Am I a good or bad yogi? I often feel completely useless and discouraged.***

At our centre, it is difficult for me to differentiate the good yogis from the bad yogis because the yogis here mix up various meditation practices. That said, we're all useless yogis. Try to think that being a good yogi means you are bad and useless. Some yogis think they are very good and very experienced — this is how bad yogis think. The teacher wants his or her yogis to think that they are bad and useless. Good yogis think they are bad and useless, and bad yogis think they are good and very experienced. It's opposite to the way in which you are thinking. Don't measure yourself. I am an exceptionally useless yogi!

***You recently recognized two good yogis.***

Yes, those two yogis had studied the Satipaṭṭhāna properly with a good teacher. I could tell they were good yogis by the way they sat, stood and walked. They maintained a posture in a particular way. They moved in a particular way. A teacher can discover a great deal about a yogi from external signs.

A teacher instructing a good yogi doesn't have to think too much about giving instructions. For example, from meeting with a good yogi on one day, I know what happened to him or her on the previous day and I know what should happen to him or her on the next day. When yogis are doing the practice of paying attention properly, I know what happened and what will happen.

*Qualities of a Good Yogi, or a Spoiled Jar of Pepper Seeds*

It's a challenge for me to teach some of the yogis who are at our centre these days because they have so much information about meditation. Some yogis are intelligent and scholarly — way too much information in their heads. A yogi who is spoiled with external ideas is similar to a jar of pepper seeds spoiled with papaya seeds. You can find pepper seeds being sold in the market. To increase profits, sellers sometimes mix in papaya seeds with the pepper seeds. Sellers thin out the pepper seeds with papaya seeds. A spoiled yogi is like a spoiled jar of pepper seeds!

***Why do sellers thin out the pepper seeds with papaya seeds?***

Papaya seeds look much the same as pepper seeds but they are worthless. These two different types of seeds are similar in colour, shape and size. Sellers mix in false pepper seeds, mix in the papaya seeds, with the true pepper seeds because it's impossible to straight away tell false pepper seeds apart from true pepper seeds. A papaya seed is only slightly larger than a pepper seed. Very similar. However, while the pepper seed is hot, the papaya seed is only slimy, not hot at all. It's in this way that yogis mix up external ideas about meditation.

***Are we still talking about yogis?***

A good yogi doesn't mix up various methods of meditation. He or she can learn new things and can leave new things alone. I also studied various methods of meditation, possibly fifty different methods of developing the mind. I don't mix them all up with each other. I know that one particular method is the correct way for me, and I know the other methods are simply interesting. I was curious about these other fifty methods of meditation. I studied these methods, not for purposes of attaining to nibbāna or to be liberated from saṃsāra. I only wanted to satisfy my curiosity. I had an interest and that was all. I now know many methods of meditation. Still, I don't mix them up with each other.

Two meditation methods are like two different languages — you can't mix up two separate languages. And yet, many yogis do mix up two or more different methods of meditation. It's not possible for the yogi to make progress when practising in that way and it's also hard to teach them.

In the past, I gave you some preliminary instructions in meditation. It's okay that you meditate with another teacher. However, make sure you meditate according to what that other teacher teaches you. Many years ago I studied meditation with Sumathipāla Na Himi. When I wanted to study another method of meditation with another teacher, I first asked

*Affectionate Splendour*

Sumathipāla Na Himi for his permission to do so. For example, I studied the Goenka method. I wanted to see what is taught in the Goenka method, not for the purposes of comparing or criticizing the Goenka method. I also studied in the Ajahn Chah tradition.

Some yogis exert great energy comparing one method of meditation with another method. They criticize one teacher and praise another. That is wrong. And some meditation teachers declare, “If you leave me to practise another method, then you can’t come back and practise with me.” That’s also a wrong approach.

***I’m interested in studying meditation in Myanmar.***

It’s fine with me that you are interested in other methods of meditation and you are interested in other teachers. Go to Myanmar and learn their methods. That’s okay. Obey the good teachers. Follow their instructions. I also travelled to Myanmar. Without mixing up various methods, you will continue on your path. You are looking for some freedom. Find the path that leads to where you want to go. Study a range of methods of meditation, but avoid mixing them up with each other.

*Mahānāma, when the noble disciple recollects the Community of bhikkhus, at that time his mind is not overcome by greed, by anger and by delusion at such time his mind is straightforwardly placed in the Community of bhikkhus. Mahānāma, when the noble disciple's mind is straightforward he experiences the meaning, the Teaching and delight arisen on account of experiencing the Teaching. To one delighted arises joy. A joyful one has an appeased body. One with appeased body experiences pleasantness. The mind of one who is pleasant concentrates. Mahānāma develop this reflection on the Community of bhikkhus, even when walking, standing, sitting or lying or when doing some activity recollect it even when living in the household with wife and children.*

*Again, Mahānāma you should recollect your own benevolence — It is great gain for me, that in a world overwhelmed with stains of selfishness, I abide in a household free from stains of selfishness. I abide released in benevolence, with open hands ready to give to the needy and arranging to give gifts. Mahānāma, when the noble disciple recollects his own benevolence, at that time his mind is not overcome by greed, by anger and by delusion at such time his mind is straightforwardly placed in the Teaching.*

Second Mahānāma Sutta<sup>14</sup>



## 6

# More on Teachers and Yogis — Wild Horses



**PEMASIRI THERA:** It doesn't matter if you learn from other teachers. However, when practising with one teacher, it's best you follow his or her teachings and you avoid the teachings from all your other teachers. Keep to the instructions from whichever teacher you're practising with at any one time. When you practise sincerely with one teacher, he or she can teach you properly and you will benefit.

Of course, thoughts of teachings from other teachers will occur to you while you are practising. I repeat, don't try to practise according to

*Affectionate Splendour*

those thoughts from the other teachers. This is a common mistake made by yogis. There are countless things you and other yogis do not know about the practice of meditation, but your teacher knows. Seemingly insignificant thoughts or actions can take a yogi's practice way off the tracks.

During the interview between the yogi and the teacher, the yogi should only state what's happening to him or her bodily or mentally. Apart from that, whatever he or she deduces from what is happening in his or her practice is totally unnecessary. In the interview, the teacher needs to know: (1) the nature of the body, (2) the nature of the mind, and (3) whatever pains and feelings are arising. Is the mind of the yogi tranquil or is it restless? That's all the teacher needs from the yogi, and this is all the teacher ever asks of the yogi. Nothing else. All is included in these three areas.

A yogi often thinks if he or she practises meditation in this or that way, then this or that experience should happen. In interviews, some yogis go so far as to tell the teacher about experiences they have only read about in books or only heard about from other yogis. If a yogi connects genuine experiences with imagined experiences, then the teacher gets confused.

**DAVID:** *Does this often happen to you?*

No, I don't get confused! I realize the yogi is travelling down the wrong set of tracks. Once the yogi starts talking, it's obvious. Experienced teachers such as Sumathipāla Na Himi instructed thousands of yogis and easily gauged them. When yogis follow the teacher's instructions exactly, their practices proceed in ways never imagined by the yogis. Meditation experiences never happen according to what yogis expect.

A yogi must be obedient, as I said in our last discussion. If the yogi stops following instructions or breaks from practising for a period of time, he or she should stop practising altogether. If the yogi doesn't follow the teacher's instructions to the letter, then it is impossible to teach meditation to him or her. Many yogis follow their own way, and disregard the teacher's way.

Mahasi Sayadaw taught the Satipaṭṭhāna practice. Other teachers put the name vipassanā on the Satipaṭṭhāna practice. In the Satipaṭṭhāna practice, there is both samatha and vipassanā. It's possible, however, to direct the Satipaṭṭhāna exclusively toward its samatha side. You know Venerable Bodhidhamma.

***Fine fellow.***

At the start of his practice, Venerable Bodhidhamma focused on the samatha side of the Satipaṭṭhāna. Same for you. At the beginning, your practice

*More on Teachers and Yogis — Wild Horses*

was also all samatha. Ānāpānasati. It's all samatha at the beginning of any yogi's practice. Rising and falling — all samatha at the beginning. There is no mention from the meditation teacher of samatha or vipassanā. Only through conceit, the yogi says, "I'm practising vipassanā. I'm a vipassanā yogi."

The teacher just waits, watches and listens. Are the yogi's hindrances decreasing? Or are the yogi's hindrances not decreasing? At the same time the hindrances are decreasing, the yogi's spiritual faculties should be seen to be increasing. During interviews with the teacher, the yogi should be able to describe clearly the nature of his or her meditation object. Say the object is ānāpānasati or the object is rising and falling. The describing clearly of ānāpānasati or the describing of rising and falling should come up in the interview.

Some yogis see meditation as fashionable and trendy. With conceit about being a yogi, he or she declares in interviews, "My meditation is going especially well." or "I feel at great peace." or "I am in harmony with the universe." That sort of talk is unnecessary and, if the yogi only ever talks in this way, he or she is useless and hard to teach. It is challenging for the teacher to remove the conceit connected to notions of being a yogi.

***Do good yogis naturally become teachers?***

If a good yogi wants to be a teacher, he or she requires teacher training. Training a yogi to be a teacher differs from bringing him or her around to the basic seeing.

Not only obedient, a good yogi is honest and open. Without honesty and openness, it's impossible to train or discipline a yogi. Teachers let go of yogis who lack honesty and openness. Otherwise, the teachers are simply exerting themselves. Ranchers let go of bulls that attack them. And cowboys let go of horses that kick and bite. It is difficult to live with yogis, bulls, and horses that are always on the attack. The Buddha dropped yogis who could not be trained.

The Whip Sutta is about the best and worst of horses. As soon as the saddle touches its back, the best of horses knows exactly what to do. Even before the rider climbs on the saddle, the best horse knows what to do. It does not need to be whipped at all. Whatever the rider commands, at once the best horse obeys.

With the next to best horse, the rider must give one hit with the whip. The third best horse requires more and harder hits with the whip. Then there is the worst of horses. The rider must whip the worst horse as hard as possible, until the horse really hurts, and only then does it obey the rider's commands.

*Affectionate Splendour****Am I the worst of horses?!***

There is a simile about death. People are dying everywhere. Perhaps they died in the earthquakes that shook Haiti. You didn't know these people, only read about their deaths in the newspaper and felt some sorrow. Soon after the earthquake in Haiti a shop owner from our local village of Kanduboda died in a car accident. You were acquainted with this person who lived not so far away. A little closer to home, you felt more sorrow for the local shop owner than for the Haitian earthquake victims.

When your mother died, you felt immense sorrow. Your father is old and will die soon. When one of your two brothers or your sister dies, surely you will be deeply affected. By now, you should have realized that death is an event that will happen to you.

Do you need to be hit many times with the whip to realize that you will die? Since the deaths in Haiti were far away and happened to people you didn't know, their deaths didn't hit you as hard as your mother's death. Did I answer your question?

***I'll think about what you said.***

Similar to riders commanding the best and worst of horses, the teachers instruct the best and worst of yogis. With the best yogis, there's no need for teachers to give daily instructions. The teachers simply give the best yogis a meditation object. These yogis practise properly and their practices progress smoothly. With the best of yogis, the teachers don't have to exert themselves for too long — a maximum of seven days of teaching is required for the best yogis.

With the next to best yogis, teachers take on the trouble of teaching for ten to twelve days. And the third best yogis, again things go a little slower. The teachers spend a month with the third best yogis, and then that's enough for their practices. Finally, with the worst yogis, the teachers take a great deal of trouble and time. A year of teaching is still not enough. And with these worst yogis the teaching is oftentimes not of any proper use.

***And why is this?***

Though most have the merit to practise properly and make progress, the teaching is not of any proper use because more often than not they studied too many methods of meditation with too many meditation teachers and are simply confused. Confusion could be what's preventing these yogis from practising properly and making progress.



*More on Teachers and Yogis — Wild Horses*

Each and every yogi has a level of merit. If the yogi's merit is high, his or her practice progresses smoothly and properly, similar to setting fire to dry leaves — immediately dry leaves catch fire. This is the first type of yogi. The best yogi. The teacher only has to give the briefest of instructions. Yogis cannot obtain merit from books. You can't teach yogis to be like this. Merit is already in him or her. It is an inherent quality.

***Is merit a personality trait?***

It's an internal quality of these yogis. There are also yogis where for many years the teacher must be teaching them. Progress is slow.

***Me?! I have been studying with you for many years.***

I am satisfied with your progress. Sometimes, progress is incredibly fast. Venerable Sāriputta needed to hear only a few words. And also the ascetic Bāhiya, because their minds were mature.

***Does what you're saying apply to samatha or to vipassanā yogis?***

I am speaking in general terms. If yogis are studying samatha, the teacher asks the yogis to keep the details of his or her practice confidential. Whatever samatha technique the yogis are taught, they cannot tell anyone else. That is the most important criterion. A samatha practice has to proceed in that way. Secrecy must be first established. That confidentiality must come, first of all.

Keeping the details of a meditation practice confidential applies to working with any object, not just a samatha object. For example, when I was teaching Anil and Tamara and yourself, the objects I gave you were different from the objects I gave Anil and Tamara. And Anil was taught differently than Tamara. And a fourth yogi was given yet a different object of meditation, and all four yogis were taught differently. And none in this group of four were allowed to discuss amongst themselves which objects they were given. There are many, many meditation objects. One yogi may be given ānāpānasati; while another may be given rising and falling.

***Why not tell other yogis about my meditation objects?***

Telling others about your meditation object is detrimental to them and detrimental to you. You would create unnecessary confusion and undermine everyone's practice. Don't do it.

A teacher adjusts, custom designs, his or her teachings to suit the unique personality of the yogi. Each and every yogi is given a totally personal

*Affectionate Splendour*

meditation object and practice. The teacher starts off by observing three properties in each yogi: (1) the nature of the Great Elements, (2) the mental state, and (3) the way spiritual faculties develop. Only after considering these three properties does the teacher choose the most appropriate meditation object and the most appropriate practice.

Despite having totally personal meditation objects and practices, all yogis who practise correctly eventually arrive at the same destination. Let's say the destination is the first jhāna. One yogi's path to the first jhāna could be the light kasiṇa samatha object, another yogi's path to the first jhāna could be the earth kasiṇa samatha object, and a third yogi's path could be the fire kasiṇa samatha object. Though using three different paths, all three yogis eventually arrive at the same destination. All three will attain to the first jhāna.

It's impossible, without proper consideration, for teachers to say which path any particular yogi should take to get to his or her destination. Once yogis get to the destination, they all experience the destination in the same way. The first jhāna, for example, is the same for all yogis.

***I haven't experienced jhāna.***

Teachers are primarily concerned with bringing yogis around to the beneficial, such as seeing the three characteristics — impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality. This applies to you too. Whatever your way of practice, whichever path, your negative qualities should shrink and your positive qualities should grow. When practising correctly, with hindrances decreasing and spiritual faculties increasing, you will arrive at the proper destination.

Remember, don't adjust your practice or object according to your wishes. Follow the path set out by your teacher and things will progress smoothly.

*Again, Mahānāma you should recollect your own virtues, that are consistent not broken, spotted or blemished, free of slavery, not acquired and praised by the wise as leading to concentration. Mahānāma, when the noble disciple recollects his virtues, at that time his mind is not overcome by greed, by anger and by delusion at such time his mind is straightforwardly placed in the Teaching. Mahānāma, when the noble disciple's mind is straightforward he experiences the meaning, the Teaching and delight arisen on account of experiencing the Teaching. To one delighted arises joy. A joyful one has an appeased body. One with appeased body experiences pleasantness. The mind of one who is pleasant concentrates. Mahānāma develop this reflection on your own virtues even when walking, standing, sitting or lying or when doing some activity recollect it even when living in the household with wife and children.*

Second Mahānāma Sutta<sup>15</sup>



7

## Past Kamma Obstructions to Path



**DAVID:** *How do yogis become teachers?*

**PEMASIRI THERA:** Only a handful of experienced yogis are meant to teach meditation. If a yogi is meant to teach, he or she submits him or herself to a lengthy period of training with a meditation teacher who has training and experience that is one hundred times greater than the yogi's training and experience. What's more, the teacher who is doing the training must have undergone a great deal of dukkha in life.

Nowadays, meditating is a fashion and a trend. You know, meditation classes here, there and everywhere! The activity of meditation is difficult. The training to become a meditation teacher is difficult. It's not a fashion, not a trend and not a business. Sometimes teaching meditation is run as a business. We'll stop talking about teaching meditation.

*Affectionate Splendour*

***Earlier in the day, you suggested we discuss obstructions to path due to past kammās.***

As a result of past kammās, even the Buddha undertook extreme austerities. Past kammās do obstruct the progress of some yogis. Not all yogis. Only some yogis. There are yogis who insult and trouble other yogis. These actions obstruct their meditation practices. And there are yogis who insult and trouble monks. It's more serious when yogis insult the whole of the Sangha, not just one particular person who is in robes. Insulting the whole of the Sangha is dangerous.

Usually, the kammās obstructing the meditation practices of yogis were performed in their current lives and were not performed in previous lives.

We have all seen yogis who look unimpressive. They are just hanging around. These yogis may be very virtuous. They don't need to have path knowledge. We can't say. They may have experienced jhānas. Nonetheless, we carelessly gossip about these yogis, not knowing who they are or what they are capable of doing. Careless talk creates problems in our meditation practices.

There are teachers from other traditions who have developed their minds. For example, Jesus Christ and Mohammed had highly developed minds. Many of our contemporary teachers from a range of traditions are also highly developed. If these teachers hadn't developed their minds to high levels or hadn't developed any spiritual qualities, they wouldn't have a huge number of followers. Carelessly, without thinking, we criticize teachers from other traditions. Don't we have anything better to do with our time? Falling into error in these ways creates problems when we try to meditate. I know yogis who have these sorts of obstructions. I know many such cases.

A meditation teacher can help yogis overcome obstructions arising out of their past kammās. However, nearly all yogis reject the teacher's help. They don't listen to the teacher and don't act in ways to overcome obstructions. Till the day they die, the majority of yogis unwisely carry on in the same way they have been going. No change. The teacher knows the yogis stopped at this or that point in their meditation practices because of these or those reasons — the past kammās.

About twenty years ago, an estate superintendent, a planter, was meditating at the Kanduboda Meditation Centre. His wife was wicked — thoroughly cruel. One time when the estate superintendent was meditating, his wife got particularly annoyed and publicly scolded him. Another time, she kicked him while he was sitting silently in meditation with a group.

*Past Kamma Obstructions to Path*

The wife also occasionally meditated at Kanduboda. When she sat down to meditate, her leg swelled badly. The swelling was quite noticeable. When she stopped meditating, the swelling went away — no problem with her leg. Sumathipāla Na Himi advised her, “Ask your husband to forgive you.” The chief monk knew she scolded and kicked her husband. The chief monk told her to ask her husband for forgiveness.

If she was only meditating for a short period of time, the wife didn’t have any problems with her leg swelling. But if meditating for an extended period of time, the wife had problems with the leg. It swelled to a very large size. Always at the same point in her meditation, the swelling happened again and again. At any rate, she refused to ask her husband for forgiveness. She didn’t want to ask for forgiveness, even after her husband died.

The wife of the estate superintendent could have asked her deceased husband for forgiveness. It is possible to ask a deceased person to forgive us. We think of him or her and ask for forgiveness. Since the wife wasn’t having any of that, she never got over the problems with her leg swelling. A couple years ago, I met her in Colombo. She still had no wish to ask for her husband’s forgiveness. Now because of her stubbornness, she is taking this kamma along with her in saṃsāra, through repeated existences. At some point, she needs to deal with this matter. Meditation is not a game. She will someday have to ask for forgiveness.

Also twenty years ago at the Kanduboda Meditation Centre, the swelling of a yogi’s tongue got my attention. Like the wife of the estate superintendent, this yogi regularly scolded her husband. And also like the wife of the estate superintendent, whenever she meditated for an extended period of time, causes came together and unpleasant results occurred. While the first yogi had problems with her leg swelling, this second yogi had problems with her tongue swelling. The swelling of the leg and the swelling of the tongue were not diseases. These problems were the results of kammās, which arose only at certain points in the meditation practices of these two yogis.

***Maybe these two wives acted cruelly in previous lives.***

These results, the leg and tongue swelling, are not to be seen as coming from previous lives. See these results as coming from their current lives.

I used to avoid saying the third refuge, Saṅghaṃ Saraṇaṃ, and I also used to avoid saying the fourth precept, that’s the one on not lying. I had two of the three refuges, and four of the five precepts! That’s how I lived at home, because I felt an occasional lie was helpful.

*Affectionate Splendour*

Sumathipāla Na Himi asked me, “What is this you’re saying? What are you doing?” I couldn’t answer. The chief monk had heard from Kanduboda villagers that I was not in the habit of taking the third refuge and was not keeping the fourth precept. He asked, “Is this true?” I came clean, “Yes.” Sumathipāla Na Himi didn’t say one more word. He didn’t say anything else to me.

I had a problem. Whenever I sat down to meditate, I had a choking feeling, starting from my stomach and then rising up to my throat. I was choking in meditation. Later, I asked Sumathipāla Na Himi what to do about the choking. He advised, “At least you must say Saṅghaṃ Saraṇaṃ, and ask for forgiveness. Then, continue your meditation.” Saṅghaṃ Saraṇaṃ is that third refuge. Thereafter, I had no problems with choking feelings. I wasn’t suffocating anymore, and moreover, no restless feelings. A good teacher is essential to the yogi.

***I choke when I sit for more than an hour. It’s unpleasant and scary. Makes me want to go back home to Canada.***

Definitely don’t see this obstruction as coming from actions you performed in past lives. It’s really not karmas from past lives. In this life itself, you are creating the conditions that come and obstruct your practice. Some teachers can precisely identify a yogi’s obstructions and precisely advise the yogi in the overcoming of his or her obstructions. I say again, for this to work, the yogis must give up their own habits and ideas, and accept the teacher’s advice. All yogis have the potential of walking the path quite well. Rarely do you find a completely useless case.

Meditation teachers have an obligation to help yogis in correcting behaviour, in overcoming obstructions, and in walking the path. Corrections in behaviour come through Dhamma itself. Not otherwise. The overcoming of obstructions comes through the meditation. The path cannot be walked in any other way. Teachers are obliged to properly guide the meditation practices of their yogis, to help them out of bad situations.

Apart from major obstructions, all yogis experience minor obstructions over the course of their meditation practices. All yogis are at times uncomfortable. When yogis experience minor obstructions, a capable teacher tells them what to do. There are times when the meditation practices seem easy for the yogis, and the yogis are happy. There are times when the practices are hard. It is completely normal for slight discomfort and minor obstructions to arise over the course of meditation.

*Past Kamma Obstructions to Path*

***I have had terrible headaches, knee pains, and neck pains. My whole body is sometimes one big mass of pain, even my teeth hurt. And in a rage I yelled at a monk the other day. It all seems crazy.***

When slight discomfort and minor obstructions arise, many yogis find an excuse to stop meditating, “My family is having problems at home. I must deal with these problems.” The problems at home are minor and not urgent, but many yogis use the dealing with problems at home as an excuse to stop meditating and leave the meditation centre. I say to them, “Yes, that’s alright. You must attend to your duties. Deal with the problems at home.” With a smile, I let this type of yogi go home. I never say, “Don’t go home. Stay here and meditate.” You want to go home to Canada. Yes, if you want to go home to Canada, that’s absolutely alright.

I never oppose this type of yogi’s decision to stop meditating because doing so may turn him or her off meditation altogether. Yogis only meditate properly when they are somewhat satisfied with meditating. They must attach some importance to time spent at a meditation centre. If I opposed this type of yogi’s decision to leave, he or she might become extremely dissatisfied with me and, more importantly, dissatisfied with meditation in general. Irritated, he or she leaves the centre and never returns. This type of yogi may never meditate again in his or her current life. Since I’m trying my best to bring a yogi around to meditating, I always agree with his or her decision to temporarily stop.

Many yogis do not think deeply about why they go to a meditation centre or what they can achieve in meditation. Staying at a meditation centre is simply something for them to do. A trend. It’s a fashion, “Other people are staying at the meditation centre. Let’s do it.”

Please do not be offended by what I say.

***No, not at all. I often run away from meditating.***

A good yogi does not give up easily and does not run away from meditation. A good yogi tries hard, perseveres through problems, through most anything. I’m talking now about discomfort, the difficult moments, which come naturally as part of progressing properly in the meditation.

Experiencing moments of discomfort are essential to a yogi’s progress. By experiencing both moments of discomfort as well as the moments of comfort, the yogi gains an idea of the unsatisfactoriness — the dukkha. He or she gains an idea of impermanence and gains an idea of insubstantiality.

*Affectionate Splendour*

Impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality — all three characteristics are to be experienced in modest ways by all yogis. This is the first point.

Upon seeing evidence of the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and insubstantiality in moments of experience, the yogi develops proper view, the sammā-diṭṭhi, and develops proper thought, the sammā-sankappa.

If a yogi never experiences moments of discomfort and only ever experiences moments of comfort, he or she never makes any progress. This yogi never gains any idea of the unsatisfactoriness — the dukkha. He or she never gains any idea of impermanence and never gains any idea of insubstantiality. Without personally seeing the evidence of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality in moments of experience, the yogi develops neither proper view nor develops proper thought.

***How does a yogi make progress?***

Progress of a yogi's practice calls for another simile. A rice plant starts its life as a delicate shoot growing straight out of the ground. With the farmer protecting it from animals and other dangers, the rice plant steadily grows in strength, height and maturity. It stands on its own. When heavy with a ripe head, the rice plant bends toward the ground.

The farmer is the meditation teacher, the rice plant is the yogi, and the animals and other dangers are the major and minor obstructions to the yogi's practice. Growth of the rice plant is growth of the yogi's practice.

At the start, a yogi's meditation practice is also delicate and also very straight. With the teacher protecting the yogi from major and minor obstructions, the yogi's practice slowly grows in strength and maturity. The yogi learns to stand on his or her own understanding. Eventually, proper view and proper thought start arising, and the yogi becomes humble and refined. Mature yogis are certainly not proud. The yogi who is walking the path properly will not be coarse.

Another rice plant starts its life in the normal way, as a delicate shoot growing straight from the ground. But after a week or two of growing straight, the rice plant is attacked by insects. They feed on it and the plant rots from within. At the start of its life, this rice plant was growing properly and it had the potential to develop into a mature plant. However, after the insects and rot, it quickly fell apart and died prematurely.

Regrettably, many a yogi is a rotten rice plant. After practising meditation for a short period of time, the yogi compares him or herself to other yogis, "My virtue is better than his virtue." or "My behaviour is superior to others." or "Oh, I'm a good yogi. I'm doing everything right.



*Past Kamma Obstructions to Path*

Others are not. I'm the moral person here." Somehow there is a feeling of superiority and a comparison with others. You can be sure this type of yogi hasn't developed the Eightfold Path. He or she has developed something else. Something else is growing. A yogi who has developed properly does not compare him or herself to others or have feelings of superiority — no.

***I have met some wonderful forest monks. They are practising properly.***

I know monks who have been living ascetic existences for decades in the forest. Many go for alms only once in three days. The rest of the time, they eat whatever off the forest floor — leaves of trees, fruit, and bark. Some forest monks almost never associate with people. Since these monks have been living in this way for decades, I once assumed, as you do now, they were all practising properly. I assumed they must be highly developed in kindness and compassion.

However, I now know that not all monks who are living ascetic existences in the forest are equally developed. I know forest monks who are poorly developed in spiritual qualities and I know other forest monks who are highly developed in spiritual qualities. Practising properly isn't based on location. Living an ascetic existence in the forest, or even living here in our meditation centre, won't in itself develop kindness and compassion. The development of spiritual qualities is based on walking the path sincerely and associating with a teacher for spiritual guidance.

***I don't always have access to a good teacher.***

You do not hang onto teachers forever. No, that's not how to properly walk this path.

The teacher brings the yogi around to clearly seeing and clearly understanding the major and minor obstructions that come from his or her past kammās. Once the yogi sees these obstructions and understands their nature, the teacher then helps the yogi avoid and overcome them. After enough progress, the teacher warns the yogi of conceit that might arise out of moral behaviour and other achievements. The yogi only needs the teacher until the yogi knows how to see, how to understand, how to avoid, and how to overcome obstructions. Eventually the yogi must go, without the teacher, on his or her own.

Nonetheless, despite getting a good start from the teacher, the yogi who goes on his or her own can still rot from within. A yogi might, for example, maintain moral behaviour, *sīla*, through sheer grit and determination.

*Affectionate Splendour*

Conceit about moral behaviour starts to arise. Then one day, moral behaviour breaks down. The well-trained yogi knows when his or her moral behaviour has broken down and repairs it.

***Why does the yogi start acting immorally?***

Moral behaviour is upheld unnaturally or it arises naturally. When moral behaviour is upheld unnaturally through the yogi's grit, determination and conceit, it is soft and unstable, and unreliable. Unnatural moral behaviour breaks easily and breaks repeatedly, which means it also must be repeatedly repaired. Similar to the breaking down and repairing of a rickety old car, all this breaking down and repairing of moral behaviour is a nuisance to the yogi.

In contrast, when arising naturally out of the yogi's progress in meditation and out of walking the path sincerely, moral behaviour does not easily break down. It is there, and there's no need to change or repair it. This naturally arising type of moral behaviour is hard and stable, and totally reliable. It is rock solid.

Is what I'm saying of any value to you?

***Yes, definitely a valuable talk. Thank you.***

*Mahānāma, when the noble disciple's mind is straightforward he experiences the meaning, the Teaching and delight arisen on account of experiencing the Teaching. To one delighted arises joy. A joyful one has an appeased body. One with appeased body experiences pleasantness. The mind of one who is pleasant concentrates. Mahānāma develop this reflection on your own benevolence, even when walking, standing, sitting or lying or when doing some activity recollect it even when living in the household with wife and children.*

*Again, Mahānāma you should recollect the gods: There are gods, of the four guardian gods, of the group of thirty-three, of the Titan gods, of the happy ones, the gods of creation, attached to the creation of others, there are gods of the Brahama group and there are gods above them. With whatever faith, virtues, learnedness, benevolence and wisdom, those gods disappeared from here and were born there, that faith, virtues, learnedness, benevolence and wisdom is evident in me too.*

Second Mahānāma Sutta<sup>16</sup>



## 8

### More on Past Kamma Obstructions



**PEMASIRI THERA:** The obstruction of a yogi's progress by certain kammās applies at the point of purification of views. Views will not be purified if there are heavy kammās operating. The yogi may have a general understanding of proper view, sammā-dīṭṭhi. But at the point of experiencing purification of views, there are obstructions.

**DAVID:** *Do family conflicts constitute past kamma obstructions? I previously asked you about fighting with my siblings.*

Those conflicts are only loosely related to past kamma obstructions. I told you how to overcome those conflicts but that's moving away from the topic we are now discussing. I am aware of your family history. Conflicts and misunderstandings are quite common among siblings. It's the norm.

*Affectionate Splendour*

It's more serious if you had conflicts with your parents. Many people harbor serious grudges against their parents. These grudges, they must really try to overcome.

***What happens when I am genuinely angry with my father? I don't think I'm harboring any ill-will toward him or toward my late mother. I just lose my temper occasionally.***

You work through that anger in your meditation itself.

Some children have major conflicts with their parents over inheritance and the sharing of family wealth. Maybe the parents distributed their wealth in ways the children dislike. The children then harbor grudges against their parents. These lingering family conflicts and grudges are major obstructions to their meditation practices and need to be worked out. Harboring grudges over the way parents distribute wealth has more serious ramifications than simply getting angry with your parents on a few occasions.

I'd like to tell you about my father's youngest brother, my uncle. He was a disturbance to his family's household. He even once raised his hand to hit his mother over a land dispute. This uncle also used to go diving and on one occasion he noticed that a man was in distress in the water. My uncle dove into the water to save the drowning man. As my uncle was getting the man ashore, my uncle dislocated his own arm. Thereafter till his death, my uncle had problems with his arm.

Though interested in meditation at this time, I was still going to school and living at home. If I ever mentioned becoming a monk to my parents, there were problems. When I had too many problems at home, I stayed with this uncle. He had a room where I could meditate. My uncle was not interested in meditation, but he had this room which I used for meditation. No, this uncle was definitely not interested in meditation. He gambled and drank. Yet one day after watching me, he asked, "What are you doing? What is this meditation all about?"

He was in the habit of drinking heavily and playing cards with his friends till early in the morning. Friends in the police force joined him in these rowdy parties! When I stayed with him, he told his friends, "My brother's son is here with me. He is meditating. Better not disturb him." I continued sitting in meditation. And they carried on in their gambling and partying. They were unbelievably noisy.

I was about sixteen at the time. My uncle gradually became more curious about meditation and I brought him to the Kanduboda Meditation

*More on Past Kamma Obstructions*

Centre. In his daily practice, the raising of his hand to hit his mother kept coming up. Since I knew about this past kamma, I helped him overcome it. I told him what he had to do in order to get around that obstruction. He accepted my advice and was able to meditate properly, and he continued meditating for the rest of his life. He reformed, stopped drinking and stopped playing cards and gambling. All this as a result of what my uncle had done to his mother.

***Did your uncle apologize to his mother?***

His mother was dead by this time. Though just a young lad, I told him, “Now, think of your mother and ask for her forgiveness.” My uncle was a grown-up, an adult, and I was a sixteen year-old teenager. Still, I was able to tell him because I had heard about dealing with these matters. My uncle was a giant of a man and I was like a little rabbit next to him! Nevertheless we were very close. He turned toward meditation and even looked to me as an example. This is how it happened — the nature of that action. This is all about the overcoming of obstructions due to past kmmas.

***Did your uncle hit his mother?***

No, no, no. He didn't touch her. Only the intention to hit her was present. Without intention, you cannot hit anyone. I think someone put my uncle up to threatening his mother. One of his gambling and drinking buddies likely said, “Ask your mother for the family land. If she refuses to give it to you, then threaten her like this.” I think someone else was involved in that incident. With parents, there can be major conflicts. With siblings, there can also be conflicts but never as intense as with the parents, I think! At least I think conflicts with siblings are not as intense as conflicts with parents.

Throughout my childhood and even into my monk life, I had some fairly intense conflicts with my second eldest sister. When I was a child, she over and over again tried to teach me something and I always got annoyed with her. As a monk, she kept trying to get me to disrobe. It didn't matter where I stayed. She came and tried to get me to disrobe. My sister visited me when I was the abbot at the Lanka Vipassana Meditation Centre in Colombo. She still expected me to disrobe and go back home. I was more than fifty years old at the time! The sight of her filled me with dread. In her mind, I should have let go of this way of life and returned home. So strange, her way of thinking.

*Affectionate Splendour*

***I'm in a somewhat similar situation. My siblings mean well but they want me to do more with my life. How did you resolve the conflict with your sister?***

Just before my second eldest died, I came to understand why we were having conflicts. She was excessively attached to me. She thought I was suffering with living as a monk. And wanting the best for me, she gave me lots of advice in living a different life. I always reacted to her advice with anger. However, I eventually came around to understand that her advice arose out of attachment and I came to understand that reacting to her advice with anger did not help matters whatsoever. Understanding the reasons for our conflicts helped defuse the conflicts. My sister was too fond of me.

***The situation did get resolved. Was it only your understanding or was there a discussion between the two of you? Was there any meeting of the minds?***

No! No! No question of talking or explaining with my second eldest sister! I had to understand and adjust my way of thinking and acting. I was the one who had to learn to adjust, not her.

***Your sister didn't change?***

No, she wouldn't change. I began to understand where she was coming from and that understanding smoothed out the conflicts. Only on one occasion did I try to reason with her, "What's the point of you coming here and trying to get me to disrobe? There's no point." The conflicts arose out of my sister's view, *diṭṭhi*. She was exceptionally knowledgeable in Dhamma, more knowledgeable than me. She had many diplomas and degrees. She was extremely intelligent. I think too much knowledge and intelligence led to her bizarre behaviour.

To Venerable Dhammika, she said, "Look, my brother is clearly crazy and now he is trying to make you crazy too. He is breeding craziness — don't get caught." Ask Dhammika about this sister. She tried to prevent him from ordaining as a monk.

At one of the temples she supported, this second eldest sister of mine got into a big fight with the head monk. My eldest sister was also at the temple that day and witnessed the fight. My eldest sister didn't speak English but my second eldest did speak English. Because my second eldest wanted to fight in private, she conducted the fight in English. She didn't want her elder sister to understand what was happening. In spite of the language

*More on Past Kamma Obstructions*

barrier, the eldest readily understood this was no polite conversation. The head monk and my second eldest were fighting. After a long fight, my second eldest offered the dāna and left the temple.

After my second eldest sister died, my eldest sister continued with the offering of dāna to that same head monk at that same temple. One time, and this was years after my second eldest had died, the head monk mistook my eldest sister for my second eldest sister. Thinking this was the same woman he had fought with years before, the head monk started scolding my eldest sister. My eldest said to him, “Look, I’m not that sister. She may have done something wrong but it’s me who has come to offer the dāna. The person you are scolding cannot hear you — she is dead. And I don’t accept your words either!” Those things happen in society.

*I could write a book about you and your sisters.*

My second eldest and my father were two of a kind — both against Dhamma, even though they were both exceptionally knowledgeable of it. They were on one side. My father’s way of thinking influenced her. In the end, I understood that she was her father’s daughter — she thinks like him in this; she acts like him in that. Once I better understood her behaviour, our conflicts were not conflicts anymore.

If I had disrobed and gone home as she had wanted, life would still have been difficult for me, as both father and this sister ignored me at home. Neither one ever talked with me. If I entered a room, they got up and left. A few years ago, I asked my eldest sister, “Why do you think father and sister behaved like that to me?” My eldest sister confirmed, “Because of their great attachment to you! And their great disappointment at what you were doing.”

Since neither wanted to attain nibbāna, being in robes was unacceptable. True, I did not know what I was looking for. And I still do not know what I am looking for. I can say that I am looking for a nibbāna that I don’t know, or know of. It really doesn’t matter, as I have a confidence that this is the correct path. It was impossible for me to change my mind with regards to my goal, just as it was impossible for my father and second eldest sister to change their minds.

*Was getting angry with your sister a past kamma obstruction?*

No, the conflicts with my sister did not obstruct my meditation. Getting angry occasionally with a sister or brother is not in the league of a major obstruction to progress in meditation. No, our conflicts may have been

*Affectionate Splendour*

difficult for her but not for me. Sometimes I noticed that she was a bit absent-minded, leaving her belongings behind after a visit. She continued to be obsessed with me.

She only let go of me after suddenly losing her son and husband. Her views changed and were more in line with my own. Her son was carefully brought up. He was shot and killed right in front of her, which must have had an enormous impact on her. He was a university student when it happened. Shortly afterwards, her husband died from the heartache of their son's death. It was a double dose of dukkha for her. With shocks like that in her life, she let go of me. My second eldest stopped thinking about me then.

When she took up her life again, my second eldest inclined toward meditation. She had always known a great deal about meditation. However, when I tried to instruct her, she told a friend, "Oh, he's my younger brother. I don't think he can teach me." She didn't want to study with me. She said, "He was the little kid at home. What can I learn from him?"

Seeing as she wouldn't accept any teaching from me, I handed her over to another monk. This monk was cunning and managed to get quite a lot of money and other belongings from her. The monk in due course told her, "You now have all four jhānas." Jhānas are the absorptions.

I was pleased to hear all this. I was happy for her, even if she had no more than imagined that she had attained the jhānas. I said to my sister, "Yes, that's a very good thing!"

She said, "Of course, if I had tried to learn the jhānas from you, I would never have attained them!" She laughed, then added, "Now, I will proceed with vipassanā." She knew perfectly well that it is natural to turn to vipassanā after attaining the jhānas.

I told her, "Very good. I don't know about these methods. You better find out from your teacher."

***Why was her son shot?***

My sister had no clear idea about her son's activities. It was the JVP<sup>17</sup> time, and the son was a JVP rebel. You can't imagine. He was an awfully attractive young lad — so sweet, you wouldn't think he would be involved in the JVP movement. Though humble in appearance, he was hard, tough. He was a hardcore member of the JVP and had all the ideas of their violence. They killed to achieve their goals. At university, he had been completely taken over by the JVP ideology. He was a core member of the movement.



*More on Past Kamma Obstructions****And when did your second eldest sister die?***

She died while I was living in Colombo. She had all the family diseases — high blood pressure, diabetes. With her background in nursing, she self-medicated when her health was out of balance. Even so, she had a good state of mind at the time of her death. At least I think she had a good state of mind. She had always been generous, giving all her wealth to temples and other good causes, and she had this idea that she had attained jhāna. Auspiciously, she died shortly before her teacher died. He committed suicide by drinking poison.

***Oh dear.***

It's good that my sister died before her teacher died. If she had lived to hear of her teacher's suicide, she would have likely given up on Dhamma altogether. Such strange things happen.

It's in the nature of smart and well-educated people like my sister to be tricked by cunning people. They are often easily tricked, despite their high level of intelligence. The monk who taught meditation to my sister wasn't at all well-educated. He may not have been able to read or write and yet, surprising to me, the two of them got on admirably. My sister was far more educated than he. Didn't matter. She was taken in by this monk.

***You should have done better by your sister and helped her out of this mess.***

No way! Not a chance! I had to save myself first! At any rate, I couldn't actually help her to any great extent. All things considered, the cunning monk's teachings worked out for the best. My sister attained a rapturous and blissful state, which she understood to be a state of jhāna. Though not real jhāna, that rapturous and blissful state was beneficial for her as it is for a lot of people who are facing the dark.

To people who have no belief in kamma, there's no point trying to explain the nature of obstructions due to past kammas. Kamma is a long and convoluted story. Obstructions which arise in a meditation practice can definitely be results of past kammas. If the yogi understands the kammas that lead to the arising of obstructions, he or she can decide, "Oh, I won't do this again. That was wrong." And afterwards, those kammas will not obstruct the yogi's practice. But a yogi who has conflicts with the teacher, that's a serious and more difficult obstruction to overcome.

***You understood this sister. Was there also an increase in your compassion?***

*Affectionate Splendour*

I can't say there was an increase in compassion. I simply understood that it was her attachment to me that pushed her to give advice and I understood why I reacted negatively, with anger, to her advice. After a lifetime of conflicts, I finally came around to understanding that getting into conflicts with her was of no use to either of us. Once I understood our behaviour, the conflicts were no longer conflicts.

My second eldest sister's views and advice did not obstruct my meditation. Her views and advice obstructed her meditation. Knowledge regularly goes against exceptionally intelligent people.

***Were you consciously cultivating compassion?***

My compassion for her was always present. I knew my sister was experiencing a lot of suffering in her life — that compassion was there all through my life with her. And then with the losing of her son and husband, I had even greater compassion for her. We simply must have compassion for others, when we consider their lives and what they are going through.

After my second eldest's husband died, she built a shrine to a deva and started worshipping it with a woman who entered a trance. The woman who entered trances performed ritual pūjās for the deva. I tried to convince my sister to stop worshipping this deva and stop performing these rituals. One day when my sister was at work, I went to her place of worship and completely destroyed her shrine to the deva.

Later, the caretaker of the shrine told my sister, "A monk came and destroyed your shrine. He smashed it to pieces and threw everything onto the roof." My sister said to the caretaker, "It could only be my brother who did this. That's how he behaves." My sister never asked me about what I had done.

I even scared her with a tall tale, "I will light a lamp that will burn out all your mantras and images." She believed what I said and stopped those practices. At least she stopped worshipping that particular deva.

One time, my sister took a lorry load of coconuts to the southern pilgrimage village of Kataragama. And along the way she stopped at every devala, the Hindu temples, to smash a few coconuts. Instead of performing this ritual of smashing coconuts at temples, she could have fed a small village. She could have given this lorry load of coconuts as a dāna and made much more merit. From this, you can see the dangers of views and how strongly they can be held.

*More on Past Karma Obstructions****And these are all children from the same mother.***

My sister had a vast knowledge of Dhamma. Though a trained nurse by profession, she was more interested in teaching the Abhidhamma, the suttas, and the Pali language at Buddhist temples. She had a diploma in Pali. The monks who used to study with her were sorry after she died, as they had no one to teach them. She knew all the Sanskrit chants. However, her vast knowledge of Dhamma didn't help her much. It is often difficult to convince people and bring them around to proper view and proper thought.

I digressed a bit. We talked about my sister because you asked how conflicts with siblings influence meditation.

***Earlier, you said the yogi need not hang onto his or her teacher forever. I still want some teaching back in Canada.***

There are different types of teachers. You can easily find a teacher who has a lot of book knowledge. He or she knows the suttas well and can reiterate Buddhist facts, telling you what is good and what is bad. And you can also easily find a teacher who is familiar with the basic hindrances to equanimity in life. This type of teacher has a slightly deeper understanding of Dhamma and goes beyond merely reiterating Buddhist facts.

However, you won't easily find a teacher who precisely identifies your obstructions due to past karmas and precisely advises you in the overcoming of these obstructions. This is an entirely different and rare type of teacher. A teacher who learns meditation through books cannot explain meditation to others. Out of books, no one can learn to identify a yogi's obstructions due to past karmas. The best of teachers are born to teach. They anticipate a yogi's potential progress and guide the yogi in making that progress. If you stay in this work, you will find such a teacher. I was fortunate enough to have the most compassionate of teachers. They all had my welfare in mind.

Wherever you go, think of the qualities of the teachers who helped you and remember them with gratitude. This is a daily practice for all yogis. When a yogi sits down to meditate, he or she thinks of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha — the Triple Gem — and then briefly reflects on the good qualities of his or her parents and teachers. The yogi first thinks of the Triple Gem, then thinks of parents, and then thinks of teachers. The yogi remembers all the worthy people he or she has known.

*Affectionate Splendour****Is asking forgiveness part of the daily practice?***

If a yogi doesn't ask for forgiveness from any worthy person that he or she knowingly or unknowingly hurt, the yogi could be stuck. His or her progress is obstructed. The hurtful action could have been committed in another life and not necessarily in this current life. If a yogi abuses teachers of other religions, he or she needs to ask, "May I be forgiven for hurting you."

***As a teenager, I treated my mom badly. There was lots of yelling and screaming in our household. Memories of these fights regularly come up when I meditate for any length of time.***

Memories such as hurting your mother can come up during meditation and these memories can obstruct progress in meditation. Simply ask forgiveness of your mother, sincerely ask her, and then proceed with the meditation.

***My mom died more than thirty years ago.***

Doesn't matter. It is possible to ask your deceased mother to forgive you. You think of her and ask for forgiveness.

There can be times in meditation when the yogi regresses to his or her earliest years and significant people and events come to mind. Lucid images and memories from far in the past can be experienced by any yogi, when he or she is progressing well. When I was meditating I frequently saw images of my mother, even when she was alive, and I also occasionally saw images of my eldest sister. It can be difficult for the yogi to get these images and memories out of his or her mind. With effort and perseverance, the yogi sees these formations through wisdom and gets back on track.

We'll stop here.

*Mahānāma, when the noble disciple recollects his own faith, virtues, learnedness, benevolence and wisdom and the faith, virtues, learnedness, benevolence and wisdom of those gods, at that time his mind is not overcome by greed, by anger and by delusion at such time his mind is straightforwardly placed in the gods.*

*Mahānāma, when the noble disciple's mind is straightforward he experiences the meaning, the Teaching and delight arisen on account of experiencing the Teaching. To one delighted arises joy. A joyful one has an appeased body. One with appeased body experiences pleasantness. The mind of one who is pleasant concentrates. Mahānāma develop this reflection on the gods, even when walking, standing, sitting or lying or when doing some activity recollect it even when living in the household with wife and children.*

Second Mahānāma Sutta<sup>18</sup>



9

## House of Dhamma



**DAVID:** *While meditating with you, I had some life changing experiences with asubha and skeletons. A friend would benefit from similar experiences. What to say to her?*

**PEMASIRI THERA:** That's alright. Your intention is good. However, you need not tell your friend all your experiences because not all your experiences are relevant to her. My two best friends were my mother and father, and even to them I never divulged all the details of my meditative experiences. Your friend may or may not be in a position to accept what you say.

It's important to understand your friend. Then, in accordance with the way she is going on the path, to suit her needs, you explain your experiences. There has to be a balance between what you tell your friend and what she has experienced. The ideas you present should conform to her practical experience in meditation. Otherwise, it will be impossible to get anything of value across. Your friend needs enough practical experience to understand what you are telling her.

David, you have been to the Sri Lankan towns of Batticaloa and Kataragama. There are differences between Batticaloa and Kataragama.

*Affectionate Splendour*

You can say to travellers, “In Batticaloa, I recommend the resthouse down by the sea. It is a fine resthouse. And in Kataragama, you will find the resthouse in the centre of town to be excellent.” To travellers to Batticaloa and Kataragama you can recommend staying in specific resthouses because you are familiar with those resthouses and you approve of them. You can help, by suggesting good places to stay.

You cannot help a yogi in the same way you help a traveller. You cannot tell a yogi, “The practice with skeletons was good for me and it will definitely be good for you. I recommend you also work with skeletons.”

You cannot encourage a yogi in this way because doing so generates a tendency for the yogi to think about what you said and he or she will not be able to make any progress. If you really mean well for your friend, then don't tell her a lot about your experiences in meditation. Tell your friend what is suitable for your friend. Adjust your way of speaking according to her practical experience. To be sure, this is where many yogis go wrong. Based on what they hear from others or read in books they naturally expect their practices to yield similar experiences. When you meditated with me, I never told you anything of potential results. Nothing at all!

***Yes, that's right.***

Back in 1998 while studying at the Lanka Vipassana Meditation Centre, you decided on your own to observe autopsies at the Colombo morgue. Two teenage girls sometimes accompanied you on your trips to the morgue. I allowed these trips and later, again on your own initiative, you acquired a skeleton and together we assembled it. I'm not sure what has happened to that Lanka Vipassana skeleton. Nevertheless, there is a skeleton at the Kanduboda Meditation Centre and yogis are welcome to use it in their practices. I almost always allow yogis to observe autopsies and work with skeletons, if they want to.

A yogi's progress is sequential. He or she takes a step forward to the first level of experience, then takes a second step forward to the second level of experience and then takes a third step to the third level. So on and so forth. You took on autopsies and a skeleton as part of your practice and some tranquility of mind came to pass. You had some typical beginner experiences with autopsies and skeleton. Then based on these beginner experiences, this first level of experience, I gave you a set of instructions that led you to a second level of experience.

My instructions were always based on how you progressed. Once you had experienced the appropriate results from correctly following one set

*House of Dhamma*

of instructions, I then told you to follow a different set of instructions. Each set of instructions was adjusted to where you were in your practice at that exact moment; each set was custom designed to furthering your practice. You had to have experienced the appropriate results of one level before I could give you subsequent instructions on how to proceed to experiencing the results of the next level. Depending upon how well you meditated, I gave instructions. Progress must be one step at a time. There is no other way.

If you expect to experience specific results, you will never experience those results.

Let's go back to 1998 when you were working with a skeleton. If I had told you at the time that working with a skeleton leads to tranquility, you would never have developed any tranquility. Instead, you would have started thinking a lot about how working with a skeleton leads to tranquility. This proliferation of thought, vitakka, would have prevented correct understanding from arising and thus prevented the appropriate experience of tranquility from arising. Excessive thinking about an experience always obstructs what it is that you are on this path to experience.

And this applies to all experiences with all objects of meditation, not just skeleton. You had experiences with skeleton as your object of meditation. Other yogis have different experiences with different objects of meditation. Each yogi is unique. If a yogi hears and thinks about an experience before he or she has that experience, the yogi simply won't have that experience. Tranquility of mind, samādhi, must arise naturally and it precedes the practical experiences of meditation. Only after tranquility arises can a yogi make any meaningful progress. To experience tranquility, however, there has to be a lessening of thought. Not an increasing of thought.

***If what you say is correct and I think it is, no one who has made any meaningful progress in meditation should ever tell another person about his or her meaningful progress, because doing so prevents the other person from making the desired progress. Perhaps my friend is more experienced and wiser than I and, for these reasons, doesn't tell me much of what she has experienced in meditation.***

Talk freely with your friend. When she talks about her experiences, you should know — okay, she is having this experience; this is correct; this is to be expected. Encourage each other, “Yes, that is how the practice should go.”

*Affectionate Splendour*

***The American monk was encouraged by what you said to him. Many people had told him he was going the wrong way. You approved and supported what had happened to him. He was relieved.***

Yogis have to discuss their meditation experiences with people who have experienced what they have experienced; others must be at their level of understanding. It's problematic for yogis if they talk about things that the other person has not experienced. Oftentimes, it is impossible for others to know what the yogis are talking about and they reject what the yogis say. This might be what happened to this monk. I am not sure.

I know this monk had numerous teachers over the years and many of these teachers totally rejected what he told them. The teachers who rejected this monk approached him improperly. They didn't listen or accept what he had to say. If the teachers who rejected him had meditated to the same level of experience to which this monk had meditated, they could have had a meaningful conversation with him. I listened and accepted what this monk had to say. I understand where he's at in his practice.

This monk is lucky because over the years not all his teachers rejected him and what he had to say. His mental make-up remains intact and he is nowadays practising in a good way — going for alms, meditating, and keeping good moral behaviour. If this monk had been unlucky, if all his teachers had rejected him and what he had said, then his mental make-up would now be broken. He would be incapable of putting rejection from teachers out of his mind. Total rejection would be part of his daily experience.

I asked you earlier which three things are common to all of us and are continuously happening. Do you now remember these three?

***Breathing, thinking and aging. Sometimes you say the third is dying.***

Good. We all breathe, think and age. It is natural to breathe, think and age. It's not necessary to make the conscious decision, "Oh, I must breathe." Breathing is automatic. We are also always thinking. And the third is aging. We need not decide to age either. We just get older. Wherever we go and whatever we do, these three things are continuously happening and common to all of us. Anything else David?

***A new topic?***

Hondai.<sup>19</sup>



*House of Dhamma*

***The Buddha's teachings are sometimes described as a cup with religion filling the cup slightly, philosophy filling the cup to half, and Dhamma filling the cup right over the top. How do you see differences between religion, philosophy and Dhamma?***

There are various approaches to the Buddha-Dhamma. This is a good topic. In the top right-hand corner of our whiteboard, I drew a picture of a small house. Next to the house, I marked a dot and this dot represents a person. This person is very close to the house. In the bottom left-hand corner of the whiteboard, I marked a second dot. A second person. Let's mark many dots in the middle of the whiteboard — these are all people who want to get inside the same house, the one located in the top right-hand corner. Who will be first to get inside the house?

***The person who is standing on its doorstep.***

Does someone else have an answer? I am looking for an original idea.

**AMAL:** *It's hard to say who will get there first because even if a person is standing on the doorstep, if he doesn't have the volition to step inside then he won't make it inside the house. The person who has the volition to step inside will be the first to get inside.*

**DAVID:** *Yes, it depends on how fast the person travels — the tortoise versus the hare scenario. The tortoise might win the race.*

Any other ideas?

**BETH:** *The person who is standing nearest the house may have a change of heart. She may decide against going inside the house and go somewhere else.*

Yes, it could be like that. Though standing right next to the house, someone could be busy with other activities and stay outside. The house represents understanding the true nature of things, just pure Dhamma. Some of those outside are performing religious rituals and debating philosophy.

## **RELIGION**

Here at our centre, there are young boys who enjoy gathering flowers and then arranging the flowers on trays for offering during evening pūjā. They enjoy gathering flowers and preparing trays more than meditating. Yesterday, the young boys engaged Tamara in preparing the trays. That is

*Affectionate Splendour*

the way these boys think — they enjoy the religious and ritual approach to the Buddha-Dhamma. Today, the boys also wanted to engage Tamara in this activity but they didn't ask her.

Yesterday, you and I and others enjoyed watching the Kandy Perahera on television. I didn't watch the Perahera thinking, "This Festival of the Buddha's Tooth is an empty ritual." The Perahera is not an empty ritual. On the contrary, it is a festival full of faith and devotion. There is a famous shrine to the Virgin Mary in Sri Lanka and every year thousands of people make a pilgrimage to this shrine. They have a lot of faith in the Virgin Mary. There is also a famous Hindu Kovil in Jaffna to which, again, every year thousands of people make a pilgrimage.

If people didn't get anything from attending the Perahera, then people would not attend it. And if no one ever got anything of value from making a pilgrimage to the Virgin Mary Shrine or to the Jaffna Kovil, no one would ever make a pilgrimage to these places either. Since thousands of people do attend the Perahera, and thousands do make pilgrimages to the Virgin Mary Shrine and to the Jaffna Kovil, clearly these people are getting something of value. They get a great deal of satisfaction and joy.

**DAVID:** *I seldom appreciate the value of religious places. Can you explain?*

Since faith and devotion are at the heart of the Perahera and at the heart of countless religious places, the people with lots of faith and devotion experience great satisfaction and joy when they attend the Perahera or make pilgrimages. We can't find fault with them for taking satisfaction in religious places or for taking joy in performing religious rituals.

Every year, many Hindu pilgrims walk roughly four hundred kilometers from Sri Lanka's northeast to the town of Kataragama in the south. They walk day and night, picnicking along the way, until they reach Kataragama where they participate in its annual festival. Generating masses of faith and devotion, one holy man rolls on the ground the whole four hundred kilometers. He is called Rolling Baba. Through rain and scorching sun, Rolling Baba rolls along to Kataragama. Weather doesn't matter to Rolling Baba.

On my last trip to England I attended a singing ceremony at a Hindu temple.

***Aren't you Buddhist? Why did you do that?***

At this Hindu temple not only do they have religion, they also have a philosophy. They have both approaches to understanding the nature of

*House of Dhamma*

things. There is nothing wrong to be said about what is going on at that Hindu temple in England. Their parking lot is huge. Twelve acres! The temple is made entirely from Italian marble. It's beautiful. Their approach is fine. By going to this temple and participating in its activities, an enormous number of people experience joy and a sense of well-being.

Furthermore, religious conviction isn't even necessary for the enjoying of religious places and activities. You, for example, attended this year's Perahera in the village of Seenigama. Were all those who attended Buddhists and Hindus? No. You must have noticed that people of all religions enjoyed the fire walking and dancing. There are always Muslims and Christians like you in attendance at the Seenigama Perahera, as well as those of no religion at all.

***I associate religion with conflict.***

Religious faith and devotion is a mixed bag. On one side, there is joy and a sense of well-being. On the other side, there are conflicts and fear. You may very well end up in a fight if you ask a pilgrim, "Hey, why do you walk hundreds of kilometers?" or ask a devotee, "Why do you perform rituals?"

I was some time ago on a flight from Qatar to Sri Lanka. In the rear section of the plane sat a group of my fellow Sri Lankan citizens who were returning home from working abroad. Many of them had wounds on their hands and legs from being physically abused in Qatar.

A couple of days ago, Ratnayake told me how his wife helped a young Buddhist girl from their area. The young girl had paid a substantial fee to an employment agent to find her work as a domestic in a Muslim home in the Middle-East. While working in that home, the family treated the young girl like a slave. Their treatment of her was dreadful.

Back in Sri Lanka, the police grilled the employment agent on the girl's working conditions but the agent was shrewd and not about to admit to any wrongdoing. Not to be discouraged, Ratnayake's wife managed to get the phone number of the home in the Middle-East where this girl was employed. Ratnayake's wife speaks Arabic and knows the religion. She called the home and the mistress of the home answered.

Ratnayake's wife appealed to the mistress' sense of right and wrong as laid down in the mistress' own Muslim faith. She reminded the mistress of the young girl's dreadful treatment and of what Allah might do. Fearing retribution, the mistress sent the young girl back to Sri Lanka with wages paid in full. The young girl was able to return safely to her home in Sri Lanka — all out of fear of Allah.

*Affectionate Splendour*

***That story ended well. It could just as easily been a Christian or Buddhist home where the abuse took place. No shortage of abuse in Canada and Canadian Christians fear God. Sri Lankan Buddhists must also fear the law of kamma.***

Conflicts and fear are disadvantages to the religious approach. More often than not if a person has nothing more than a strong belief in religion he or she fears painful consequences from committing unwholesome actions, such as going to hell after death. Our friend Bhante Chandrawansa is experiencing this approach from his Christian relatives, as they are sad and disappointed that he ordained as a Buddhist monk. Religions generate fear.

However, fear is not only a disadvantage to the religious approach; fear is also an advantage. If a person has sufficient fear of painful consequences from committing unwholesome actions, he or she will not knowingly commit such actions. People who believe strongly in religious teachings and who follow the teachings properly perform wholesome actions as much as possible. The fear generated by religions is a strong deterrent against any wrongdoing and that is certainly good.

***I fear God and hell.***

The wisdom of Dhamma is not connected with fear. When a person has a healthy understanding of the nature of things, he or she is not afraid of Allah or any god. There is no creator to fear, not when this path is walked sincerely.

***You once said we all need religion and philosophy while Dhamma is for our later years in life.***

Yes, that's right. Within the Buddha-Dhamma, there is the ritual and religious approach and there is the philosophical approach. We go through stages of growth. None of us immediately grasps what the Buddha taught. People use the religious approach to the Buddha-Dhamma at one time in their lives and they make use of the philosophical approach at a different time in their lives. There is normally a back and forth and an interweaving of approaches, depending upon circumstances. Young children need a good foundation in religion. Teenagers need to investigate philosophy.

Religion and philosophy are useful in the correct measure. In moderation. Children and yogis, especially yogis in the early stages of their meditation practices, need wholesome rituals. Religion is more than chanting from morning

*House of Dhamma*

until evening and it is more than repeating, “Sādhu. Sādhu. Sādhu.” Religion, in our case the Buddha-Dhamma, means living the Buddha-Dhamma.

I am not discouraging the chanting and performing of rituals. I am in no way suggesting that chanting from morning till night is bad or wrong. Quite the opposite, I think chanting and many of our rituals are good and right. I also listen to the chanting and when it is done well find my mind becoming tranquil. Chanting and rituals are useful; they can help the mind.

**PHILOSOPHY**

And I am in no way condemning philosophy. We need to examine and discuss the nature of things. As a child living at home, I was a pest to other members of my family because I argued, debated and questioned most everything. There was a time in my life like that.

The people who engage in philosophical debate are looking for answers. They are curious, “What is life all about?” or “Why am I here?” Some people delight in the philosophical approach to the Buddha-Dhamma — the debating, the learning, the finding out, the arguing, and the discussing. Philosophy is a way to understand the true nature of things, another approach to the house of Dhamma. This examining of life is healthy and more intellectually complex than pure religion.

I recall travelling in a van from Colombo to the ancient city of Anuradhapura with our late friend Creon and Mr. Silva. The trip took one full day. From the moment we left Colombo until the moment we arrived in Anuradhapura, Creon and Mr. Silva continuously debated various points of philosophy. Both skilled at debating, no one else in the van could argue against them or convince them otherwise. It is not easy to talk with people like Creon and Mr. Silva because they are knowledgeable and refuse to be convinced, even when we know better than they.

Creon and Mr. Silva often focused on one sticky point. Toward the end of the day, I begged, “Can the two of you be silent for just for a few minutes? I need to revive myself.” On another trip, this one with Suranga, Frieda and Creon, I travelled from Colombo to the town of Balangoda. It was the same that day. Because of Creon’s skill in arguing, his views on all subjects won out. Luckily, Colombo to Balangoda is a shorter trip than Colombo to Anuradhapura!

Philosophy, like religion, is a mixed bag. On one side, there is the satisfaction and progress that comes along with understanding to a degree the nature of things. On the other side, there is a paralysis that comes from reason and force of argument. And later on, doubts arise.

*Affectionate Splendour*

Philosophy can be a trap, as in debates the most powerful and educated person always wins. It doesn't matter if this person, maybe a university professor, is right or wrong. Even when wrong, the professor has the advantage in debates and rarely listens. A tongue-tied gardener might know far more about the true nature of things than the erudite professor. Doesn't matter. However right he might actually be, the gardener will never convince the professor of what is right. Our gardener always loses the battle. Philosophy traps people at an academic level of understanding, and this is a danger of philosophy. If you challenge a person's philosophy, you might end up in a fight — it's possible.

At one point, the philosophical approach to the Buddha-Dhamma nearly wiped out the Theravāda teachings. Nagarjuna and other extraordinary sages had their own take on the nature of things. I too am now inclining toward the Mahāyāna philosophy! I was made a Maha Nāyaka in the Mahāyāna tradition and given all the paraphernalia of a Maha Nāyaka — the robes and hat.

***Why were you given Mahāyāna robes and hat?***

I won a debate and the robes and hat were the prizes. They were stumped by my way of explaining. I gave away all that Mahāyāna paraphernalia to a young boy at Kanduboda.

Whether approaching the Buddha-Dhamma through religion or philosophy, everyone over the course of their lives knows their approach to the Buddha-Dhamma is, to some extent, beneficial. There is joy and a purifying of views. Both approaches — religion and philosophy — are somewhat beneficial.

However, most everyone on this path also knows their approach is not one hundred percent correct. After a lifetime of research, the professor may get fed up and wonder, "What have I been doing all these years? Why have I been debating philosophy? It is so exhausting!" When sufficiently dissatisfied with religion and philosophy, people turn away from these two approaches, and turn exclusively toward Dhamma.

***I recently heard on Canadian radio an interview with the American actor Alan Arkin. After three years in therapy with an analyst, he became cynical and started reading Buddhist philosophy. Now he regularly meditates. Has Alan Arkin turned toward Dhamma?***

Though it's an approach to what the Buddha taught, philosophy is still only an approach, and as such can no more than point in the right direction.

*House of Dhamma*

I don't like the term Buddhist philosophy used for the Buddha-Dhamma. That term philosophy is time and again mistakenly applied to the Buddha's teachings. Philosophy is logic, debating and reasoning out in a fashion. Dhamma is not logic and debating. It isn't arguing. Sometimes the Abhidhamma and the psychic powers, the abhiññās, are seen as Buddhist philosophy — this is an incorrect understanding of what the Buddha taught.

In the Mettā Sutta, you find the Pali expression dassanena-sampanno, the true seeing of insight.<sup>20</sup> It is the direct experience into the true nature of things for oneself and it eclipses any intellectual understanding that comes about through thinking, reading books or debating. Seeing for oneself purifies views far more than the reasoning of philosophy.

***Philosophy never interested me. Well, I did attend Christian Sunday school when I was a child and until about fourteen years of age I regularly attended Sunday service. All that religious education seems like a waste of time, when I look back.***

Religion and philosophy benefit nearly everyone and are not a waste of time. Your parents put you on the right track. At Sunday school, you learned a basic morality.

Look again at the whiteboard. The house of Dhamma is in the top right-hand corner. The dots in the lower left-hand corner are non-religious people, the dots in the middle are religious people and philosophers, and the dots closest to the house are people who appear to have all the qualities necessary to get inside the house. Not only religious, they debate philosophy and meditate.

Non-religious and religious, philosophers and yogis — everyone can get inside the house of Dhamma. There are no restrictions. Travelling along the path to the house, some make use of religion, some make use of philosophy, and some make use of both religion and philosophy.

Though farthest from the house, the non-religious person may well get inside the house before the religious person or the philosopher. Some western yogis use little of the religious approach to the Buddha-Dhamma. The non-religious person may even get inside before those who are standing right next to the house. Somehow or another, he or she understands the true nature of things and gets inside. At other times, it's the religious person who gets inside before the non-religious and before the philosopher. On the rarest of occasions, without using religion in any way, it's the philosopher who understands the true nature of things and gets inside. It is difficult to get witty intellectuals inside the house!

*Affectionate Splendour*

Religion and philosophy help some people get inside the house. Religion and philosophy also hinder some people from getting inside the house. It could happen that the person who is free of religion and philosophy is more easily convinced of the nature of things than the person who is fully immersed in religion and philosophy.

***Why do religion and philosophy hinder people from getting inside?***

The dot next to the house represents the person who appears to have all the qualities for getting inside the house. He or she is the one who is fully immersed in religion and philosophy. If this person is holding on strongly to religious and philosophical views, he or she will do his or her best to maintain those views. Holding onto and maintaining views keeps him or her outside the house. A strongly religious person, for example, stays in the realm of religion and does not go inside. An educated philosopher stays in the realm of philosophy. A person with lots of views goes elsewhere. Not inside the house. It would be wonderful to live without attachments to religious or philosophical views.

A hard-working yogi might also stay outside the house. In the course of practising properly with a competent teacher, he or she has important experiences and makes progress. He or she is standing right on the doorstep to the house. Nonetheless, for some reason or another, this yogi becomes disillusioned with the competent teacher and runs away, often-times to a teacher who is downright useless. The useless teacher appears to be more agreeable to the yogi.

***You said it would be wonderful to live without attachments to religious or philosophical views. Why?***

Religion and philosophy are useful approaches to the house. However, religion and philosophy are still only approaches to the house, and an approach to the house is different than being inside the house. Neither religion nor philosophy is the house. The time I engaged in religion and debated philosophy seems like an insane crazy time. I gave that up and happiness arose.

Without the constraints of religion or philosophy, we are free to see the *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* within us as they really are. Freedom from religion and philosophy greatly eases our way of being. When all's said and done, freedom is the greatest of joys.



*House of Dhamma***DHAMMA**

*If Dhamma is not the rituals of religion and not the debating and arguing of philosophy, then what is it? You mentioned insight and seeing.*

The word Dhamma has many meanings. Keeping the mind upright is one meaning. Rather than letting the mind sink, we keep it up.

*And where does this happen?*

Keeping the mind upright happens within one's self. Dhamma is not for anyone else. It is for you and me, and everyone. Each of us is responsible for keeping our own mind upright, which means *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. These three must occur within us if we are to stop sinking to low levels. When the moral behaviour of *sīla* is within us, there is self-discipline and restraint, the *saṃvara*. Restraint is the foundation of morality. Only you know to what degree you have restraint and only I know to what degree I have restraint.

In explaining Dhamma in the Second Mahānāma Sutta, the Buddha uses the verse, “*Svākkhāto Bhagavatā Dhammo, Sandiṭṭhiko, Akāliko, Ehipassiko, Opanayiko and Paccattaṃ Veditabbo Viññuhi'ti.*”<sup>21</sup> In your lap, a translation of this verse reads, “Well proclaimed is the Teaching of The Blessed One, here and now, not a matter of time, leading inwards, to be realized by the wise by themselves.” Let's look at Sandiṭṭhiko, Akāliko, and Ehipassiko.

Sandiṭṭhiko means Dhamma can be seen directly. We see and know the experiences within ourselves. And not only *can* Dhamma be seen directly, Dhamma *must* be seen directly. There is no other way to get inside the house. No external source can tell you to what degree you have *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. No god, no devil nor any philosophy can tell you. It is only within yourself that the nature of things can be seen. Only you know to what degree you have *samādhi*, the tranquility, and only I know to what degree I have tranquility. You are directly seeing your *paññā*, the wisdom, just as I am the one who directly sees my wisdom.

*I thought a meditation teacher could tell me lots about myself.*

Teachers only direct students. For example, if you are to see a particular star in the night sky, I can tell you to look in this or that direction. It's up to you, however, to look in the right direction. Teachers only direct students toward the stars. Students must see the stars for themselves.

*Affectionate Splendour*

Akālīko means Dhamma is outside of time. It is immediate. I say to you, drop the present. Drop thinking about the past, drop thinking about the future, and do not cling to anything in this very moment. Let the past and the future stay where they are and you just stay where you are — living restraint, tranquility and wisdom. No need to agonize over thoughts of past, present or future. We simply keep our minds upright and immediately we experience beneficial results.

Free from notions of time, we access Dhamma right now, here in this world. You can't practise restraint in the past nor can you practise restraint in the future. You can only practise restraint in the present. You can't have tranquility in the past nor can you expect to have it in the future. The only option is to have tranquility in the here and now. Same for wisdom. Dhamma is separate from notions of time. Read the Bhaddekaratta Sutta.<sup>22</sup>

Ehipassiko is the invitation to come and see Dhamma for ourselves. The Buddha invited Mahānāma to see the nature of things. All of us must look honestly at what is actually happening within us; this is the way forward. When looking within, we see thinking about the past and see thinking about the future. All contentment is lost when we worry, "Can I achieve tranquility?" When looking within, we see projections of a self.

Hopefully at some point, you and I realize that all objects of experience arise and pass away, anicca. All objects we experienced in our past broke up and all objects to be experienced in our future will in like manner break up. All past objects arose and passed away, and all future objects will arise and pass away. What about each and every thought and feeling that arose during this discussion on religion, philosophy and Dhamma? Those thoughts and feelings similarly passed away. It's time to ask, "For what are we tiring ourselves out?"

All wise people search for a condition that is free of problems, conflicts and struggles, and the very wise find it. That condition of freedom is Dhamma. No one can force another to search for Dhamma. I cannot force you inside the house and you cannot force me. You cannot twist your friend's arm or trick her inside the house, and she cannot trick you inside. Getting inside the house of Dhamma must come naturally.

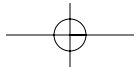
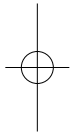
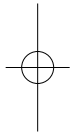
With your friends, may the blessings of the Triple Gem be with you on this path of sīla, samādhi and paññā. Theruwan Saranai.

***Thank you.***

Simply keep the mind upright, as it were.



# Endnotes



- 1 AN 11.2.2; [www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html](http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html)
- 2 MN 56; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1995), page 477
- 3 AN 11.2.2; [www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html](http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html)
- 4 Chapter twenty-three of Dhammapada.
- 5 MN 125; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1995), page 989
- 6 MN 125; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1995), page 989
- 7 SN I.X.12; Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2000), page 314
- 8 AN 11.2.2; [www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html](http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html)
- 9 AN 11.2.2; [www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html](http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html)
- 10 SN V.XI.III.21(1); Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2000), page 1808
- 11 MN 142; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1995), page 1102
- 12 MN 56; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1995), page 477
- 13 AN 11.2.2; [www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html](http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html)
- 14 AN 11.2.2; [www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html](http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html)
- 15 AN 11.2.2; [www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html](http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html)
- 16 AN 11.2.2; [www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html](http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html)

*Affectionate Splendour*

- 17 JVP is a Sinhalese term, which translates as Peoples Liberation Front
- 18 AN 11.2.2; [www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html](http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html)
- 19 Excellent.
- 20 <http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/5Khuddaka-Nikaya/05Suttanipata/1-uruga-vagga-p.html>
- 21 <http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/4Anguttara-Nikaya/Anguttara6/11-ekadasakanipata/002-anussativaggo-e.html>
- 22 <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.131.than.html>

